Chapter - VI

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The foregoing discussion of the plays of three noted playwrights of Bengali theatre namely Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra indicates that their major dramatic literature is dedicated to the cause of underprivileged, marginalized, oppressed and the suppressed communities of the society. It further reveals that there is a great similarity between the thematic concerns of the dramatic works of these three playwrights but technique of representation differs from one another. All the three playwrights dramatize the voice of the people who have been made voiceless in the society. They harshly criticize the feudalistic attitude and hypocrisies of the ruling classes, exploitative and abusive attitude of the ruling class, malicious social consuetude and traditions, and the oppression and discrimination of the common poor people. Their major plays dramatize the voice of the marginalized and construct resistances against the monstrous social powers and forces. They wish to see a social reformation and political revolution which would bring all the people from all the section of society on the same ground of humanity, equality, justice and fraternity.

Playwright Utpal Dutt is arguably the greatest dramatist of twentieth century Bengali theatre. In articulating his concern for the marginal class of the society and their exploitation by the feudal bourgeois class he stands unrivaled in the modern Bengali theatrical arena. His plays outspokenly portray the deliberate and strategic discrimination and exploitation of the working class people by the state machine or the ruling class. As he was a committed Marxist and a supporter of CPIM party, he propagated communist politics in his theatre and theatrical literature. In his theatrical performances Utpal Dutt badly exposes the ruling party of the day and their hooliganism through the use of state agencies. He candidly displays the governmental hooliganism and hypocrisy in his theatrical performances and that is why, several times he is put behind the bar by the state government of the day. He is one of the most prominent politically inclined playwrights of Bengali theatre who openly criticizes the misrule, miss-governance, hypocrisy and failure of the government of the day through his theatrical literature and activity. And that is why, several times the performances of his plays were disrupted and vandalized by the workers of the
ruling political party of the day in front of the state police. He used theatre as weapon to raise the downtrodden communities of the society against the exploitation and injustices meted out to them.

Utpal Dutt’s theatre was very much influenced by the theatre of Bertolt Brecht and he contextualized the western theatrical convention into Bengali or rather Indian theatrical convention. Like Bertolt Brecht, Utpal Dutt wanted his theatre audience to think of their social-economic and political situation in the society. In order to involve the audience in his theatrical performances he adopted the Brechtian stage convention. As playwright Utpal Dutt asserts:

The Brechtian style interferes with our people’s responses because they are used to another kind of theatre, and all forms must come from the people’s understanding... As I understand it, epic structure advances the action to a certain point and then halts, cuts it entirely and proceeds with another episode, or with the same episode in a different light. (Bharucha 92)

His major dramas explored his contemporary social and political issues like the consequences of the Naval Mutiny of 1946 and the oppression and hooliganism of the Congress led state Government of West Bengal during the early 1970s etc. Playwright Utpal Dutt’s political plays intended to stage his revolutionary propaganda in order to resist the consequences of the rising trends of imperialism, capitalism and fascism in the Indian society of post independent era. He preached revolutionary agenda and social reformative lessons through his dramas and dramatic performances which would usher a perfect society.

Utpal Dutt sets his play Hunting the Sun in the historical background of the reign of emperor Samudragupta. The play is set in the history but it actually represents the present state of contemporary society. To stay away from the direct criticism of the ruling class or the bourgeois class and their power-dominations, the playwright set the play in the historical background of the regimen of emperor Samudragupta. The play is scintillating with the various noxious aspects of the society which are paralyzing and weakening the social fabric of the society. The play reveals the vicious panorama of societal stratification where the people of higher stratum do whatever they like with
the power of the state. On the contrary, the people of lower stratum own nothing and lead a life like animals. It also unearthed the prevailing malicious caste hierarchies in the society which snatches a man’s right to live a respectable life like any other fellow citizens. “This woman is a shudra, and yet reads the Vedas- she reads books! (snatching her books.) Look. Yajnabalkya. Narada. Shudras may not read. Her tongue must be cut out. That is the imperial edict” (Dutt 47). The play unveils the patriarchal supremacy over the women and the women were just used as merely sexual objects. It delicately exposes the existing slavery system of India and how a man is reduced to a sub human level through the slavery system. Playwright Utpal Dutt most importantly highlights the resistances of oppressed section in the play and underscores that any oppression can be resisted by the people and resistance itself brings reformation or revolution in the society.

