

The Geographical Space in Badal Sircar's Plays: *Bhoma and Beyond the Land of Hattamala*.

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Abstract

Badal Sircar is one of the influential Bengali dramatists of the twenty first century. He was born in Calcutta and most of his plays revolve around Calcutta. In most of his plays he has recorded the turbulent period of Calcutta in 1960-70s. Sircar used the real space (Calcutta), the existing city rather than the fictional space. Calcutta is considered to be one of the largest cities in India. Even though the city seems to be economically well developed, most of the people suffer from poverty and overcrowding. Sircar's letter to Richard Schechner, the founder of performance studies, describes the 'city of alien culture'. He also opines that Calcutta is a city, both most loved and hated intensely.

Keywords: Calcutta, turbulent period, fictional space, overcrowding and alien culture.

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Being a Bengali, he witnessed the Bengal famine in 1943, which flooded and destroyed most of the people's livelihood. It is interesting to note, his uncle gives the name 'Badal' which means 'rain' or 'cloud'. Apart from witnessing famine, he also encountered many burning Indian socio-political issues. Among such is the partition of Bengal, which divided the city into two halves: the East and West Bengal. The character Kusum discusses her experience of migration in *The Hungry Tide*. She says:

Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila: we're tide country people, from the Sundarbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us, to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was soured it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold, they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. (164-65)

Like the Indians, the entire world considers and worships the land as their Motherland. Susan Bassnett's *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* discusses that any violation of land would be considered as spoiling the women's virginity. Bassnett says "other colonizers expressed their journeys in terms of land cultivation, planting and fertilizing, hoeing, tilling, ploughing the land, and recently scholars have begun to point out the equation of this kind of imagery with that of rape" (93).

The land has been considered as the flesh and blood of people because of its nourishments. Indians especially the tribes worship the five elements (air, water, land, space, and fire) of nature as their God. These kinds of nature's nurture and worships could be destroyed both by a geological hazards as well as man-made disasters. Compared to man-made disasters, it is the nature's violence against people is more vibrant.

Bhoma is one such play, which depicts the predicament of people in Sundarban as well as Sundarbans (space) in West Bengal. The critics and scholars agree that Sundarbans is a place which recorded most of the geological hazards and also suggest that it would be terrible to lead a peaceful life. Though Sundarbans is considered being one of the most celebrated and second largest mangrove forests in the world, it has some pessimistic aspects also.

Sircar's *Bhoma* gives a glimpse of the darker side of the Sundarbans by recording its ecological destruction against people. Many scholars and writers witnessed and recorded Sundarban's geographical and ecological destruction in their works. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer and his *The Hungry Tide* depicts the darker side of Sundarbans. He also agrees with Sircar and says that Sundarbans is an archipelago of islands and considered as one of the most terrible forest for survival. Ghosh's character Kanai Dutt discusses the hurdles of livelihood in Sundarbans due to the climatic and geohazards in a forest.

Raja Ambethkar and Jaya Raj's "Restoration of Human Spirit in *The Hungry Tide*" also agrees with Ghosh and Sircar. They say that Sundarbans is a liquid landscape and it is a place for frequent natural disasters. It wipes out thousand lives of animals and humans. Yann Martel in his the *Life of Pie* observes that it is because of the frequent famine and cyclones, the earth is unbalanced. These kind of unbalance led to the major destructions in Sundarbans coastal ecosystem causing loss of vegetation, poverty, property and human lives. The cultivating lands become salty, which made the farmers starve for

food, pure air and water. The heavy tides result in the mixture of brackish water with the pure water.

Most of the people do not have regular jobs and some of them work as part time workers. Such works are: wood-cutters, palm collectors, fishermen, and honey hunters. Some people collect timber for boats, woods for fire, poles for house, grass for matting and reeds for fencing. The inhabitants of the land struggled hard for their survival and migrated to nearby villages. Bhoma's family is one such family migrated to nearby villages. By seeing Bhoma's migration, other farmers in Sundarbans migrate and struggle hard for their survival.

