Towards A Transnational Poetics of the Oppressed: Utpal Dutt's Postcolonial Transformations

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ABSTRACT: While postcolonial studies still seek direction from the seemingly oracular pronouncements of celebrated theorists, postcolonial writers have forever addressed their times with that double-vision which even while assimilating the best of colonizer's culture has always managed to stare straight at the problems surrounding his/her own people, those that unmistakably shaped the modes and forms of assimilation. From Jose Marti to Ngugi wa Thiong'o to Mahasweta Devi, postcolonial authors have often embodied a stirring fusion of languages and cultures determined by their own active engagement with their contexts. Utpal Dutt was a part of this tradition and was a polymath genius of gigantic proportions, perhaps to be only compared with Sartre. One of the most fascinating aspects of such genius was his mastery of nine different languages such as Bengali, English, Hindi, Latin, Russian, German etc. and it is natural that such encyclopaedic erudition would lend to his oeuvre a transnational dimension that would best embody the transformative powers of postcolonial societies to assimilate elements from foreign cultures to refashion national futures toward a postcolonial utopia. As one who had spent his formative years in theatre with both Geoffrey Kendall's Shakespearewallah and the IPTA, Dutt, was one of those rare individuals who

applied his polyglot brilliance to respond to the throbbing needs of the people. The paper would seek to analyse three of his plays, *Tiner Talwar*, *Kallol* and *Surya Shikar*, to explain how Dutt's reading of Shaw, Vishnevsky and Brecht would enable him to construct, a 'revolutionary theatre', to envision postcolonial futures, untrammeled by processes of postcolonial subalternization through the mobilization of united popular resistance – both material and ideological.

KEYWORDS: *postcolonial, nation, transformation, multilingualism, revolutionary theatre, transnational.*

INTRODUCTION

Stuart Hall explained that "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (Hall 112)" Postcolonial literatures across the world have repeatedly enhanced themselves by transforming the cultural capital that colonial conquest has thrust upon them, as manifested by several authors like Ngugi wa Thiong'o or Derek Walcott or Albert Memmi. Dramas based on the metamorphosis of cultural resources drawn from different centres is therefore one of the constant features of postcolonial cultures around the world including India. In fact, the entire history of anti-colonial resistance will throw up innumerable instances of such transformations for conceptualising and organising the modes and means by which decolonization was to be achieved. Indian theatre of the post-independence period has been marked extensively by the fusion of theatrical traditions of the West as well as the exploration of indigenous cultural resources. It is this logic which was foregrounded by Bill Ashcroft who remarked:

The western control over the time and space, the dominance of language and the technologies of writing for perpetuating the modes of this dominance, through geography, history, literature and indeed, through the whole range of cultural production, have meant that post-colonial engagements with imperial power have been exceptionally wide-ranging. The one thing which characterizes all these engagements, the capacity shared by many forms of colonial experience is a remarkable facility to use the modes of the dominant discourse against itself and transform it in ways that have been both profound and lasting. (Ashcroft 13)

Utpal Dutt's (1929-1943) theatre is a remarkable example of such transformations which are based not only on the inherent multilingualism of the Indian society but also on his own polyglot genius which, far from confining him in intellectual ivory-towers, only served to enhance the quality of his political theatre. The paper would explore, with special attention to three of Dutt's plays – *Kallol* (*Song of the Waves*), *Surya Sikar* (*Hunting the Sun*) and *Tiner Talwar* (*Tin Swords*) – how he repeatedly drew on texts of other cultures and languages to create a theatre that focussed on the national subalterns' probable rise to hegemony.

Despite being born into a wealthy, elite family in which not just Dutt's father but also his elder brothers acted as high-ranking officials of the colonial government, Dutt rejected the scope of being a part of the comprador bourgeoisie and rather, as a resolute Marxist, utilised the cultural privileges his lineage had ensured to fashion a 'revolutionary theatre' which sought to inject socialist consciousness in the exploited masses of a post-independence India which had failed to usher in those dreams of prosperity and fulfilment that had inspired the struggle for freedom. Associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), a cultural organisation of Indian leftist artists, Dutt combined his Shakespearean prowess with passionate socio-

political commitment to create a kind of theatre that would appeal to the subjugated majority while being critical of socio-political inequities. Subsequently, he created his own theatre groups, Little Theatre Group (LTG) and People's Little Theatre (PLT), even as he gained national fame through his cinematic performances, through which he sought to champion popular struggles against tyrannical and oppressive regimes, primarily by utilising episodes of mass struggles from Indian and world history. Since elitist historiography ignored various moments of subaltern self-assertion in the anti-colonial struggle, Dutt argued in *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* that "It will be our endeavour to rediscover the history which has been distorted and raped by the hirelings of the bourgeois…" (61) in order to infuse 'socialist consciousness' among the masses to reignite their revolutionary fervour:

