

Towards an ethics of Responsibility: An Ethical Revaluation of the Political universe in Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* and *Micchil*

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Abstract

Enrique Dussell writes about a certain fallacy characterizing political authority-namely the fallacy of identifying power with the possessor of the same, in complete oblivion of those who have actively established and continue to maintain through consent the authority of the powerful subject. In shifting roles and performative garbs, the actors in the plays of Badal Sircar explores new agencies of creativity. This paper seeks to explore how the aesthetics of performance in certain plays like 'Evam Indrajit' and others provide ample agency to the performer/ character to enable him or her to realize an agency of creativity, thereby unmasking the aforesaid fallacy that authority viewed in terms of the author and the political Master upholds or at least aspires to do so.

In certain cases, we find that the actor principally involved in playing a particular role that is representative of a certain degree of marginalisation assumes a part that does contradict such a node of representation. It is in the scope and purview of this paper to explore at length how such a shift in performance (that involves characteristic shifts in the representative portfolios of actors itself) actually enable the reflection of the idea that the individual subject is able to comprehend the apparatus of control and 'interpellation', and is, therefore, the legitimizing authority for power. Along with this, I also seek to explore how the incorporation of dramatic styles like the ellipsis, coupled with the aforesaid gesture of performance actually create a space characterized by a proliferation of instances of 'play', making any idea of

surveillance itself point to the above-mentioned fallacy because it itself is indicative of a certain realization of the accessibility/knowledge of the modes of operation of control and the subjects of power.

Keywords: power-politics, interpellation, fallacy, creativity.

Enrique Dussell, the Argentinian philosopher, in his book, *Twenty Theses on Politics* writes about a certain fallacy characterizing political authority—namely the fallacy of identifying power with the possessor of the same, in complete oblivion of those who have actively established and continued to maintain through consent the authority of the powerful subject. In the plays of Badal Sircar, much as they have been analysed from Brechtian perspectives on the theatre, we do tend to find a distinct presence of performativity, as part of the dominant aesthetics of representation. In shifting roles and performative garbs, the actor in the play explores new agencies of creativity. This paper seeks to explore how the aesthetics of performance in certain plays like ‘Evam Indrajit’ and *Micchil* provides ample agency to the performer/ character to enable him or her to realize an agency of creativity, thereby unmasking the aforesaid fallacy that authority is only vested in its political patrons. These plays, as will be shown, also display a certain possibility of responsible democratic behaviour with the responsibility emerging from a realization of the urgency of ethical governance. This, coupled with the aforesaid idea of the subject’s position, makes it almost obligatory for the occupant of authority to acknowledge not simply the presence of the governed but also its potency as agents of creativity in the sense that they create the position of power in the first place through consent. In certain cases, for instance, we find that the actor principally involved in playing a particular role that is representative of a certain degree of marginalisation, assumes a part that does

contradict such a node of representation. It is in the scope and purview of this paper to explore at length how such a shift in performance (that involves characteristic shifts in the representative portfolios of actors itself) actually enable the reflection of the idea that the individual subject is able to comprehend the apparatus of control and is the legitimizing authority for power. These repetitions, as will be shown, also account for a certain idea of democracy that considers the concrete aspects of the system that are always vulnerable and looks on it more as an idea to push forward through the above-mentioned moments of ethical responsibility which is the only alternative left to authority in the wake of an immensely shifting and unstable political terrain. My primary texts for elucidating this would be *Evam Indrajit* and *Micchil* by Badal Sircar, the rationale for whose selection is the overt references both to political authority and control, and role-reversals in these plays. All Translated parts from these texts incorporated here are mine and these plays are included in an anthology entitled *Badal Samagra* edited by Pabitra Sarkar.

