

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

Print ISSN: 2773-7829; e-ISSN: 2773-7837

eJournal Site: www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



Central Department of English
Tribhuvan University
Kirtipur, Nepal

URL: www.cdetu.edu.np

Theatre as Social Critique in Select Nineteenth-Century Indian Plays

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Article History: Submitted 30 Sept. 2022; Reviewed 30 Nov. 2022; Revised 4 Jan. 2023

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v5i1.52480>

Abstract

As an imitation of actions, theatre is representational. Different aspects of performative arts like theatre are a reflection of the contemporary age in which they are written and performed. Theatre in Calcutta, India, in the nineteenth century started being influenced by the colonial and European models. The changes brought in by colonial modernity are major tropes in many of the plays of that time. Colonial modernity brought English education, western liberal ideas and new lifestyle, which attracted the youth and made them criticize the old and traditional ways. Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay's (also spelt as Krishna Mohana Banerjea) *The Persecuted* and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei Ki Bole Sabbhyata? [Is This Called Civilization?]* are two plays that represent the so-called colonial modernity and show how changes were taking place in the society in the colonial period in Bengal. The characters from two generations, the older following the traditional ways and the younger ones following Englishness, depict a confrontation of two civilizations. Ideologies, worldviews and new habits are formed among the youths, which are despised by the elders. The plays, thus, question the modern ways, that, if they really mean a civilization. This article attempts to show how the plays can be read as social critique at par with comedy of humours and comedy of manners.

Keywords: Theatre, performance, social critique, nineteenth century Indian plays, comedy

Introduction

In *Poetics*, Aristotle's definition of tragedy as an imitation of action encompasses the other kinds of representative arts including comedy and satires. As an imitative art, performative plays represent the society and in doing so, they also play a role of social critique. In the Western literary and performative traditions, we witness a strong criticism of society with an aim to remedy the social malaise. Here, these genres

of play have blurred the thin boundaries between art and life. Margot Morgan's deliberation in this regard is important for us:

Like all art, theatre can serve as a window into the life-world of a specific time and place, providing a glimpse of a culture's value systems, underlying ideologies, and understandings of human nature and the human condition. Yet theatre differs from other art forms in that it is dialogic in structure — the very form of theatre requires inter-action between and among human beings. Structurally dependent on human connection, theatre takes as its subject the human condition, and the issues of judgment, affect, power, communication, and change that are intrinsic to humanity. It dramatizes the power of human misunderstandings and conflicts, the problematic nature of morality, and the ways in which unintended consequences can play havoc with human plans, lives, and relationships. (4-5)

The similar tone is also voiced by Bernard Shaw: "I am, among other things, a dramatist; but I am not an original one, and so have to take all my dramatic material either from real life at first hand, or from authentic documents" (175). Shaw points out the laps on the part of the critics as he states, "Put a thing on the stage for them as it is in real life, and instead of receiving it with the blank wonder of plain ignorance, they reject it with scorn as imposter, on the ground that the real thing is known to the whole world to be quite different Consequently, to a man who derives all his knowledge of life from witnessing plays, nothing appears more unreal than objective life" (175). Shaw problematizes how objective truth of real life is staged before the audience as a representation by a dramatist. He emphasises such representation of reality as a necessity for the audience "who cannot bear to look facts in the face" and find "in the contemplation of the idealized, or stage life" a relief from the everyday "foulness and baseness" that one confronts in real life (176-177).

The question of spectatorship is important in our understanding of the plays that critique the society. Many of the plays are meant for the contemporary audience where the playwright, actor/s and the audience belong to the same age. Acceptance or unacceptance of the playwright's views depend on the epoch of the audience. At times, the reader/spectator may reject the ideas of a playwright or a play. This could have happened because there were parallel modes of resistance in the "politics of aesthetics" in the performances of those plays. Here, on one hand, the playwright brings in ideas which may be resisting the popular ideas whereas, on the other hand, the audience would resist the (novel) ideas of the playwright if that challenges their established notions and aesthetic tastes.

