

The Quiet Catalyst: Decoding the Feminine Silhouette in Badal Sircar's Urban Canon

Badri Prasad Yadav

Assistant Professor

Government College, Sagwara, Dungarpur,
Rajasthan

Email ID: bpy071985@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0006-2818-8369

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Abstract

The urban tetralogy of Badal Sircar, i.e., *Evam Indrajit*, and *Pagla Ghoda* is broadly commemorated for investigating the existential angst, bureaucratic disenchantment, and emotive downturn of the men of post-independent India. Nevertheless, a critical fault happens when the women characters within this "urban canon" are rejected as the steady narrative devices or inert background to male angst. This paper investigates that the characters such as Mansi, the complicated spirit or ghost of the play *Pagla Ghoda*, Vasanti and Sunita are represented as quiet catalyst. They are not just the submissive sufferers, but they also fulfil the role of being important touchstone that reveal the scrupulous insolvency, mental timidity, and the systemic privilege of contemporary middle class male psyche. By describing the feminine silhouette in these four texts, it has exposed that critique of the contemporary Indian society by Badal Sircar depends completely on the hushed, organisational hold of its female characters.

Keywords: Urban Canon, Psyche, Mental timidity, Feminine silhouette, Domesticity

In India, the time of 1960, was pinned by an intense disrupt. The unworldly promises of a recently independent country commercial development, remunerative fairness, and highborn liberation, had paved the way to stern reality of middle-class exploitation, unemployment and systemic manipulation. In West Bengal, this contentment exhibited majorly within the Bhadrlok (the educated, urban middle class) consciousness. Any dramatist did not capture this limitless boredom more precisely than Sircar. The early urban plays of Badal Sircar, which were penned down for the conventional proscenium stage, efficiently framed a scenario of existential gist. Traditionally, the urban plays of Badal Sircar concentrate on male characters who flail against the conformity of the commercial ranting

and the desolation of domestic life. In these studies, the female characters are mostly downgraded to the verge, presented as signs of the domesticity the men search to escape.

Methodology and Approach

This paper is qualitative research and investigates *Evam Indrajit* and *Pagla Ghoda*, tracking down whole of the urban tetralogy of Badal Sircar to display how the feminine still develops across his complete early artistic performance. This paper is based on primary texts and secondary sources like journals, articles and archives.

Argument

Badal Sircar's treatment of Woman is a repetition of a very old paradigm which is part and parcel of Bengal's modernity. The entire scheme of modernity of Bengal was articulated through the figure of the woman. So the woman is in most cases a kind of storehouse of various desires—an empty signifier. (Bandyopadhyay) Nevertheless, the paper examines the major works of Badal Sircar i.e., *Evam Indrajit* (1963), and *Pagla Ghoda* (1967). By concentrating on the “feminine silhouette”, the reappearing, pensive presence of female characters in these texts, the researcher found out that the systematic anchors of the social critique by Badal Sircar have been represented in the plays. They do not only live through the existential angst of the male protagonist, their experienced realities, social enclosure and catastrophic ends are the impetus that disclose the ethical failure of contemporary Indian men.

While Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* is usually read as a play about existential dread, a feminist reading shows how patriarchal rules trap both women and men in post-independence India. The character of Manasi highlights how literature often denies women their own agency. She is split into different roles—a muse for the Writer or a lover for Indrajit—acting more like a mirror for male feelings than a real person with her own voice. “Sircar calls Manasi 'the creation of the mind' and perhaps an Indian counterpart of Jung's anima” (Dubey vi). Yet, Manasi also shows a quiet independence that Indrajit lacks. As an educated, working schoolteacher, she understands how the system works. Her refusal to marry Indrajit because they are cousins isn't because she doesn't care; it is a realistic survival choice, knowing that society punishes women much harder than men for breaking moral rules.

MANASI. Don't say that! Don't ever say that. [Pause.] How can I explain it? Don't you know what you mean to me? I feel stronger because of you. Strong enough to live. Otherwise, I would have just gone in. [Pause.] But I can't get angry. I don't want to be angry. I like life. I accept a lot of things. I have to, but it doesn't worry me. Because you are there, I can take life more easily more... [Suddenly.] I can't explain!

INDRAJIT. Go on. Tell me.

MANASI. No. I can't analyse things. Let's talk of something else.

INDRAJIT. We were talking of something else.

MANASI. If I don't understand this book will you explain it to me? [He stares at her.]
Why aren't you saying anything?

INDRAJIT. The day I get a job-I'll marry you.

MANASI. NO!

INDRAJIT. Just watch.

