

Manoj Mitra's Play *Honey from a Broken Hive*: A Discourse of History and Culture

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Abstract

Schools of cultural studies are chiefly devoted to 'specify the functioning of the social, the economic, and political forces and power structures that are said to produce the diverse forms of cultural phenomena'(Abrams 53). Literature is one of the cultural phenomena that are 'viewed as endowed with meanings that are the product of social forces and conventions, and that may either express or oppose the dominant structures of power in a culture'(Abrams 54). Manoj Mitra's play *Honey from a Broken Hive* exemplifies a representative cultural discourse that expresses and opposes the dominant structures of power in Bengali or rather Indian culture in the post-Independence era. Though *Honey from a Broken Hive* is not a historical play, this play needs to be taken back to the socio-political conditions or 'historical conditions' from which the play emerged as a voice to address the subject of the marginalized. The aim of my paper is to scrutinize, identify and articulate all the 'state apparatus' that have been automatized and naturalized by the state power-politics through the Bengali play *Honey from a Broken Hive* by Manoj Mitra.

Keywords: cultural discourse, political forces, power structures.

Introduction:

Manoj Mitra is the one who dreams to see a revolution to bring all the sections of people on the same ground of humanity. He has longed to create a society where the dimensions of conflict and violence between unequal social forces come to an end. Manoj Mitra is one of the contemporary Indian playwrights who draw a new phase to the tradition of Indian theatre, incorporating new traits that concern the class relations and class struggles and that echo a revolutionary voice against the established order of society. He along with Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, Bijon Bhattacharya and few more succeeds to enable the theatre frames to raise questions among people regarding social violence, injustice, and conflict. Up to date, Manoj Mitra wrote above one hundred plays and acted as a major role in many of his plays. He was awarded the *Asiatic Society Award* for his unique contribution to theatre in 2005. He wrote his plays in Bengali language and major portion of his plays has been translated into English. *Chhayar Prasad*, *Golpo Hekimshaheb*, *Chak Bhanga Modhu* are some of his best known plays translated into English.

Honey from a Broken Hive (Chak Bhanga Modhu) was written in 1969 and later translated into English. The play is set in a village in the Sundarbans against the backdrop of the Naxal movement in Bengal and dramatizes some of the heinous social diseases— class inequality and struggle, economic exploitation, and different forms of oppressions. The play is uniquely marked by its concern for the margins and the marginalized that are remained unnoticed by the main-stream Indian freedom movements. It centers on Matla Ojha and his family who belong to the lot of the downtrodden class, and projects the class conflict between Ojha (Matla and his family) and Jotedar (Aghor Ghosh). Aghor Ghosh is a monstrous money-lender who exploits and grabs people's property through his money-lending strategy. The whole village is crushed down for the social system of the 'Jotedar' class. Aghor Ghosh is bitten by a snake and poison spreads all over his body. Now it is up to Matla Ojha who has

the power to take the poison out of his body and the central action of the play surrounds the dilemma whether Matla should save the body of his class enemy or not. The body of Aghor is taken to the house of Matla. Matla initially does not want to save the life of Aghor because he is the cause of the destruction of the entire village. Badami, Matla's daughter, thinks that they should save Aghor's life on the ground that Aghor will, in return, spare them from the debt they owe to him. At last Matla takes the poison out of his body and gives a new life to him. But Aghor does not acknowledge their gratefulness to him, rather rebukes them for they wait so long to take the poison out, and demands the interest of the money they borrow from him. He shows a licentious desire for Badami and demands to take her to his house. A crowd of angered villagers gather before the house of Matla to throw all their anger on Aghor and thus Aghor breathes his last breath.

Methodology: Notion of Discourse and Concept of History in Cultural Studies

The practice of discourse analysis has been in vogue late in the 1980s. My study wishes to focus attention on the notion of discourse and on a cluster of other notions which have become closely associated with it. The notion of discourse has come largely from the amalgam of history, historiography and socio-cultural studies that are associated with the works of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Michael Bakhtin, Lacan and with many schools of cultural studies in the 1980s. The present essay proposes to draw these modern perspectives on discourse to offer a critical exploration of Manoj Mitra's Play *Honey from a Broken Hive*.