Comedies are imitative representations of follies of people with an objective of correcting them. They teach lessons through laughter and entertainment. What Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis said may be mentioned in this connection:

The Stage but echoes back public Voice.

The Drama's Laws the Drama's Patrons give,

For we that live to please, must please to live. (19)

Shepherd and Wallis further mention: "Pleasure now has become a matter not of individually drowning in honey but corporately defining that which is deemed to please. And it is the job of the audience to insist that drama returns to being an imitation of nature" (19). This means that comedies are produced for correcting the follies of people in the society.

Situating Banerjea and Dutt in Modern Indian Drama

Modern Indian drama has been influenced by Sanskrit and folk traditions as well as by Western performance techniques and ideas. The advent of 'renaissance' brought Western ideas and styles, which ushered socio-cultural transformations within the native spectators. With the passage of time socio-political themes and issues started occupying the centre-stage. Erstwhile colonial Bengal had been a centre of the cultural activities that brought in the western mode of writing and performances and many experiments started taking place there. Political and social evil, and hypocrisy and upliftment of the society were some of the key themes of the playwrights like Rabindranath Tagore, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Aurobindo and so on. Such westernized forms also had an influence of realist theatre. *Neel Drapan* by Deenbandhu Mitra is one of the pioneering examples of realist theatre. Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay's (the name is also spelt as Krishna Mohana Banerjea) *The Persecuted* and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei Ki Bole Sabbhyata? [Is This Called Civilization?]* are two plays, which represent the time and epoch of the colonial Bengal where the western modernity and the ideas of renaissance were challenging the existing social norms and bringing in new cultures. *The Persecuted* is "amateurish in ... composition" (qtd. in Lal 12) and was not staged. M. K. Naik notes:

Indian English drama dates from 1831, when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the present state of Hindoo Society in Calcutta*. In his preface, Banerji claims that 'inconsistencies and the blackness of the influential members of the Hindoo community have been depicted before their eyes. They will now clearly perceive the wiles and tricks of the Bramins [sic.] and thereby be able to guard themselves against them.' This somewhat crude presentation of the conflict in the mind of a sensitive Bengali youth between orthodoxy and the new ideas ushered in by Western education remained a solitary dramatic effort, not only in Bengal but also anywhere in India for more than a generation. (97-8)

Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization?* is one of the pioneering attempts in vernacular theatre in 1871. Dutt was a versatile writer who wrote dramas, poetry and divine treatises. His *Savitri* is known to be the longest verse by any non-English poet. *Is This Called Civilization?* is composed in Bangla, which was translated with the English name '*Is This Called Civilization?*'. He had written the play following a request from Raja Iswarchandra Sinha for Belgachhia Natyasala. It was not staged in Belgachhia Natyasala, but it was staged much later by Shobhabazar Theatrical Society on 18 July 1865. The play is embellished with songs as well Naik observes: "In fact, even in Bengal—the fountain-head of most forms of Indian English literature—drama in English failed to secure a local theatrical habitation, in sharp contrast to plays in the mother tongue (both original and in the form of adaptations from foreign languages)" (98). The play, thus, is a pioneering contribution to both Bangla and Indian English writing. It is one of the modern satires in Bangla. Through this play, Dutt brought in the tradition of social satire.

Marvin Carlson notes that in the mid-nineteenth century, "wealthy citizens of Calcutta began to create private theatres in the British model and to write western-style plays" (22). Both the plays selected here are a result of such hybridization in the performative domain. Both the plays have the dominant theme of critiquing the contemporary society and culture as satires. The plays have a lot in common in keeping social themes and plots. However, both the plays display social deviations as their main themes. Our endeavour here is to explore how the select plays contributed in the making of satirical theatre "blended with European methods and plays with indigenous practice

and materials to create the huge variety of hybrid forms found today” (qtd. in Carlson 22).

The Persecuted as Comedy of Humours

The concept of ‘Comedy of Humour’ was introduced in English drama by Ben Jonson. For Jonson, human beings are composed of four liquids, or humours, viz. blood, phlegm, yellow bile (cholera) and black bile (melancholy). A proportionate balance constitutes a good human being whereas any imbalance causes abnormality and a person then acts in a peculiar way.