MANASI. But don't you see I'm your first cousin. (24)

At the same time, the play shows how patriarchy hurts men too. The identical lives of Amal, Vimal, and Kamal parody the rigid path middle-class Indian men are forced to take: pass exams, get an office job, marry, and buy property. Indrajit's depression comes from resisting this robotic definition of manhood. His eventual exhaustion shows how society crushes male vulnerability, forcing men to become unthinking cogs. When he finally gives in and gets married, domestic life is shown not as a happy home, but as a boring trap of repetitive chores. Ultimately, a feminist view reveals that the meaningless routine Sircar critiques is kept alive by patriarchal expectations; while men have the luxury to complain about the system, women have to practically navigate its dangers just to survive. "Sircar's attitude to the middle class has changed significantly since *Evam Indrajit*" (Bharucha 136). That is why in the play, when Leela is expelled from the house, Indrajit becomes angry and demands that society's rules should be changed. But Manasi understands that and asks him to ignore. Indrajit insists on moving on from this patriarchy but Manasi knows that this is not possible right now so she approaches Indrajit and diverts his attention by changing the topic elsewhere. This is also why Indrajit wants Manasi as his own companion because in a way she completes Indrajit. Mansi does not want to spoil his friendship with Indrajit, so she says, "Perhaps there will be another type of friendship something deeper, more meaningful" (45). Badal Sircar did not design the character of Manasi through a feminist perspective but rather, reflects a way women are presented in the Indian culture. Anjum Katyal in her *Badal Sircar Towards a Theatre of Conscience* claims that,

In a play that is about the individual who can-not accept what is expected of him, who questions societal norms, Manasi is a set of ideas. The idea of a woman who completes the man, who fills in all the gaps, as it were, and matches what the man needs. She does not have her own story. She appears in response to the male's needs.

She is a sort of dream of the male mind-as her name suggests. Manasi is not a restless female version of Indrajit, though she could have been. (Katyal 197-98)

In the play *Evam Indrajit* by Badal Sircar, the main character Indrajit endeavours to escape from the cyclic, repetitive essence of a monotonous existence. He denies the similar paths by Kamal, Amal and Vimal, which easily glide into traditionalism. Yet, the key point of attitude throughout his existential wandering is Manasi. Manasi, whose name translates to "created by the mind or "desire", occur in different repetitions in the play, i.e., as a teacher, cousin, lover, and a mother. This transformation has been charted by critics as a reflection of the imagination of Indrajit, but Manasi is far better than a muse. She serves as a stern, social reality that Indrajit is so much involved into himself to entirely understand. As in an interview Sircar states:

In *Ebong Indrajit* and also in later plays [women] are mostly portrayed as Manasi, a construct of men who are themselves pre-fabricated. At best they signify some elusive Telos. They are there to remind the men how closed-in they are... Manasi, for example, is ephemeral; she is not a character; she is not there for herself. She is there to show the limits within which the masculine psyche moves. It is a signifier of the closure of the masculine characters. As a result, she does not have a claim to autonomy. She is some sense Utopic. The woman signifies a lack which is constituted by the male. (Bandyopadhyay)

When Indrajit contemplates self-suicide or running away to London in search of meaning. Manasi is stuck in stern rules of a patriarchal society. She cannot easily escape as her survival needs mediation with the social familial structure. Indrajit proposes her to marry him and reject the societal norms, from the perspective of patriarchy that permits him to romanticize revolt. Manasi's rejection to involve in the careless, conceptual, idealism isn't a symbol of weakness, but of grounded pragmatism; Manasi states mildly, rupturing his existential dramatics,

MANASI. I can't, Indra, I can't.

INDRAJIT. Why not?

MANASI. Don't force me, please. Give me some more time.

INDRAJIT. Time-time-time! I have been waiting for six months now.

MANASI. What am I to do? I don't have courage. (39)

By remaining a "static ideal", Manasi reflects the narcissism of Indrajit. Her steadiness emphasizes his purposeless drift. The angst of Indrajit is exposed to be an opulence of his class and gender. He is free to bleat about the purposelessness of life, contrastingly, should silently channelize the actual, palpable limitation.

MANASI. You will have to go on.

INDRAJIT. But why? Why? Why? The same old road... I walk and walk and walk.
Keep on walking. And yet is there no escape?

MANASI. No. There is no escape. (55)

Manasi tries to pacify Indrajit by saying that life is not as absurd as he thinks and everyone is moving in the same way. You are not different from others and hence there is no escape and you have to keep moving.

If Manasi constitutes to be the silent, domestic hook, the womanly *Pagla Ghoda* presents a horrific, multidimensional accusation of patriarchal brutality. The play operates, on a crematory ground wherein the four men, Shashi, Karthik, Satu and Himadri, come together to have a drink and play cards while a young, unidentified woman's body is burnt.

While Badal Sircar's *Pagla Ghora* is often read as a dark, psychological play, it is actually one of his most direct attacks on how patriarchal society treats women. The play is set in a graveyard where four men are drinking while waiting for the funeral pyre of an unknown young woman who died by suicide. As the night goes on, the ghost of this young woman takes the shape of four different women from each man's past—Malati, Lakshmi, Mili, and Ladli. Through these ghost stories, the men are forced to admit how their own selfishness and cowardice destroyed the women who loved them. "In this play, women are 'modern' enough to aspire to romantic love, and to express their desire to their men, but they remained defined by what the men are not they are indicative of a lack in the male." (Katyal 208)

The play exposes the deep hypocrisy of men, no matter their class or background. Every single one of these men chose their own pride, social status, or fear of what people will say over the women in their lives. For example, Shashi refuses to marry Malati just because he doesn't want to upset his male best friend, showing that male bonding matters more to him than a woman's life.