> They [the Indian bourgeoisie] seek carefully to suppress all the great peoples' wars against the British rule that have swept the country for nearly two hundred years. They dismiss in a couple of pages the war of 1857, and make no mention at all of the peasant uprisings of 1776, the Wahabi uprising of 1831, the Mysore wars, and the Santhal rebellion of 1855, the Indigo revolt of 1856-60. Coming to modern times, they scrupulously suppress all reference to the armed uprisings in Bengal and the Punjab in 1905-08, 1920-24, 1930-34. They attempt to obliterate the name of Subhash Chandra Bose from history; they have erased from the history the establishment of workers' rule in Sholapur, the Meerut trial of communists, the strike actions of the Indian workers and the mutinies in the army and the navy ('Weapon', p. 123).

It is in this context that a play like *Kallol* (*Song of the Waves*) becomes so vital. Based as it is on the events of the Naval Mutiny in 1946, the play not only focuses on the valour and heroism of the proletarian sailors who constitute that alternative history

of subaltern self-assertion that elitist historians conveniently ignored, but draws its formal sustenance from plays like Vsevolod Vishnevsky's *We are from Kronstadt* and *An Optimistic Tragedy* which focus on the contributions of the Czars' navy in the success of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. As Utpal Dutt was both a Marxist and a nationalist, he was obviously aware of the resemblance of Khyber with not only the actual mutinying ships of 1946 but with the famous 'Aurora' which had turned its guns against the Czar's palace to ensure conclusive Bolshevik victory of 1917 in Russia. Shardul Singh and his men in 'Kallol' thus exemplify a remarkable fusion which makes them the children of those powerful intersections of history, literature and culture that have recurrently shaped Dutt's theatre and postcolonial theatre in general.

ANALYSING *KALLOL* (1965)

This becomes evident from the very beginning of *Kallol* which starkly resembles the opening of Vishnevsky's *An Optimistic Tragedy*. *An Optimistic Tragedy* employs two narrators, who, after a resounding overture, state:

> Put aside all your business for tonight. A naval regiment that has done its march, now addresses you – our descendants… It proposes that you reflect in silence, that you discover what struggle and death really mean for us… (Vishnevsky 185)

Kallol opens with a similar combination of overture and narratorial address, where the narrator poetically addresses the audience and proposes to unveil before them a suppressed history that not only valorises the struggle of the sailors but also exposes the cunning connivance of bourgeois leaders who conspired with the British to sabotage the sailors' struggle:

> আমি নাবিক
> আজ বলব ঐ নৌবিদ্রোহের কাহিনী চুপি চুপি।

অহিংস ইতিহাসের চোখে ধুলো দিয়ে,
এই নিভৃত কক্ষে আপনাদের বলি -
কোত্থেকে এল এই স্বাধীনতা
I am a sailor
I will whisper to you today, the story of the naval mutiny.
Hoodwinking the history of non-violence,
Let me tell you in this secret room
How we got our freedom. (Translation mine; Natya Samagra, 2: 238)

As Dutt has repeatedly claimed, the idea behind such theatrical hoodwinking is to foreground that tradition of popular resistance against diverse forms of injustice which can awaken revolutionary consciousness in the present to effect decisive political action. It is for this purpose that he has repeatedly dramatised various episodes of rebellion and struggle from both Indian and world history, even if those episodes concluded with failure. According to Dutt, the consequent death of a martyr in such a context "creates hope, not despair" as "His death is the beginning of a revolutionary process." (*Towards*, 54) Not only does Dutt substantiate his argument by referring to the plays of Bertolt Brecht but he also seeks to project such martyrs through a revolutionary realism that takes its cue from Maxim Gorky. Gorky not only spoke of a literary mode that sought "consolidation of revolutionary achievement in the present and a clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future", but also argued that:

Indeed a time has come when we need the heroic…something, you know, that would not resemble life, but would be higher than life, better, more beautiful. It is absolutely necessary that today's literature begin to embellish life somewhat, and as soon as it does so, life will be embellished, i.e., people will begin to live more swiftly, more brightly (qtd. in Becker 486).

The representation of the struggle of the ratings, led by

Shardul Singh obviously constitutes Dutt's quest for such 'heroic' elements which is boldly emphasised by its remarkable conclusion which shows Khyber's uncompromising struggle as opposed to the sailors' actual surrender in 1946. Such an ending deliberately transcends historical reality to signify the relentlessness of struggle and foregrounds the undying spirit though which Dutt hoped to enkindle many such struggles in present and future. As he states:

To us the RIN [Royal Indian Navy] mutiny is the beginning of a revolutionary process that drove the British to begin plotting with Congress and League leaders, a process that set India ablaze with rebellion, a process that still threatens the Indian bourgeoisie with armed rebellion (*Towards*, 55).