Although Banerjea does not mention that he is following any English tradition in his play, his characters in *The Persecuted* bring in the formulae of comedy of humours. Taking meat-eating and religious belief as tropes, he reveals the evils of hypocrisy and greed through a set of stock and round characters who in reality are not confined to only one community of people. The report of *Samachar Darpan* points out about *The Persecuted* in this way:

It represents the Brahmins as men who draw a subsistence from the delusion and folly of their disciples. It describes the rich natives generally as having departed from the rules of Hindooism and indulging in sensuality. We have, however, no hesitation in saying, that though the censures are severe, they are not unjust. A very great laxity does prevail among the natives of the metropolis; and those who are loud in their outcry against the *Nastiks*, the term by which the recent dissidents from Hindooism are called, would, if judged by the shastras they themselves venerate, be considered as having forfeited their privileges as Hindoos. (qtd. in Lal 20)

The “Preface” proclaims that “The Author’s purpose has been to compute its excellence by measuring the effects it will produce upon the minds of the rising generation. The inconsistencies and the blackness of the influential members of the Hindoo community [sic] have been depicted before their eyes” (Lal 29). Significantly, the play is dedicated to “Hindoo Youths” and “By their ever devoted Friend and Servant/ Krishna Mohana Banerjea” “... with sentiments of affection and strong hopes of their appreciating those virtues and mental energies which elevate man in the estimation of a philosopher” (Lal 27). Considering the epoch of the period and the Derozian reformatory zeal, it is obvious that Banerjea (being converted to Christianity) takes upon the contemporary Bengali society and its class contradiction for his drama. The audience is supposedly to be predominantly the Europeans and the newly formed western educated elites. The use of English, dialogues of Kamdeb and allusions to Shakespearean characters show that the drama is meant for a particular select kind of audience.

The theme of reform of “Hindoo” religion (rather the contemporary predominant social culture of upper class) shows the East-West encounter in the period of beginning the Bengal Renaissance. Referring to the newly enlightened western educated people, a character, Turkolankar says:

Aye, but the indifference they show us is, I apt to suppose, Very considerable. Their constant intercourse with Europeans — a set of men not in favour of our aggrandisement you know — gives me occasion to fear much. I have heard some question our sanctity! — Europeans, you are aware, are very unfavourable to us. They are decidedly opposed to the influence we command. They dislike the adoration the natives have for us. They are all anxious to see us upon equal footing with men. (Lal 39)

A conflict of the traditional faith and the new found ways is very imminent. Traditional ways are at loggerhead with western liberalism. The very first dialogue in Act-I, Scene-I,

has a Young Servant saying that the Master is a devoted Hindu whereas “my young master – ha! What does *he* – eats beef in his room! fine contrast – excessive devotion on the one hand and eating beef in the other!” (Lal 33). The Old Servant finds this a work of the *Kalyug* that “the son of a godlike man would be so degenerated” (Lal 34). The Old Servant provides a criticism of the new promiscuous habits of the young men saying, “Vice has entered these abodes once so pure. The family is no more brilliant. Young rakes will undo what old took so much pains to achieve....” (Lal 34). The Old Servant’s words reflect the resistance to western modernity, which also brought social changes and social evils – in this case, changing the mindset of people towards the old traditions as the new generation youth justify their action that “these practices are not crimes” (Lal 35). Orthodoxy towards the traditions too is brought in through the Old Servant. The Young Servant aligns his allegiance with the young master and suggests to the Old Servant that “O they are young men and may be excused” (Lal 35). The Young Servant thus supports the new practices against the old ones. However, more than the liberal ideologies, enjoyment in its name is more important. The Young Servant feels that “There can be no enjoyment until this old rascal is out of the way” (Lal 35) and says that the Old man should also taste the same and forget his religious traditions. Beny and the Young Servant show disrespect to the elders which is very similar to Dutt’s play. We also witness a generational conflict between the younger people like Beny (who are rebellious being ignited with new western ideas) and the old and traditional people like Mahadeb, Turkolankar and Bydhabagis. Beny admits that he feels “hostile to Hindooism” and wants that “Hindooism must fall and must fall with a noise. Reformation must come on and excite heart-burning jealousies among men . . . prejudice and liberalism cannot long reign under the same roof without a rupture” (Lal 36). Beny understands that the old folk would not understand the contemporary youth. He asserts: “What will the bigots say when they understand my thoughts and feelings? I fear – not for the bigot’s rage and the priest’s thunders” (Lal 35). Beny thus voices the new rebellious generation. This is a one-sided and limited view that Beny saw social change only in terms of changing his food habits. The play does not show any social reforms made by the young people.