To keep away from the direct criticism of the ruling class Utpal Dutt again sets the play *The Great Rebellion* in the backdrop of history like the play *Hunting the Sun*. Through the veil of historical setting it exposes the emerging imperialism, capitalism and fascism during the early 1970s Bengal. It reveals the feudalistic and neocolonial mentality of the contemporary government. The play brings to light the existing communal disharmony and the caste hierarchies of the society of Bengal or rather whole Indian society. The character Lachman Singh several times in the play faces discrimination in the name of religion and caste. It also uncovers the hypocrisy of ruling class. To sustain their power and hegemony over the common people, the ruling class plays the foul trick and hypocritical game over the common masses.

Distinctively, in the play *Nightmare City* of Utpal Dutt openly exposes the governmental hooliganism and political vendetta of contemporary government of West Bengal in 1960s and 1970s. The play outspokenly depicts the hooliganism of the leaders of the ruling Congress Party and how the state police becomes the puppet in the hands of the local mafias of ruling party. In the play Utpal Dutt vividly shows the rising of communists in the state politics and how undemocratically or unlawfully communists were oppressed and harassed by the ruling party of the day and the agencies of government. It also foregrounds the contemporary governments’ failure to provide the safety, security, job and respectable life to people of the society. Lakshman Palit is a formidable business man and the state police and the local leaders
of the congress party works according to his vicious instruction. Through the power of state the ruling party and the government of the day undemocratically suppresses the voice of opposition and ruthlessly suppresses the rebellious voices. As the play severely criticized the ruling government of the day, the performances of the play faced several police and gangster’s brutality. Utpal Dutt asserted in his book *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* that the performances of the play were attacked fourteen times by the workers of the ruling party and the state police.

The CPI’s organ said: ‘It was a peaceful demonstration which everyone has the right to stage’. The Chief Minister said, ‘Political plays will naturally be dealt with politically’. Then, Bibhuti Chakrabarty, the Deputy Commissioner, Detective Department, filed sedition charges against us. Section 124-A… (Dutt 110)

The play most significantly reveals how the disillusionment, fragmentation and cynicism grip the life of the educated youngsters of the day. Due to lack of jobs or placements the educated youngsters were compelled to engage with the underworld to earn livelihood. Through the portraiture of the character of Monibhushan Mitra in the play, the playwright exposed the state of disillusionment and despair of the youngsters of Bengal of 1970s who had to indulge in criminal activities due to the financial constrain and penury.

Similarly, Mahasweta Devi is a committed social activist who works and writes for the marginalized communities of the society. The complete spectrum of her writing shows an explicit concern for the downtrodden, suppressed, marginalized, oppressed and the other lower tribal class people of the society. As she herself said that “Writing is activism for me” (qtd in Sen 61), her major works are dedicated to the cause of underprivileged communities. In her long career as a writer Devi showed that pen is indeed mightier than sword. Mahasweta Devi’s works are basically fiction, but are later adapted for the stage. She wanted to convey her message through her plays as they would be more accessible and approachable to the largely illiterate and rural audience. Mahasweta Devi once remarked in an interview given to “Seagull Theatre Quarterly” that “Theatre is visual it will reach more people. Most of my stories … have travelled far, reached (inaccessible) interior places also. … My only point is let it reach people. It must work” (19). Mahasweta Devi’s writings embody the socio-
economic and political circumstances ranging from the urban bourgeois to the urban underworld, from rural untouchable societies to tribal segments, and demonstrate an outlook of India hardly ever seen in any kind of Indian literature.

Mahasweta Devi has been quite accurate in the depiction of harsh realities of life of the poverty stricken tribal and other lower class people in the society. She had a deep rooted compassion for the marginal class and her entire life of activism and writing she devoted herself to bring reformation to the life of the marginalized. Through her writing she displays that the reformation can be possible with the resistance of the oppressed. Resistances germinate within the oppressed or suppressed communities and not outside. She independently or sometimes with some nongovernmental organization worked for the tribals but she never associated herself with any political party. Thus, she should not be classified with the propagandist playwright or writer. “She critiques the ‘construction’ of the political as well as the socio-religious-economic constitution of the nation. She critiques the political “Constitution of India” as it gives the marginals basic rights and representation only in law, not in application” (Gupta 31). The critical analysis of her major plays reveals that Mahasweta Devi always challenges the established order of the societal structure and there is a special kind of zeal for reorganizing the society on the basis of equality and justice. “Profound humanism imbued with a deep-rooted love for the suffering humanity is the core of Devi’s philosophy” (Athista 627).