Conceptually, Foucault's concept of discourse is much complex which is closely related to the other two notions—the power-relations and conflicting social structures, and knowledge. Several concepts organize Foucault's perspectives, which will be taken up while considering discourse in this essay. Foucaultian notion of discourse can be used to explore the power relations and power effects which manifest themselves within discourse which

Manoj Mitra documented in his play. The critical study of Manoj Mitra will show how the Bengali society maintains the class systems and validate the privileged positions of dominant class politically and economically over the working class.

Foucault, one of the most prominent critics in the modern and postmodern cultural studies, came out with some groundbreaking ideas that changed the general ideas on culture, society and history. He opines that each social phenomenon is constructed upon the struggle over power. And this is “bottom-up model of power, that is his focus on the way power relations permeate all relations within a society” (Mills 34). So, the social position of an individual is constructed by a particular discourse and he always remains in some level of power structures and he has the ability to bring a change in the structure of power relations. When modern readers come to approach history and culture with this method, it “allows an analysis which focuses on individuals as active subjects, as agents rather than as passive dupes” (Mills 34). In Foucaultian notion, discourse can control and construct the production of knowledge. Foucault also views that a physical phenomenon or object is independent from the discourses but it has been unconsciously constituted by invisible discourses:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought . . . An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or expressions of ‘the wrath of God’ depends on the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence. (qtd. in Mills 56)

That is, Foucault is focusing on the invisible operations of discourse that frame the utterances of an individual. What a man utters is always a production of the discourses that control the human knowledge. Foucault is also a historian who aims to discover the marginalized voices in the history, and in all cultural productions and then, “to re-do the things said by traditional records of history so that the ‘interior secret’ and the other history that runs beneath those records and is more fundamental would be uncovered” (Foucault *Archeology* 22). His studies identify and articulate the “interior secret” and the “initiating subjectivity” of a culture and “discover the law operating behind” the discourse of culture which “is constituted by a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence” (Foucault *Archaeology* 50, 106).

The notion of power is another important concept in cultural studies which is connected with discourse. Foucault opines that “power circulates in all directions” (Tyson 284). It works as a chain and doesn’t flow in one direction and it is not just “a set of relations between the oppressed and the oppressor” (Mills 35). He opines that an individual is not always a subject to power; he can resist the power which is constituted in different forms of institutions. Power is not circulated through one single institution, but through various forms of social discourses struggling over power. Foucault believes that there is simultaneous existence of discourses in which power is not necessarily a constraining factor as he says in *History of Sexuality* (1978) that “if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?” (36). It implies that power does have a constructive nature in itself and this is different from conventional Marxist and Feminist tradition which takes power as a restrictive and oppressive force. So, according to Foucault’s notion, no single discourse can be able to have long validity without any resistance. He thinks that the way discourse is formed “does not play the role of a figure that arrests time and freezes it for decades or centuries” (*History of Sexuality* 74). As he says:

There is no statement in general, no free, neutral, independent statement; but a statement always belongs to a series or a whole, always plays a role among other statements, deriving support from them and distinguishing itself from them; it is always a part of a network of statements. (*History of Sexuality* 99)

The way discourse circulates into the top of hierarchy of power is quite a complex process. Social institutions and discourse work simultaneously to exclude the statements that tend to exclude things which they categorize as false and which do not conform to their discourse. Phenomenon that tends to exist within the domain of a specific discourse should obey the rules of that discourse. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, he claims that “it is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be ‘in the true’ however if one obeyed the rules of some discursive ‘police’ which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke” (224).

The present study of my essay “Manoj Mitra’s Play *Honey from a Broken Hive: A Discourse of History and Culture*” involves a reading of Manoj Mitra’s play *Honey from a Broken Hive* and then, a critical investigation of bourgeoisie discourses and their power-politics. The present study puts the terms ‘history’, ‘culture’, ‘discourse’ in its main debate and discussion. Theories of cultural studies will be our major tools to the present study.

Foucault’s method of genealogy will be taken up to examine various social truths and the discourses that create the truths. This method of genealogy doesn’t seek to search the origin of a truth but investigates how a particular social system is constructed through the strategized mechanism of power-relations. And this essay, through Foucault’s genealogy, aims to deconstruct the established systems of Bengali society. Antonio Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony will also be used to defend my arguments in this essay.