One of the most important thematic focal points of the play, *Evam Indrajit* is the ethics of responsibility. It is this idea that governs the role-reversals and shifts that occur in the play. The title itself (translated as –‘ And Indrajit’) points to the situation of the characters in a fissured universe- a certain detachment or lack (since ‘and’ itself indicates the absence of other phrases that might have come before it)- a subtraction from a sense of unity that is reminiscent of Dussell’s idea of ‘community’ as is evident in the following lines from his *Twenty Theses on Politics* :

The notion of ‘community’, in going beyond the metaphysical individualism of liberalism but falling short of the substantive collectivism of real existing socialism, indicates the originary intersubjective insertion of the singular subjectivity of every citizen. (91)

Amal, Bimal and Kamal, along with Indrajit, in spite of playing individuals with separate roles embody certain similar characteristics (evident at the outset when the character of the writer equates himself with them and proposes to write about 'us') but fail to come together as is evident in the latter half.

In the first part of the play, we find that the character of the writer is already in a position to forge a unity among these otherwise separate individuals. However, when, in a reversal of roles, the three (Amal-Bimal-Kamal) assume a certain position of authority (as the teacher) over Indrajit, this unity is snapped. This is an indication of the possibility of the aforesaid sense of 'community' in the area of social relations. In such a world, the ethical resolution that can most conveniently be taken is the stance of ethical responsibility towards the Other, as Dussell writes: 'I am speaking again of a postulate: "We must struggle for an always increasingly democratic system" whose perfect empirical institutionalization is impossible' (109).

Now, the writer (and this perhaps a self-reflexive moment for the author) fulfils this condition of ethical responsibility in this context both by demonstrating the characters to the audience and the reader and thereby guaranteeing their presence, while at the same time, maintaining a position of acknowledgement vis-à-vis each of them (speaking of them as being part of himself, and at the same stating that their existence actually affirms his for without them there would be no place for a writer as such). The characters, on the other hand do not restrain themselves from contemplating on their shared sense of responsibility in eliciting response from Indrajit in their capacity as teachers, although one might, taking a cue from Dussell's sense of 'potentia', say that it is the existence of the student that also affirms the position of social authority for the teacher. The repetitive occurrences of such instances where the trio appear as figures of authority over Indrajit posit a certain understanding of repeatability that is linked to the inability to realize the empirical manifestation of a perfect democracy. Dussell clarifies that the various spheres of life- political, social, familial are ultimately imbued with stakeholders of power- in

his terms, the manifested power or ‘potestas’ and the real power of the sovereign – the people’s power- the ‘potentia’. In Sircar’s play we find the trio assuming points of authority (potestas) at different spheres- the school, the office, etc. However, there is a reversal again when in the third Act, we find a ground for unity emerging among Amal Bimal and Kamal affirming once more the repetition of the parameters of political life, and thereby consolidating further the urge to continue exercising ethical responsibility to create moments of unblemished democratic systems. Amidst such a possibility the character of the writer stands out in terms of actually advocating this system of politics. In spite of explicitly suggesting that his characters can only be ‘represented’ (a word through which one senses the idea of the working of actual democratic institutions the fallacy of which has already been the subject of theorists such as Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak among others) through and by him, his willingness and urge to ‘know’ his characters (leading to the conversations between him and Indrajit) indicates a sense of responsibility towards them. It is this responsibility that makes the authoritative sovereign not assume a sense of complaisance and keeps the ethical interactions between the governor and the governed alive and with it, the democratic ethos. In fact, there are indications of the identity of role between the writer and Indrajit, one instance of which lies in the way in which the character of ‘Mashima’ calls out to both of them. This is a deliberate portrayal of identity (and also an indication of how the playwright actually brings out the agency of peripheral characters in contributing to the chief theme) through which the writer professes both his obligation to the character (whose presence guarantees the essence of the writer) and indicates an aspects of liberal democracy itself where the occupant of authority (potestas) admits to his being inextricably bound to the holders of actual sovereign power or ‘potentia’. In the very next scene we find the writer confronted by critics played by the trio- the very people with whom the former had earlier professed unity. However he does not fail to maintain the ‘we’ perspective in his arguments suggesting that both the critics (who are in a position of authority over him)