Like Utpal Dutt, in Mahasweta Devi’s theatre also the influence of Brechtian theatre convention is discernable. Like Brechtian theatre Mahasweta Devi also makes the audience clear that they are sitting in a theatre and she establishes a direct connection between the spectators and the actors on the stage. In her theatrical technique she sometimes allows her performer to directly address the audience. In some of her performances she gives a single character to play many roles on the stage such as in Aajir, Urvashi and Johnny etc. Because of her exclusive theatrical technique Mahasweta Devi achieved greater theatrical economy.

Mahasweta Devi sets the play Mother of 1084 against the background of Naxalite movement of Bengal in 1970s. The critical scrutiny of the play unearths the consequences of longstanding exploitation and oppression of the downtrodden communities and which leads to insurrection or violent uprising of the working class
people. The play exhibits the dedication of the youngsters to the cause of the underprivileged and deprived and how they sacrifice their life for the justice of marginal class. But, the revolt and the participation of urban youngsters into it is called by the state representative Saroj Pal as “A cancerous growth on the body of democracy!” (Devi 11). The play exposes the police brutality and the violation of human rights in the name of suppression of Naxalites. It uncovers the several organized killings and fake encounters of state agencies in the name of repression of Naxalite Movement. Through the sacrifice of lives of the youngsters to overthrow the established social order and discrimination Mahasweta Devi essentially endeavored to project her lifelong zeal to eradicate the exploitation and marginalization from the society. As Devi appropriately asserted that “Those whose lives are aflame, I have full faith, will never err. They have never erred - neither in Telangana, nor in Naxalbari” (Devi 19). It also brought to light the hypocrisy and patriarchal mind set up of the urban elite class society through the portrayal of the husband-wife relationship of Dibyanath Chatterjee and Sujata.

The play Aajir unveils another kind of exploitation which reduces a human being to sub-human level. Through the portraiture of the character of Paatan in the play playwright Mahasweta Devi reveals the dreadful aspects of the bonded slavery systems and how a lower caste man is denied his fundamental rights. The critical study of the play Aajir displays the pathetic plight of the oppressed communities in the hand of the self-centered, decadent feudalistic and hypocrite ruling class people. The play significantly establishes that injustices, exploitations and oppression cannot go on for a long time and of course they face resistance. It unearths Paatan’s longs for life and freedom and his struggle and resistance finally make it possible for him to free himself from the clutches of bondage slavery. Through the representation of Paatan, Mistress and Punnashashi’s distress in actuality Mahasweta Devi exposes the present exploitation and oppression inflicted upon the common poor people.

The critical analysis of the play Urvashi and Johnny unmask the soullessness and hollowness of the urban elite class people of contemporary era. The play minutely observes the life of poverty stricken slum dwellers, street beggars and other marginal class of metropolitan Kolkata city. Mahasweta Devi vividly shows pursuit of materialistic pleasure of the urban elite class people and they pleasurably and
consciously remain unaware of the sufferings of humanity. Materialistic and self-centered attitude of the contemporary urban educated elite class people makes the maternal world a merely wasteland. The study of the play gives an insight to the scenario of the life of Kolkata city. Through the character sketch of the protagonist of the play Johnny, Devi shows that how he struggles for his existence in this material world. People like Johnny are compelled to live a life like animal.

Mahasweta Devi’s play *Bayen* shows how the superstitions grip the rural societies of Bengal even after the fifty years of independence. It exposes people’s belief in unreality, black magic and the witchcraft, and how it destroys the life of innocent human beings in the name of practicing magic. In the play through the sufferings and agonies of Chandidasi Gangadasi playwright Mahasweta Devi reveals the vicious consequences of belief in unreality and magic and how it ruins the life of the innocent. The play also brings to light how patriarchal mind set up grasps the rural societies of Bengal of the day through the representation of the relationship of Malindar and Chandidasi Gangadasi.