Honey from a Broken Hive: An Analysis

Honey from a Broken Hive is obviously a representative discourse of a particular time and place in which the play can be situated to unearth the various power forces, structures and dominations operated and circulated through different ‘ideological state apparatuses’. Modernist philosophers like Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault propagate insights to identify and articulate the invisible functioning of different ‘social apparatuses’ through which the discourse of bourgeois ideology has been perpetuated and normalized into the grass roots of common masses. Here we can refer to the inquiries of Foucault who says:

It is not the “privilege”, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who “do not have it”; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. This means that these relations go right down into the depths of society, that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes (*Discipline and Punish* 26-27).

During the pre-Independence era the Bengali culture or rather the whole Indian culture was divided into different layers of power structures from the landlord to common people. This power mechanism continues some decades even after the Independence. Aghor Ghosh who represents the power of the landlord is a landowner and money-lender. He lends money to people in need and collects huge amount of interest from them. When they are unable to pay the interest, he grabs property, land, or any other things. This play is a cultural

product that is intended to expose the power structures and power-relations prevalent in Bengali culture and society, and portray its disastrous effects on the class of the dominated. As Lois Tyson writes: “all events—including everything from the creation of an art work, to a televised murder trial, to the persistence of or change in the condition of the poor—*are shaped by and shape* the culture in which they emerge” (Tyson 284). To carry out a sociological and cultural study, it will take us to the theories and inquiries of some modern cultural thinkers. New historicists conceive a literary text as a merely a production of the cultural practices and ‘codes’. As Abrams writes:

...new historicists conceive of a literary text as “situated” within the totality of the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes. (Abrams 244)

Manoj Mitra, a pro-Marxist and politically- inclined writer, attempts to create a discourse that reflects an alternate history—the history of the social conflict between unequal power relations and structures. Aghor Ghosh possesses the ‘power mechanisms’ of lending money in high interest and exploits the property and land and this power mechanism makes him able to exercise the power over the people. The Ojha family in this play represents the class that remains at the margin of the society. Matla and his family are crushed down by the power strategies Aghor and his class exercise over them. Matla and his uncle Jata often think of fleeing from the village to get rid of Aghor’s disastrous trap. Badami, a woman ripe with life in her womb, gets nothing for last few days to eat; neither could Matla manage any grain for his pregnant daughter. Badami cries:

Badami(expectantly): have you brought anything? Could you get anything? No? (picks up the empty net pouch.) Nothing? Three days and you've not been able to get a single grain! Let it die, the demon in my belly—let it die!

Malta acknowledges the same and says:

Matla: ...and then I remembered—Badam? Badam's not eaten for two nights...

Badam, crying and cursing her pa...Badam...

This is the harsh picture of this village people. The landowners and money-lenders transfer the village into a place of fear and hunger. People lose the peace of their minds and always try to avoid the glance of their 'master' Aghor Ghosh. The flowing dialogue shows how the people in the village are frightened with the glance of Aghor:

Excited voices in the distance. Jata comes running down the slope of the ridge. His voice quivers, his body trembles, the stick in his hand keeps slipping.

Jata: Matla—ah Matla—Matla—

Matla: What's the matter?

Jata: What've I heard...oh my God, what've I heard!

Matla: What've you heard?

Jata: Did you hear that, Granddaughter? Did you hear that? Ah...oh my God...

Badami: Why do you say the same thing?

Matla (raising his hand as if to slap). Look here...

Jata: Master! Master himself?...

Malta and Badami: Master?

Jata: Yes, yes, Master! Master of ill fame...Aghor Ghosh—

Matla: Aghor Ghosh!

Badami: he comes hither!

Matla: Oh my God!

...