and the writer himself (who also holds authority over the critics for their presence as critics is only possible on account of his presence) do occupy similar positions although we do know there is a clear demarcation of identities between them. If we take the writer into consideration, we find that *Evam Indrajit* is as much a play meant to be read as it is to be performed. As a character in the play, the writer reverts to prose most of the time when he seems contemplative. Most of these contemplative moments showcase a certain realization of inability on the part of the writer. For example, the concluding lines of Act 2, is a commentary on Indrajit who, in the previous scene had in discourse with Manasi, had revealed his fallibility in making his choices in life. It is similar fallibility that we see affecting the writer when we see him lamenting over his inability to have a complete grasp over his characters. All such instances coupled together are tantamount to the writer's public display of imperfection- an honest and ethical discretion on his part. These moments of honest and sincere ethical reflections spill over the plot of the play to the basic aspects of the theatre itself including the intersubjective relationship between the writer and the audience whereby the former is responsible enough to admit a failing to those whose existence and participation in the theatre creates the response needed to sustain it. In other words, this is a theatrical extension of what Dussell finds to be an appropriate ethical moment in political life:

One might ask, "How many sins must it take to make one unjust?" The answer is none, since the unjust person is precisely one who never takes conscious responsibility for the negative effects of his actions. (111)

However, even after making this assertion the fact remains that the author (not the character of the writer) of the play does intermittently reveal his own tendency to 'control' his characters in the plot- a revelation of the latent Will-to-power within him. The stage directions are so structured to drive home the theme. For example, in a conspicuous instance of role reversal,

the writer assumes the part of a corporative executive from that of a peon in an office in act2.

The stage direction at this point reads: “Writer takes the seat of the boss” (288).

The language at this point is directly suggestive of a certain idea being enforced. However, we notice the subtle undercurrent of irony again when we ‘read’ this authorial gesture against the backdrop of the writer’s condition in the play, and in conjunction with the fact that the author can only ensure constant reversals and repetitions in the plot without reaching any uniqueness of resolution. The chorus that concludes the play reveals this inability in the closing couplet: “Not the pilgrimage itself but the road to the pilgrimage—let us remember” (312). Thus, we may say following critics like Pabitra Sarkar that the strong critical tradition that began to raise questions to all claims to objectivity in plays towards the second half of the nineteenth century leaves its mark on a play like *Evam Indrajit* where Sircar seems to have spoken substantially about himself while lending a voice to other characters.

All in all, it must be said that what one gathers from a reading of the play is a sense of reason in repetition. This means while there is a repetition of moves portraying differences of positions- of authority and subordination- this points to a tradition quite symptomatic of political and social life in Dussell’s view. In this condition, perhaps the best prescription is the exercise of ethical responsibility in certain snippets of our social existence as the writer fulfils in the play as a character. Again, we find it hard to pin any character down to any particular model of subjectivity, for their roles are constantly changing so that we have no static ‘knowledge’ of their positions which disrupt any prediction on their moves throughout the plot. The only possibility that remains open in these moments of uncertainty is ethical responsibility and this lacks the grandeur of any grand narrative of liberation.

The play ‘ Micchil’ (translated as ‘rally’) has as its title a term that includes the sense of both ‘multitude’ and ‘movement’. Both these terms, as we shall see, are substantial to the

idea of ethical responsibility indicated in the play. While *Evam Indrajit* focusses on how such a responsibility, *Micchil* concentrates on the need for exercising such a responsibility.

Like *Evam Indrajit*, we witness interchangeability of roles without the change of character name. Characters who comprise the rally or ‘micchil’ are numbered (in their Bengali equivalents of course) as One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six. The individual characters can locate themselves at the intersection of the two spheres of existence, while everyday familiar instances begin to have political overtones defining the public realm. Thus even while playing the role of a bus conductor, character ‘Two’ asks a passenger to move forward and ‘Three’ responds by asking if Bengalis can ever move (217).

This motif of situating oneself at tandem at two entirely separate spheres is evident also in the fact that the characters can shift roles constantly and some of these are even mutually contradictory. For example, prior to the above-mentioned scene, there is a rapid dramatic movement from the enactment of a scene where the characters represent the qualms of middle-class life to one where they position themselves as the authority. However, the dialogues conforming to the latter situation are incorporated as instances of mimicry because the utterance of the name of the corresponding character at the end of every line in these dialogues, for example, invariably puts it within ‘double quotation marks’ to use a Bakhtinian phrase.