And Dutt's formal justification for such a representation takes him back to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which too concluded with the relentless struggle of the mutineers as opposed to their factual surrender:

Khyber refuses to surrender for the same precise reason that Eisenstein's Potemkin refuses to surrender, though in factual history it did. Potemkin's victory ended in victorious October, 1917, and therefore the precise moment in history when the sailors raised their hands in surrender cannot be considered in isolation, as an absolute be-all and end-all in time (*Towards* 55).

Both form and content thus emerge out of Dutt's own elite social location, which, instead of interpellating him as another 'comprador bourgeoisie' opens up those ambivalent intersections of cultural interactions which ensure both the evolution of Dutt's chosen Marxist political belief, as well as the application of such consciousness through forms that are themselves dependent on such acquired cultural capital which were and still are available to a select few. Dutt thus interpolates the available discourses through his own conscious dramatic enterprises and emphasises

that transformative turn which constitutes a major element of postcolonial being and allows authors to utilise resources endowed by those very structures and discourses they persistently critique.

ANALYSING *SURYA SIKAR* (1971)

Such a critique would have been too parochial had it only taken into consideration colonial history as Indian society remains haunted by problems that have been plaguing it since pre-colonial times such as the problems of caste and gender which are both deftly highlighted in 'Hunting the Sun' which, set during the reign of Samudragupta, offers a trenchant critique of the chauvinistic, Brahminical orthodoxy of the times which acted in collusion with royal administration to ensure the perpetuation of casteist violence and exploitation that served to uphold the veneers of cultural sophistication of the so-called 'golden age'. Alluding to Peter Schaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964), *Hunting the Sun* (published in English in 1972), based on Dutt's jatra 'Samudrashasan' (1970), aptly exemplifies Dutt's transnational, hybridised dramaturgy which borrows with ease from Brecht and Shakespeare in order to transmute them into remarkable explorations of his personal Indian context. The central conflict of the play revolves around the evolving tussle between orthodox Brahminical administration and the rational arguments of Kalhan and his disciple Indrani regarding a heliocentric cosmology. Obviously Kalhan and Indrani's assertions about the roundness of the earth and how it orbits the sun or how the moon orbits the earth, that too with the ancient Indian version of a telescope, recall the actions of Galileo as recorded in history and as immortalised by Brecht in *The Life of Galileo* (1938). However, the representations are based on diametrically opposite approaches. Brecht's Galileo is a great scientist but he is also a lover of food and wine and is mortally afraid of tortures. It is these human weaknesses which

make him rather loathsome in his own eyes and Brecht also refused to present him as a hero. In contrast, Kalhan remains till the end a heroic and almost superhuman embodiment of courage and endurance as despite all the threats issued by the tyrannical Samudragupta or the destruction of books and equipment wrought by general Hayagreeva, he remains steadfast in his scientific convictions and even the molestation, torture or eventual execution of Indrani, almost like a daughter to him, cannot compel him to recant. Brecht's Galileo never faces any such agonising conflict and the most that he can muster is the rejection of Ludovico as Veronica's suitor in order to pursue his scientific ideals which he then compromises by recanting his teachings and submitting to the Church after being imprisoned and threatened with torture and execution. However, both Kalhan and Indrani are characters of the 'heroic' mould who remain undaunted despite severe trials and tribulations.

In fact, the duo of Kalhan and Indrani may be seen as a radical reworking of the Galileo-Veronica pair in *The Life of Galileo*. Just as Kalhan is drastically different from Galileo, Indrani too is completely unlike Veronica who is a rather vain, god-fearing conventional woman with least interest in science. Instead, Indrani is as resolute and undaunted as Kalhan and is superbly well-versed in both science and theology. In fact, it is her crucial intervention, for ensuring the emancipation of Gohil, a lower-caste slave, that initiates the conflict which culminates in Indrani's execution and Kalhan's maiming. While some may object to Dutt's heroic representations, it is only his keen awareness of the extent of authoritarian violence which necessitates such quest for heroism and Brecht's Galileo can afford to be much more practically credible because he never faces such grave crisis but only the prospect of it. The difference is also perhaps down to the fact that unlike Dutt who even spent days behind the bars and

faced attacks on his performances, Brecht successfully escaped the Nazi atrocities and returned only after Allied triumph. As Utpal Dutt explains in an interview:

People who live in this society feel that Galileo's compromise with the ruling class was inevitable, because these are people who go on making this kind of compromise everyday of their lives. They simply identify with Galileo…In fact the same happened with me as well. What wrong did Galileo do? Brecht would have understood if he had to sit in front of the Nazis. But he escaped. Settled in America, Hollywood! Had he remained in some concentration camp or been interrogated by the Gestapo he would have realised what Galileo did and why! (Translation mine; Dutt, *Interview* 375).