Social hypocrisy is another aspect that Banerjea wants to reveal. Mahadeb shows a fear of losing his social status more than his concern for his son’s well-being. Bydhabagis makes fun of his disciples with Turkolunkar saying that “The fellows that feed us are jackasses. . . . They understand none of the tricks we play upon them” (Lal 37). They are quite aware that showing devotion to them empty the purse of their disciples; they also know well that they do not have any qualifications to be respected and adored: “. . . we are much indebted to our predecessors for having paved the way. . . . They propagated sentiments respecting the sanctity of Braminism which the people imbibed, and which at present are so serviceable to us” (Lal 38). It is ironical that despite being aware of their own follies, they want to be respected; they condemn the “wickedness of the present age . . . the coldness and the indifference with which we are treated by the young men of this age” (Lal 35). Later in the play, we also see Bydhabagis getting drunk and allowing his disciples to drink: “Why I have expounded a course of shasters to them where I allowed drinking. . . . They are very happy – they like me exceedingly. – their veneration for me is particularly great because I permit sensual gratifications” (45). He admits: “They never read the shasters, and so did I: But I invented a set of doctrines and recommended them as their shasters—they are particularly glad that drinking is allowed” (46). He and Turkolunkar plan to “injure” Mahadeb upon the discovery of Beny’s meat-eating; we later see them plotting against each other and also taking bribe. Turkolunkar understands that their hypocrisy is getting

exposed with Christian and English education and if more people become like Beny then there will be an end to their welfare (46-7). Therefore, they plot to take help of Lallchand. Lallchand, an editor of a paper can see the immanent conflict between new education and the old beliefs. Through him, a social criticism is reinforced by Banerjea. He argued: "Hindooism has been already sunk down if we consider strictly; to be religious now, is to be a . . . hypocrite" (48). Lallchand is worried about his son. He finds objections against English education: "I cannot any longer keep him at school, not only because people will consider me very inconsistent, but also because it is so expensive. Five rupees a month are worth the while a man" (48). Lallchand thus reveals the dilemma of the age itself. At the same time, he is an epitome of hypocrisy when he says that, ". . . My "noble nature" was once changed when I passed for a Christian. It may change again if necessary, and I may again be a "liberal" as they call it if circumstances turn out strangely" (50). Lallchand reveals how everyone drinks and eats in secret; he is also aware that Beny and other young men know about him and call him a hypocrite. Similarly, Kamdeb too reveals social hypocrisy, "He tells every one not to let children go to School but is cunning enough to see his own sons there" (54). Thus, drinking becomes a major trope of east-west encounter and becomes a symbol of social hypocrisy.

It can be noted that the modern education brought by the Europeans face a criticism for corrupting the young minds with liberal ideas. Mahadeb regrets for giving education to his son in the school as he said:

Why did he not remain in perpetual ignorance? Who does not put his son into school? Why is he so corrupt and others unspotted? Where are my hopes gone? – I thought since he is so learned he will raise my name in the estimation of the people.... far from raising me he has hurled me down—He has lowered my ancestor's name. (41)

Again, he wonders: "Is it knowledge that has wrought this unhappy change?" (44). Scene II has a dialogue between Debnauth and Denonauth. On the one hand, there is a apprehension that the schools make boys Christians; on the other hand, there is a growing interest for this new education. Debnauth asserts that people talk about not sending their children to school, "But we never intended to act as we said" (62); Debnauth does not mind losing religion and the old customs for "dressing fashionably and being like gentleman" (63). Thus, the play focuses on the growing popularity of English education in the contemporary period.