Badami: If we can't pay him interest—

Matla: He'll kick my ass and grab all he sees before him... (161)

This is what the play intends to expose that Aghor, the Jotedar, will 'grab all he sees before him, if they could not pay him the interest. Jata's wife once ends her life by committing suicide when it reaches beyond her patience to bear the pangs of hunger. Louis Althusser comes up with relevant studies on power that is exercised through different social system ('apparatuses') and suggests that these apparatuses or the social discourses may carry hidden messages of the bourgeoisie and these phenomena should be taken seriously (Althusser 1-60). With his concept of "hegemony", Raymond Williams addresses the problem of ideology and says that "hegemony" or dominant ideologies which are maintained by a grouping of gender, ethnicity or class or profession encompass the "whole social process" (Williams 108-121). And this power does not originate only from the top of the political and socioeconomic structure. Foucault gives the ideas that "power *circulates* in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times. And the vehicle by which power circulates is a never-ending proliferation of *exchange*: (1) the exchange of material goods through such practices as buying and selling, bartering, gambling, taxation, charity, and various forms of theft; (2) the exchange of people through such institutions as marriage, adoption, kidnapping, and slavery; and (3) the exchange of ideas through the various discourses a culture produces" (Tyson 284). Manoj Mitra here uncovers the struggles of the ordinary people who are not able to survive the situation the power apparatuses of the landowners and money lenders create over them. In *Some People, Some Plays*, Manoj Mitra writes:

...Matla and Badami of Honey from a Broken Hive I have seen from a very close. I have seen the rags in which they cover themselves. Seen the people of rough skin and hair sitting on the ground and eating cooked saag leaves from broken clay dishes. Poverty was their constant friend. They never thought of freedom. Poverty seemed to a deadly illness that enveloped them like a deep coma. (213)

It is here clear that the story of the play presents the contemporary socio-political conditions of Bengali culture. Louise Montrose, a new historicist, comes up with methods to dig out 'the historicity of text' and views that literature or any text "Consists of what are called representations—that is, verbal formations which are the 'ideological products' or cultural constructs of the historical conditions specific to an era". Here the story of Jotedar class and the class conflict between the Jotedar and the Ojha in the play is the main historicity of the play that can be seen as ideological products' or cultural constructs of the Bengali culture. Further, Manoj Mita has written the play *Honey from a Broken Hive* as a representation of "the complex power structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society" to "undo these ideological disguises and suppressions in order to uncover its subtext of historical and political conflicts and oppressions which are the text's true, although covert or unmentioned, subject matter" (Abrams 193). Foucault moves ahead and discusses the invisible power struggles that operate at the grass roots level of the society and studies and highlights the politics of power and domination. As he says in an interview:

...that is to say on the basis of daily struggles at grass roots level, among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power. This was where the concrete nature of power became visible, along with the prospect that these analyses of power would prove fruitful in accounting for all that had

hitherto remained outside the field of political analysis... (Foucault *Power/Knowledge* 116)

Here, the class conflict of the Ojha and the Jotedar is the “grass roots level...where the concrete nature of power became visible” (Foucault *The Order* 116) and this conflict between Ojha and Jotedar and the disguised exploitations and oppressions of Jotedar class through the power mechanism remain here as the central concern for the readers of cultural studies. Another conflict arises in the play when Aghor is bitten by a snake and his body is taken to the house of Matla to take the poison out of his body. People go to the house of the Ojha to take poison out when they have a snake-bite. But the hunger grips over the village in such an extreme way that they die of hunger and that they do not need to go to Ojha’s house. Jata says: “...snakes don’t bite people any more...such bad days these are...and what will they bite? Folks these days die without food...” (*Honey* 161). When the Ojha family comes to know that Aghor is bitten by a snake, they feel merry. Jatla says: “we’ll live if he dies. I owe him so much money...five times twenty *taka*...” (*Honey* 179)” Matla who knows the ways of poison does not like to give back Aghor his life because he is the cause of the destruction of the whole village. As Badami converses with Shankar, Aghor’s son:

BADAMI: to tell you the truth, we fear saving your pa...

SHANKAR: you don’t need to tell me that...you think I don’t know...?

...

BADAMI: Master! Master, I don’t know what made you say that...

But none of it’s untrue! That one man alone has destroyed this entire village...

SHANKAR: you think I don’t know that... I may stay at Shagunj but I come here every week (*Honey* 168).