Though Bhoma seems to be one of the exploited farmers, he represents the suffering of all the marginalized farmers in his village. Their exploitation is both external as well as internal. The internal wounds of the farmer are the most when compared to the externals. The external exploitation of the farmers is the physical wounds when they are brutally attacked by the wild animals. Yann Martel rightly observes that the farmer's external exploitation in his *Life of Pi*. He says that the Bengal tigers in the forest would sometime go outside to hunt the humans. The villagers are being threatened by the tigers and their livelihood is under question.

Bhoma and his family works in the forest for daily wages and his family is not an exception from the hungry mouth of wild animals. They are also attacked and suffered by animals. Bhoma's family and other villagers suffered not only from the attack of wild animals but also by the numerous unnamed diseases. ONE. "Bhoma's mother died of snakebite. His father was dragged away by a crocodile before his very eyes. The younger brother couldn't stand the tamarind and salt-water mixture and died of diarrhea" (100).

Bhoma's mother died and her whole body turns into blue because of the snake's venom. The crocodile ate the chunks of flesh from his father's body and made him mutilated. Bhoma says that his father's blood flows around him like a red river. The Bhoma's brother who works in the salt water has turned black in colour. Bhoma, the protagonist of the play is himself too seriously attacked by the tiger.

The people of Sundarbans say that the tiger attacks Bhoma's right eye and made him blind. The vengeance within Bhoma made him to attack the tiger. He killed the tiger with his rusty axe which killed hundreds of villagers before his eyes. Despite all his miseries, it is Bhoma who has the responsibility to look after the dying and mutilated family members. Above all, he has worked hard to fill his mouth and also paid his family debts. He and his brother both are considered as the two breadwinners of their family.

It is melancholic to know that they both strike a clock for only six rupees per day. Learning all the difficulties, most of the Sundarban villagers moved as refugees to the nearby villages. Such villages are Sealdah, Tapsia, Bediadanga, Dhapa and Kusumkumari. Bhoma's brother is one such person migrated to the next village in Sundarbans. The rest of the family members - Bhoma's mother, wife, daughter and sisters serve in the house of the gentry. They seem to be washing the pots and pans in their master's household. They become worse than the servants in the family because they are

master's made them as concubines. Bhoma's mother and sisters carry their master's children in their wombs. SIX. "Carrying in their wombs the children of the gentry" (107).

Though Bhomas' families serve as real breadwinners, the whole family income could not feed the mouth of all. Bhoma seems to be hungry all the time and wishes to eat rice. It is well to quote Marxist views that rich becomes richer and the poor becomes poorer. The landlords are like huge blood sucking bugs sitting at the top of the every farmer's head to suck their blood. To erase and counter such differences, Bhoma has now become more vibrant and violent now.

He takes his rusty axe to revolutionize the weeds (rich landlords) in the society. Learning all the revolutionary aspects of Bhoma, his co-farmers shares the facts about Bhoma, the sacrificer. They say that Bhoma worked for the welfare of all the exploited farmers. The farmers with their deepest concern toward Bhoma says that it is he who withstands and give his life and blood for the survival of the village community. Though he gives his life and blood for the others survival, there is no one to look after him. He is in the death bed and the blood drips from his mouth.

While discussing about his sacrifices and his condition, soon his co-farmers become lifeless and their blood becomes cold and inert. It might be interpreted as the force of hierarchy which made them to never raise their heads in the protest. Though both he and his co-farmers struggled hard to erase class/caste distinctions, there is no change in the hierarchial values. Sircar has used many images and symbols to depict natures violence against man as well as the man violence (hierarchy) against his fellow beings.

He has referred hierarchical powers as poisonous weeds of the society. Even though Bhoma tries to remove such poisonous weeds, they are growing and growing at the height of the mountain peaks without any delay. His co-farmers cry loudly and encourage Bhoma's senses and say that he is alive to care for the farmers. They proudly say Bhoma has risen to attack all the evils in the society and they are within the heart of Bhoma.