Malti: I know. Pradip is your friend, your brother, your cousin. You have known him since childhood. I know everything.

Shashi: Then what?

Malti: (screaming) Is this the reason why you will be pushing me away from yourself? (Sircar 36)

Another character abandons Lakshmi out of sheer cowardice, leaving her to die in poverty.

Satu: look, we have discussed this many a times. I, being all alone, have kept a lady like you as a maid, what will the world think of me? That will definitely affect my work.

Lakshmi: Nobody will be able to find out, Babuji. I'll be stay hidden. Please don't throw me out. Let me stay with with you Babuji. (88)

Sircar shows that these women didn't just die of heartbreak; they were systematically crushed by a society that values male reputation over female survival. Society has always seen male-female relationships as being very restrictive. Class, creed, religion, caste are such issues on which the society has focused to define the male-female relationships. Perhaps this is the biggest reason why the male is patriarchal in nature and patriarchy has made it all right for a man to do anything with a woman. The man never feels that he is doing anything wrong to her and even if he does, he can go beyond the rules made by society and does what the society approves. *Pagla Ghoda* presents this issue very well. "In *Pagla Ghora* you don't have a play about what men do to men, which is vintage Sircar, but what men do to women. Thus it has a unique place in Sircar's oeuvre." (Prasad 75)

The title *Pagla Ghora* (The Mad Horse) represents the wild, untameable force of human love and emotion that society constantly tries to lock down. By bringing the dead woman back as a ghost, the play stops the men from lying to themselves and making excuses for their past behavior. In a patriarchal world, women are caught in a trap: they are expected to give everything to support men's emotional needs, but the second they become a threat to a man's social standing or comfort, they are instantly thrown away. Badal Sircar makes full use of an excellent theatrical device, where a single woman character plays four different roles in the play, i.e.; Malti, Mili and Lakshmi, who were being loved, betrayed and finally demolished by these four men.

The fourth woman-who remains unnamed-is a prominent presence in the play. As the spirit of the girl who is being cremated, she goads the men into revisiting their memories, provoking, challenging, commenting and questioning throughout. She also repeatedly invokes the *Pagla Ghora* metaphor the wild horse of untamed passion which has never visited her. She longs to know true passion, with all its promise of in and deep emotion. At the end, when she realises that she is the object of Kartik's unrequited longing, she cries to be taken off the funeral pyre. She would never have killed herself if she had known there was some love in her life after all. This just makes her victimhood all the more pathetic. (Katyul 208)

This integration, using one physical body to mirror four different stories, is an intentional political statement. Badal Sircar utilizes the feminine silhouette to signify how patriarchy demolishes feminine identity, providing individual woman interchangeable and disposable object.

The male characters in *Pagla Ghoda* reflect the aspect of ill-fated romance, presenting themselves as devastated victims of the destiny. Nevertheless, as the women come into being from their imagination, the story changes. The female characters say the truth to strength from outside the grave, eliminating the melancholic illusions of men. They expose that these deaths were not mere ill-fated accidents of destiny, instead, they were the immediate outcomes of male timidity, social adherence, and emotional detachment.

In an interview with Abanti Chakravarty, Badal Sircar quotes:

I read Badal Sircar's women in three phases. The first phase consists of his comedies-very stereotyped and clichéd. I sometimes feel how strange that Badal Sircar has written these plays! Such an intellectual person, such a political person! In the second phase-which includes *Ebam Indrajit*, *Pagla Ghoda*, *Baki Itihas* there is a modernity to the women, but it is men-centric. They are conditioned by men. I also feel that the women sort of belong to a dream world, not real. And then, in the third phase, women vanish. There is no woman.

Both plays, i.e., *Evam Indrajit* and *Pagla Ghoda* have been a part of Badal Sircar's proscenium theatre, where Sircar presented women empowerment in *Evam Indrajit* keeping existential problems at the centre and how women exploit the rules of society. While Leela, Malti, Lakshmi, and Milli, represent weak women, Manasi comes forward as a strong woman.

Conclusion:

The reason that the plays of Badal Sircar are still relevant today is that patriarchy is instilled in contemporary society and there are still so many women who are the sufferers of patriarchy. After independence, education has played a major role for Manasi to be recognised as a self-independent personality. On the other hand, women are still living the lives as of Malati, Lakshmi due to falling in the prey of unawareness and are completely dependent on males for everything.

In both the plays, *Evam Indrajit*, and *Pagla Ghoda*, Badal Sircar has shown the feminist perspective. In the play *Evam Indrajit*, Manasi is shown as an understanding and suitable match, whereas, in the play *Pagla Ghoda*, how a woman questions the society and attacks the male psyche, has been presented. Badal Sircar has written so many plays that can

be studied from a feminist perspective. The researcher has focused on *Evam Indrajit* and *Pagla Ghoda* and has attempted to present Badal Sircar's feminist perspective. Many of Sircar's plays are in Bengali, yet are still untranslated, and can be presented from a gender studies perspective.

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