The critical study of *Water* exposes the hypocrisy and the viciousness of the ruling class. To sustain power and wealth, they can ruin the life of thousand of innocent people. The analysis of the play *Water* shows the height of exploitation and discrimination of the marginal class people by the upper class or ruling class. But, Mahasweta Devi also demonstrates in the play that the resistance is more powerful than the oppression. Santosh Pujari and his other associates including government bureaucrats inhumanly and heartlessly exploit and discriminate the poor lower tribal class people in Charsa region and the tribal people resist the oppression and injustices. The play *Water* also uncovers how the tribal people are denied their basic human right and right to education, and they face severe discrimination and oppression from the upper caste people in the society. It reveals the sufferings and poverty of the marginalized communities which are caused by the caste hierarchy and untouchability in the society of rural West Bengal. The downtrodden people of the society are famishing due to lack of food and water and the upper caste Santosh Pujari along with all his relatives is enjoying the water and food which are essentially provided for the commoners by the government.
Like Utpal Dutt and Mahasweta Devi playwright Manoj Mitra’s major plays display concern for the marginal class of the society. His plays are based on the ground realities of societies of Bengal. The massive body of his plays generally deals with the socially, economically, culturally and educationally backward people of West Bengal and India as a whole. His dramas are characterized with the typical social structure and social dilemmas of the lower and lower middle class society. Manoj Mitra always takes a dig at caste hierarchies, social taboos and the distorted social norms which exist in the contemporary Bengal. Playwright Manoj Mitra said in an interview with the eminent theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay that “I have thought that I had to write about the present time, and that it was the theatre’s prime responsibility to enlighten people on all that was happening right now around them” (Mitra 263). The lower cast and the underprivileged of the society are deprived of their basic human rights as they belong to particular community or caste. The marginal classes like the colonized people are suffering from existential crisis as they are controlled by those people who wield the top position and enjoy all the privileges in the society. Being a true playwright of Bengali theatre, Manoj Mitra displays all these eclectic view of the society of contemporary West Bengal in his works.

Playwright Manoj Mitra severely criticizes the conflict between different sections of people who, to sustain their power over another, play nasty tricks. Because of their noxious game the common masses are suppressed in between their vicious game of power. Manoj Mitra uncovers these hypocrisy and politics of domination and power of these particular segments of people of the society through his theatre and theatricality. Mitra demonstrates the hypocrisy and clash of power and supremacy between different sections of people through the setting down of historical events, incidents and even characters in his several dramas. Manoj Mitra in an interview with well-known theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay admits that “had to be taken back into history, for the simple reason that I could not afford to make the statements that sought to make about the contemporary reality, in plain, direct terms. It’s a secret that I’m sharing with you. It’s a candid confession I’m making” (Mitra 263).

Manoj Mitra sets the play *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* in historical genre but he actually addresses the present social and political issues in the veil of history. The play candidly reveals the deception, hypocrisy and malicious politics of two talukdars
to maintain their domination and power over another. To sustain their dominance over another, these two talukdars are playing with the life commoners of their respective taluks. In between their conflict of power the Hekim who is an honest and pure man finds himself in a state of distress. He has devoted himself to the cause of sick and ailing people of a taluk. The critical study of the play also unearths the sufferings of the common people from hunger and displays a poverty stricken scenario of rural Bengal. It also reveals the existential crisis of women in the patriarchal society and shows how the identity of Gangamoni gets replaced and she is known more as a wife of hoodlum robber Bhondul Bagdi than as Gangamoni.

The analysis of the play *Honey from a Broken Hive* expounds the exploitation of the marginal class people by the upper class people who hold the power. It uncovers the massive rise of moneylender and land grabber who exploit the common masses by lending money in high interest in the nineteen sixties and seventies West Bengal. It further unveils oppression, exploitation of the common masses by the landowner and the moneylender. The study of the play *Honey from a Broken Hive* also exhibits the social milieu of the poverty and penury incapacitated common people of nineteen sixties and seventies West Bengal and their suffering and resistance. In the play Matla Ojha’s daughter Badami possesses the power to resist the monstrous force Aghor Ghosh and that resistance takes the life of Aghor Ghosh. Playwright Manoj Mitra constructs a spirit of revolt or revolution through the production of the play *Honey from a Broken Hive*.

Like *The Tale of Hekim-Shaheb* playwright Manoj Mitra sets the play *The Shadow Palace* in historical settings. The critical scrutiny of the play unmask the religious fanaticism and fundamentalisms, hypocrisy, corruption, miss governance and the exploitation of the marginalized in the name of social hierarchy and casteism. The play also unveils the flagitious and deleterious system of caste and social hierarchies of Bengal and how it weakens the social foundation of the society. It shows the superstitions and deadly social practices going on in the rural society of West Bengal. The unawareness and fanatic belief of the illiterate rural people is exploiting by deceitful rulers.