One: We have to be prepared for further problems. PM

Two: Have to visit the capital frequently for the state’s sake. CM. (216)

This suggests the characters’ accessibility of both worlds and therefore posits the need for exercising responsibility towards the governed who do not exist without a knowledge of the rules of the governor, thereby underlining the position of real sovereignty or ‘potentia’. Also, later in the play, we find these characters assuming an overt position of authority with respect to the child, suggesting the inevitability of force relations in a world driven by the exercise of differential motives and purposes. The synchronization of these characters happens at places

for both purposes—for directing the attention of a democratic authority towards its demand and also for suppressing the Other's voice. Thus, as Eugene Van Erven rightly points out, playwrights like John McGrath suggest the idea of 'persuading the working class to pursue a change in consciousness, the effort itself seems patronizing because the end is always-already predetermined by intellectuals representing the oppressed. In Plays like *Micchil* the aim is not to provide any such predetermined solution but suggest the need for exercising responsibility to the Other without any categorical statement of any desired political goal. Dussell himself brings to his analysis of social phenomena the persistence of a philosophy of liberation- an elucidation of the ethical mode of governance irrespective of political contexts.

The situation of the play is the modern metropole- a cosmopolitan space that automatically implies the co-existence of a plethora of aims and ends. In this context, it is most feasible for a radical democratic system to emerge. However the convergence and/or divergence of motives does exist but it does not end instances of oppression, inevitably pushing the reader to consider the template of philosophy (perhaps being a textual indication of Dussell's own wish to extend Laclau's thesis). In this world of multiplicities, we do not see the absence of conflicts and all conflicts emerge from a desire to push individual will and demand farther. This is reflected through the conflict of wills between 'Two', 'Three' and 'Five' when the latter two enact the roles of nationalist freedom fighters while the former represent the complicit consenters to British authority. The fact that any idea of democracy must entertain even the most disagreeable component is adequately presented. However like the character of the writer in the earlier play, the character of the old man in this play reflects the significance of ethical responsibility. Thus, unlike the numbered characters who are frequently in conflict with each other in case of a disruption of the 'equivalentiality' of their demands, the old man's treatment of the child is significant. While he is in search of a companion on his way home he does not forget to consider the child's own concern. Thus when he successfully finds his way, he does

try to at least ‘know’ the plight of the child when he cries out that he has been ‘killed’ and that he is ritualistically ‘killed’ every day.

Another instance of responsibility that marks the presence of the old man is the meta-theatrical gesture with which he speaks of the bottle of wine he holds in his hand. Describing the act as an instance of ‘comic relief’, the actor playing the role self-reflexively suggests his representation cannot do complete justice to the character in spite of the realistic tenor of the play. This metatheatricality carries with it a dosage of humour laced with an assertion of the fallibility of self-certainty. At the most in a universe of uncertainties, one can exercise one’s responsibility towards the Other by refraining from claiming that which one cannot do. Thus the self-conscious portrayal of humour shows its socio-ethical implications indicating thereby a role of humour starkly different from that observed by Adorno in his analysis of Brecht where he observes that it functions to dilute the impact of sombre political realities.

Thus *Michhil* displays a sense of imminence in the perception of responsibility, leaving us not with any grand idea of liberation but suggesting a structure of ethics immanent in every case of governance that does run into imperfections only to keep the possibility of exercising democratic responsibility alive.

In reading these two plays by Badal Sircar, we do ponder over a theory of dislocation of the individual but in a sense deeply predicated on the issue of ethics. Rustom Bharucha writes:

One could say *Evam Indrajit* is about an enlightened middle-class youth in Bengal who passes through various stages in his life unable to fulfil his dreams, and yet unable to accept the world around hi, epitomized by these representatives of the bourgeoisie—Amal, Bimal, Kamal. (Saikia 4)

However, we do see that the individual placed in the interstitial position is strategically placed to access modes of authoritarian exploitation as well. This creates a level playing field where

participation of the governed in the process of governance is practicable and possible. However what is emphasised over the same is the acknowledgement of the position of the governed as the consentor to the position of the governor, the need and ethical dimensions of which is elucidated by the plays in concern.

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