ONE. Hungry. Hungry. Bhoma lies almost lifeless with hunger. Bhoma, the beggar. His axe is rusty. All around there grows a jungle of poisonous weeds and parasites. Poison. There's the smell of poison in the air. There's the taste of Bhoma's blood on the tongue. We drink Bhoma's blood, and laugh and play. There's blood dripping down the sides of our mouths, dripping, dripping, the poisonous plants are growing, growing. My blood, man's blood, becomes cold, c- o-l-d, c-o-l-d... (Lies down. Tune 2 starts. Five is still lying. The others are also lying lifelessly as if put to sleep by poison. One speaks out, as if in a dream, but in a clear voice.) But Bhoma is there! I know Bhoma is there! I know, that's why I have dreams. Dreams. Bhoma has risen. He has taken up his rusty axe, he's grinding it, sharpening it. There are forests all around him. There's the forest in Bhoma's eyes. The torn eye lights up with the fire that killed the tiger! Bhoma is rising! We are rising! The forest! The

forest! The forest of poison trees! Pick up your axe! Bhoma! Come on, hit it... Heave ho—(110)

Through the play, Sircar highlights the predicament of farmers and also encourages them to participate in the revolution. He says people are the heroes by themselves and they have to carry and protect themselves from all the anti-social elements. In this play Bhoma serves as a metaphor and represent farmers exploitation on the whole. As a king who takes cares of his country men, cares for the suppression of his co-farmers in the hands of the landlords as well as from the ecological desolation.

Sircar's second play *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* is a children's based fantasy play. It is about two thieves: Kenaram and Becharam transformed into responsible persons in the utopian land. The play opens with the encounters of thieves robbery in the landlord's house. Being afraid of both local people as well as the police, the two thieves fall into a river. The thieves after crossing the river, they both landed up in a new land (utopia) where everything is free of cost. Samik Bandyopadhyay's introduction to Sircar's *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* and *Scandal in Fairyland*. He says: For Sircar, this story of two thieves who, fleeing from their pursuers, jump into a river to save their skins and surface in a land where people have never known what money is and live by the principle of 'from each according to his capacities, and to each according to his needs' becomes a myth of possibility (ix).

The thieves falling into the water could be interpreted as their soul's redemption from all the immoral activities in their life. After the entry into a new land, Kenaram informs Becharam that he is hungry and feels thirsty too. They both planned to cheat the coconut vendor and finally amazed with the fact that money had no value in the utopian world. The vendor doubtfully asks both thieves: FIVE (Laughing). "What do you mean 'how much'? As much as you can drink" (She prepares to cut open a green coconut.) (9). Kenaram gets puzzled and asks his friend: BECHARAM. "What's happening, Dada? I first don't get it. Is everything on charity here or what?" (17). Becharam wonders and question the vendor:

BECHA. Don't you have to pay any money anywhere?

ONE. Money?

FOUR. "Oh, I think they're talking about those ornaments— round, flat discs made of silver, I think".

THREE. I think there are even some made of paper, which pictures on them.

FOUR. Oh, I wish Grandma were alive, I could have told her.

KENA. Becha, I think I'm going mad! (24)

The two thieves think that they have reached a magical land. They have both enjoyed the scenery of the utopian land which seems to be evergreen and also welcomes them for their happy days. Prashanti Ganesh opines about *Beyond the land of Hattamala*

in her article “Two Thieves and a Village Full of Freebies” that it is a rollicking comedy about two run away thieves Kenaram and Becharam. As the thieves make their way through the village, they discover that everything free there. The thieves enjoy the hospitality of the villagers. They eat sweet tender coconut water, hot payasam at the end of a full meal and even some ripe bananas all for free. She ends up with a suggestion that it is wonderful to be in such a utopian land. These kinds of utopian principles could be seen in William Morris *News from Nowhere*. Morris represented the utopian society where there is no court, no law, no private property, no judge, no corruption, no punishment, no class, no prison and no police.