Mahadeb's attempts to make Beny deny his meat-eating in order to avoid ex-communication in the society that falls on deaf ears as Beny declines to do so; he says, "I will never be able to utter falsehood, nor propagate that my feelings are changed by suffering a penance" (43), "how can I with a safe conscience disgrace philosophy, disgrace humanity, and disgrace the character of man by uttering what is not a fact" (44). Beny's Kantian adherence to his truth and his understanding of the new ideas of liberalism creates a situation of "A father versus Truth". Beny does not understand why one should suffer for "renouncing superstition." He compares his situation with the biblical event of God forbidding Adam to eat the fruit of knowledge and decides to give up his filial relationship for truth and takes a resolute determination: "I will bear up all like a man" (45) "Bear on; bear nobly on" (69). Beny's endeavours are seen in terms of the interest of the country as the society is in need of change: "Let us prove ourselves dutiful sons of our country by our actions and exertions. Now let us see what strength can ignorance and bigotry bring into the field. Let us mark how feeble is prejudice when rational beings attack it with prudence" (69). Thus, Beny becomes the voice of the new trends of the epoch in the early British days in Calcutta. However, Lal maintains: "The incendiary material in Banerjea's drama and the determination of his firebrand

protagonist to rightfully, rationally, fight and reform the faith into which he was born could have incensed these society viewers” (22).

Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization?* as Comedy of Manners

Comedy of manners was influenced by French dramatist Moliere. This idea is mentioned by M.H. Abrams that

deals with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper class society, and relies for comic effect in large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue – often in the form of *repartee*, a witty conversational give-and-take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing match – and to a lesser degree, on the violations of social conventions and decorum by would be wits, jealous husbands, conniving rivals, and foppish dandies. (29-30)

Abrams points out how comedy of manners was a “middle-class reaction against the immorality of situation” (30). Similarly, J. A. Cuddon points out that comedy of manners has “for its main subjects and themes the behaviour and development of men and women living under specific social codes” (158-9). Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization?* can be aligned to the features of comedy of manners. The duality of the society and the affective nature are projected here through the mannerism of the characters for an audience who are predominantly Bengalis. The play is about a group of English-educated Bengali youths who indulge in breaking the traditional and conventional societal norms by indulging in drinking and getting involved with prostitutes in the name of liberty and social transformation. One would not miss the tone of sarcasm in the name of *Jnanatarangani Sabha* [Assembly of Knowledge Wave] that they started in a red-light area of Calcutta. Kali claims that the Assembly of Knowledge Wave is meant for the study of Sanskrit, “We had to study only English in our college, but we should have some knowledge of our national language, so we have established this *Sabha* for discussion on Sanskrit. We gather there on every Saturday and discuss about the *dharmasashtras*” (Das, 128). Act-I, Scene-I discloses the hypocrisy of the new brand of educated youth. They were afraid that the *Sabha* would be abolished as Nabakumar's father had returned from his pilgrimage to Brindavan. Nabakumar explains the reason here: “. . . Am I willingly trying to close the Sabha? But what to do? The Master has become changed now that if I am out of sight for even ten minutes then he would look for me. So brother, I don't have any chances to attend the Sabha, (Sigh) (Das 124). This scene has a lot of code-mixing of English and Bangla in the dialogue of Naba, Kali, Mahesh, etc. This shows the hybridity of an emergent culture through linguistic hybridity as a symbol on the one hand, and how in the name of western liberal education, certain social evil like drinking is given precedence, on the other. An elitism of Englishness also is very prominent here. Kalinath's sole intention is to enjoy with Nabakumar's resources and he finds it inconvenient that the “oldman came back to spoil our pleasure. This Naba is our leader and helps in the money matters; if he leaves us then it would be disastrous for us, there is no doubt about it” (Das 124). The old generation with their traditional values are ridiculed and fooled. Kalinath talks about his Sanskrit learner uncle as “Yes, there was indeed an old fool, his name, Krishnaprasad Ghose” (Das 126) in an attempt to impress Naba's father that he comes from a lineage of great Sanskrit scholars. Similarly, Naba's father and the caretaker of Naba's father, named as Babaji, are subjected to ridicule and humiliation respectively. Dutt also gives a glimpse of the torture made by the British. When Babaji follows Naba and Kali to the Assembly of Knowledge Wave, he is ridiculed by the prostitutes in the red-line area. A British corrupt officer takes bribe from Babaji which shows how the British used to exploit the natives.