Mitra's *Honey from a Broken Hive* shows how various social discourses propagate and establish its political and ideological supremacy through various agencies of power such as Zamindari system, money-lending, land revenues etc. as noticed in the present play. The playwright exposes the fact that through the cruel and brutal violence, the ruling govt. expresses their susceptibility. People in power are against any person or organization which refuses to accept the hegemonic culture and ideology. To this specific aspect of state's power mechanism one can refer to the inquiries of Foucault who asserts:

Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possess or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. Certainly everyone doesn't occupy the same position. Certain positions preponderate and permit an effect of supremacy to be produced. This is so much the case that class domination can be exercised just to the extent that power is dissociated from individual might. (*The Order* 156)

At last humanity wins over the class enmity. Badami comes to care for monstrous Aghor when he is bitten by a poisonous snake. The Ojha family agrees to save Aghor with the hope that he will, in return, help save her unborn child. Matla harbors the hope that Aghor will excuse their debt. Much against the will of the villagers, Badami tries to save the life of Aghor. For a moment the collective class enmity disappears for the individual will of care for Aghor. Matla saves his life by taking the poison out of his body. Aghor, an epitome of higher social force and power, gets back his life at the mercy of Matla, a man lying at the bottom of the social power. Audience might be surprised at "how the two retailers at one point seem to give Aghor Ghosh, the devilish moneylender, a lift of sorts, as they convey their love for him so gushingly, evoking his childhood—quite unexpected from the two toiling men, and quite uncalled for" (*Honey* 261).

Manoj Mitra here shows and advocates the Foucaultian notion that the man of higher social force does not have full control over all the social power relations. They sometimes need to come to the feet of the ordinary people. Manoj Mitra here shows what Foucault says ‘the productive aspect of power’ in Malta’s saving Aghor’s life through his power of chants. Power becomes repressive if it cannot produce the good. Malta, a person belonging to the class of the downtrodden, possesses some power that he can make poison rise and fall with his magic chants and that he can remove the poison from Aghor’s body. Malta has power and utilizes to produce the good by removing the poison out of Aghor’s body while Aghor has power which he uses to exercise domination over others. Mausumi Roy Chaudhury, a Bengali theatre critic and translator of Mitra’s plays, writes in her introductory notes for *The Theatre of Conscience*: “In such gifts of life at the margins, Manoj Mitra also writes the will to power; emperors, rulers and landholders must reach for the margins and offer themselves to intimate encounters with their social others” (232). As Foucault rightly says in an interview that:

But it seems to me now that the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. One which has been curiously widespread... If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.
(*The Order* 119)

‘There are no relations of power without resistances’ (*The Order* 142). The resistance that comes or should come against the disastrous social forces remains a central concern for

the humanist writers. Badami and Matla saved the life of Aghor and proved their humanist care for other human. But the moment Aghor could stand on his feet, he, instead of showing any kind of gratitude for them, demanded his interest and rebuked them for being late to remove the poison from his body. Moreover he showed licentious desire for Badami and planned to take her to his house. At the end of the play Badami were able to have the Jotedar killed by the hands of the angered villagers. The outrageous and angry mob of the village gathers in front of Matla's house and they beat up Aghor to death and thus established the value of life. Foucault views that resistance does not come from outside rather it germinates from where the power relations exist. As he says in an interview: "that there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised" (*The Order* 142). Here in the play, the revolt of the outrageous people against oppressive Aghor is Foucault's explored resistance that originated from common village people where the power is exercised.

Manoj Mitra's play here echoes the Foucaultian concept of the individual's ability to resist the power when Badami has killed the Jotedar at the end of the play. Badami possesses the power to resist the monstrous force Aghor and that resistance ends the life of Aghor. Thus Manoj Mitra creates a spirit of revolt or revolution and orients it, as Alan Sinfield has put it, "to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender, and class." (qtd. in Abrams 188)

To conclude though Matla's action of saving Aghor from the snake-poison serves at the level of ethical values, the *Ojha/Jotedar* conflict remains the privileged site of meaning while interpreting with the yardstick of socio-political studies. The honey/poison dialectic preceding and leading to the killing of Aghor and rising and ebbing of snake-poison in Aghor's body at Matla's bidding metaphorizes the dance of class war—the *Ojha/Jotedar* conflict. The ultimate resistance to the rising of Aghor's power proves fruitful to re-establish

the social order of human life. Through this resistance leading to Aghor's death, "Manoj Mitra creates an oppositional space of revolt—a revolt of different kind—another history" (Chaudhury 235). Utpal Dutt "interprets the play's end as 'proletarian humanism' that helps to establish the revolutionary spirit of human life—Badami having killed the Jotedar at the end of the play to establish the value of life" (qtd. in Mitra *Honey* 21).

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