The thieves late enter the hotel without any abstacle. That’s why they indulge in drilling the hotel’s brick walls inorder to steal food. This is how the people of the world go wrong and indulge themselves in immoral activities. If everybody works for the good of the being, there is no need for theft or murder. The scarcity led them to indulge in immoral activities. Sircar through this play created a utopian land where everybody shares everything without scarcity. It is no need for the thieves to drill the walls because the doors are already opened for the customers upto 10pm in the nights. Their drilling noise is heard outside, the two thieves afraid of being caught. Fortunately, they both are appreciated by Doctor. He wants them to teach the art of drilling. He says:

DOCTOR. I’m quite serious. You should be proud of doing something well. I was thinking of learning this wonderful skill from you. Will you teach me? (35). Kenaram agrees and willing to teach the art to him. He also conditioned that learning the art of poker will take some ten years. The Doctor’s enthusiasm is disappointed with Kenaram’s initial utterance and moreover, he says that he is not too young to learn the art.

But the enthusiastic Kenaram cheer him up by saying that he has the ability to learn the art. He also cautions him that learning the art of poker has a different procedure and it varies from mud walls. He pinpoints that the speed and patience are the two essential elements of this job. At last, the Doctor with the tireless effort learns the art of poker and informs Kenaram that a man must work hard to learn every art and also to taste the fruit of success. He further says that in the utopian land everybody works for the sake of every one and together enjoys the fruit of success.

The Doctor becomes the eye opener of thieves through his enlighten words. They both realize their mistakes and want to work hard. Kenaram utters forcefully if everybody worked hard could anyone ever go to prison ? He says: Nonsense. If we could do that would we need to steal to go to prison? Be flogged as thieves? (36). The Doctor replies that definitely one does not go to prison unless he work hard without indulge in immoral activities. He admires the way the people in utopian land works together to share the burden of the whole mass.

Sircar’s *Bhoma* also shares this view of making an egalitarian society which is free from all anti-social evils. One says: “This earth belongs to ALL of us, doesn’t it Bhoma? If we ALL of us, could work our hardest to make everything we need and then All of us shared all we produced” (86). Learning all the merits of the utopian society,

Becharam questions Doctor that they are people starving outside utopia. He wants to know the cause behind people's starvation.

The Doctor too agrees that it is a valuable question to be asked. He also wonders people in utopia shares everything out of their leadership and hard work but people outside utopia suffer for a single square meal. He replies that rich and selfish people stagnates the wealth of commoners and make the poor to be even poorer. He analyzes that the dystopian country is the root cause of all anti-social elements in a country. In dystopia, people behave immorally without ethics and humanity and attempts to spend commoners' money lavishly.

The illustration depicts how some people in utopia never utilize the merits of an idealistic society. Kenaram informs the Doctor that he is hungry and does not have food till from the morning. Becharam interrupts their conversation and says: But that's because you didn't want to. On purpose (36). The Doctor observes and says that no one in utopia drags/ consumes or asks him to pay money for his food. It is he himself avoids having the food. He further says that some people in utopia do not utilize the sources and blames others for their own convenience. He says Becharam is one such lad.

The two thieves lists out the things they are getting free in utopia: Foods, the shelter, free shave and free shoes. Their guilty conscious made them to utter and think that they are undone anything in utopia, but still they are enjoying everything freely. The Doctor replies that there is nothing comes free and suggests that people who do not work today they would work and compensate for tomorrow. He warns the thieves that they must be aware of the fact that man should not live without work. Moreover, he urges them to work, work, and then work.

He says working together increases the economic growth of the country and in turn it helps the poor to lessen their burdens. His enlightening words made the thieves to redefine, reform and refine themselves. Moreover, it led them to find their jobs and to work for the countries progress. Becharam works as a gardener and Kenaram works as a builder. Their transformation helps for the progress of the country. Chorus in the play happily sings the reformation song and celebrates the progress and transformation of the two thieves.

Sircar's *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* is one of best illustrations of communist ideology. The newly found utopian land plays a major role in the thieves' transformation into responsible citizens of the world. *Bhoma* and *Beyond the land of Hattamala* are the two plays bring the relationship between people and their living space. *Bhoma* depicts the trauma of the living space (Sundarbans) and the second play *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* portrays the thieves progressive transformation in utopia. Their native land (Hattamala) is a dystopian world and their shift from native living space to utopian space marks their good transformation.

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