It is interesting to note that some of the female characters voice the concerns of women and provide a criticism of the “new brand” of youth. The drunk young men create discomfort to their wives and other female members. Here, Harakamini exclaims: “O sister-in-law, look at the condition of your elder brother. Hah! In Calcutta, how many wives face this kind of torture that is countless. Oh God! Why should you be so unkind to us?” (146). Nriya finds Naba kissing his sister in drunken condition improper which is not any vice for the European people; she comments, “Should one be shameless after learning English?” (Das 143). Similarly, referring to Naba’s drunkenness, Harakamini also comments at the end of the play, “. . . Those who study in Calcutta, they learn only one kind of wisdom [drinking] . . . these shameless ones again say that we are civilised like the Europeans. . . . Does one become civilised for drinking wine and eating meat and misbehaving? Can this be called civilization?” (Das 146). The social criticism here is projected through the voice of the women, which in itself is reflective of the social changes among the educated elites as many English educated elite people were growing conscious about the place and rights of women in the society.

Conclusion

The codes, dialogues and movements in the semiotics of theatre indicate that the dramatic representation can be contextualised in terms of the real world. In case of the select plays here, the plays are very much context bound with their age and epoch. Banerjea’s *The Persecuted* and Dutt’s *Is This Called Civilization?* can be read as complementary to each other. When Banerjea is criticising the hypocrisy of the old and traditional generation, Dutt is revealing the hypocrisy of the new educated young generation. In the Assembly of Knowledge Wave, Dutt’s young characters express their pride for being free from the shackles of superstition through education and they take resolution to work for social reformation; they talk about women’s education, their liberty, re-marriage of widows claiming that then only Bharat would be able to compete with the civilised countries like England (139-140). But in reality they are insensitive towards the needs, rights and social position of women. As a social comedy, we can see Dutt’s book as a critique of western modernity that brought a derogatory culture and affected mannerism in the society, particularly the upper class. The mannerism of the English-educated youth turning to promiscuity is Dutt’s major concern of sarcasm. The play definitely points out that a blind imitation of the European way/s is not an advantageous sign for the Indian/Bengali society.

Dutt’s personal choice of writing in Bangla itself is seen as an act of resistance to English/ness by many critics. Similarly, Banerjea’s play also shows how his personal experiences led him to write such a play in a zeal to resist social hypocrisy. We can say that both the dramatists have followed a modern western tradition of writing and both offer a social critique, and in doing so both the dramatists have historicised the age of the beginning of western modernity in Bengal. A tone of radicalism cannot be missed in both the dramas. We notice a connection between cultural politics and theatre that made a renegotiated delimitation of boundaries between art and society. In the literary history of modern Indian drama, these two plays suggest a creation of a new space for representing society – a space that neutralises the separation between art and socio-cultural politics.

The plays selected here can also be read as the early signs of nationalism that emerged in the beginning of twentieth century leading to independence from British rule as an establishment of non-English theatre was an early sign of Indian nationalism. Adoption and hybridization of western models can be understood as quests for alternative canons. Nonetheless, they are the social dramas in every aspect revealing the worldviews and values in a changing society. Therefore, reading the select plays

following the formulations of comedy of humour and comedy of manners can be seen as an exercise in social aesthetics and social critique.

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To cite this article [MLA style]:

Ara, Arzuman and Sib Sankar Majumder. "Theatre as Social Critique in Select Nineteenth-Century Indian Plays." *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1, February 2023, pp. 71-79. *NepJOL*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v5i1.52480>.