Thus, after closely examining different aspects of the plays, it can be stated that the three playwrights namely Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra are sincerely
concerned with the different societal issues and political circumstances of the contemporary society. But, each of the playwrights has certain specific quality of representation of these issues which makes them distinct and different from each other. Utpal Dutt is one of the most prominent politically inclined playwrights of Bengali theatre. The chief concern of the theatrical works of Utpal Dutt is contemporary politics, and his works ideologically reflect his endorsement with left wing ideology in politics and socialism. “What Utpal Dutt did was to give the political play a more substantial theatrical body and a left ideological colouration reflecting the radicalization of political thinking in Bengal in the post-independence period” (Raha 162). He is the sole figure in Bengali theatre who openly denounced the miss governance and hooliganism of Congress led state of government of 1960s and 1970s West Bengal. And that is why many times he was put behind the prison by the then state government. His plays distinctively condemn and denounce the feudal bourgeois class and speak for the working class. Most probably he is the first one who makes the labor class the central character of the plot in his play Angar (Coal).

Similarly, Mahasweta Devi is a social activist turn writer. She is a determined and committed social activist who works among, with and for the marginalized and oppressed section. Her works always distinctively speak for the justice of adivasis and the tribals people of West Bengal and India as a whole. “One of the main concerns that emerge from Mahasweta’s own works relate to tribal independence, self-possession and the historical possibility of peasant insurgency” (Sen 26). Her works, uniquely in Bengali theatrical literature, embody the socio-political and economic-cultural circumstances ranging from the urban bourgeois to the urban underworld, from rural untouchable societies to tribal segments, and exhibit a viewpoint of India barely ever seen in any sort of Indian literature. “She presents the rare combination of an activist and a writer who has been leading a spirited crusade against social injustice meted out to the disenfranchised and the dispossessed” (Asaduddin 236). In the same way, certain qualities which subsist in the dramas of Manoj Mitra make him unique and different from his predecessors and other contemporary playwrights of Bengali theatre. His plays distinctively represent the class conflicts, typical societal structure and social dilemmas of lower middle class society. His plays are not politically biased, but based on the ground reality which makes him unique. Exclusively, the supernatural and mythological figures of his plays act and behave like a real human,
and come to the world to solve various day to day and domestic issues of the common people. Uniquely he always takes a dig to the contemporary politics in the veil of historical settings. He candidly confesses this in an interview with noted theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay that “had to be taken back into history, for the simple reason that I could not afford to make the statements that sought to make about the contemporary reality, in plain, direct terms” (Mitra 263).

**Significance of the Study**

Relying upon the findings of the research, which were presented above, this study, is significant in these senses: Firstly, to extensively survey the literary and performance texts in order to create a quantum of ideas and trends among the three playwrights. Secondly, to bring out the nuances of the texts and highlight the issues they have dealt with in their works. Thirdly, to explain and exhibit reformatory and revolutionary structures in these playwrights in terms of the depiction of the society and politics. Fourthly, to theorize the societal, political and theatrical elements in the theatre in Bengal while focusing on the works of the three playwrights.

**Limitations, Suggestions and Recommendations**

The present study discusses about the social reformative and revolutionary zeal of three playwrights: Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi and Manoj Mitra. It also brings out the nuances of the texts and emphasizes the issues they have dealt with in their dramatic works. Regardless of the discussed issues and the mentioned conclusions and significances, the study bears these limitations: Firstly, as all the works of these three playwrights are basically Bengali, I had to consult materials in Bengali language. Secondly, I faced lack of secondary materials on these playwrights as very few researches have been done on them. Thirdly, I had to translate many useful matters on them from Bengali into English.

On the basis of above limitations, these recommendations are provided for future studies: Firstly, these three playwrights are very much concerned about the contemporary issues of the society and that’s why they need to explore by the researchers. Secondly, their works are very contextual in terms of the present scenario of politics and society of India. Therefore, social reformatory and revolutionary
messages of these playwrights need to bring out by the researchers. Thirdly, these playwrights are versatile playwrights and to do justice to their works it needs the attention of the researchers.
Works Cited