This is why Samik Bandyopadhyay remarks that, in case of Utpal Dutt's theatre "it's Brecht's approach, it's Brecht's dramaturgy, it's Brecht's whole dialectic of theatre which is more relevant" (Dutt, *Interview* 375) rather than the arc of the characters. Therefore, though Dutt does not approve of Brecht's portrayal of Galileo he still incorporates into his play the final portion from Brecht's play where Andrea smuggles Galileo's final work on motion beyond Italian borders that he had painstakingly copied from his confined original, despite weakening his eyesight almost to the extent of blindness. Similarly, a silenced Kalhan, despite losing his tongue and being diabolically co-opted into the establishment, is finally assured by Madhukarika that his son Veerak, following the instructions of Indrani has fled from the palace to procure and smuggle away the books in which Kalhan's teachings were recorded by Indrani to effect a Foucauldian "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (82-83). Galileo's teachings also reached the various corners of Europe to shake those foundations of superstition and ignorance which the Church and the feudal authorities wanted to perpetuate but what remains

missing in Galileo's history is the actual rising of the masses which Dutt imaginatively incorporates in his exploration of Gupta history in order to inspire similar uprisings in present and foreseeable future. And it is in this context that the romantically idealised figures of Kalhan and Indrani attain their relevance as they can prepare the masses both for the ordeal they must endure as well as the courage with which they must persevere.

ANALYSING *TINER TALWAR* (1971)

Such influences, assimilation and modifications are a pivotal part of Dutt's dramaturgy and they exemplify how an elite status and consequent reception of English education, instead of creating interpellated mimic men can produce those absolute opposites who would perform such deliberate inversions as would transform elements of colonial culture into assets of stringent postcolonial criticism. The same process also comes to the forefront in Utpal Dutt's *Tiner Talwar* (*Tin Swords*) which was arguably one of his and PLT's best productions. Just as Dutt had taken the central episode of Brecht's play and had modified and refashioned it into a completely original exploration of Gupta history, similarly in *Tiner Talwar* he took the central idea of Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) in order to offer an imaginative representation of the theatrical tradition of Bengal during the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially in the face of colonial assault on native theatre to curb emerging nationalist dissent against colonial authorities, expressing themselves through satires and farces produced by native intelligentsia, often armed with colonial education. Just as *Pygmalion* revolves around Eliza's transformation, from a cockney-speaking impoverished flower-girl, to a beautiful, bedecked speaker of queen's English who successfully impresses the London elite of her supposedly regal lineage, under the tutelage of Professor Higgins and Colonel

Pickering, and the consequent complications, *Tiner Talwar* too focuses on the transformation of Moyna, from a rude, uncultured speaker of kerbstone-Bengali with persistent mispronunciation of 'sh' as 's', into a polished, refined and successful actress on the professional stage of Kolkata which is integrated with the dramatisation of the fate of the fictional The Great Bengal Opera within the matrix of colonial assault, obscene domination over theatre by opulent urban comprador bourgeoisie and the general social ostracisation of both theatre and artists associated with it. Just as Higgins, along with Colonel Pickering, takes utmost pains to ensure Eliza's speedy acquisition of regal English, in complete contradiction to her Drury Lane origins, Benimadhab Chatterjee, the actor-director of Great Bengal Opera, along with other fellow-actors undertakes the enterprise of transforming Moyna from a coarse and foul-mouthed vegetable seller into an actor capable of reciting the most ornate and mellifluous Bengali verse with perfect poise and intensity, as a result of which she achieves such social elevation which makes her as de-classed as Eliza. And just as Higgins and Pickering heartily congratulate themselves on their grand success, Benimadhab too lauds himself on such achievement and remarks with flamboyant bravado:

> বেণীমাধব চাটুজ্যে বলছে শিখিয়ে নেবে! বেণীমাধব চাটুজ্যে পাথরে প্রাণপ্রতিষ্ঠা করতে পারে, কাষ্ঠপুত্তলির চক্ষু উন্মমীলন করে দিতে পারে গাধা পিটিয়ে ঘোড়া বানাতে পারে···আমি শিক্ষক, আমি স্রষ্টা। আমি তাল তাল মাটি নিয়ে জীবন্ত প্রতিমা গড়ি। আমি একদিক থেকে ব্রহ্মার সমান। আমি দেবশিল্পী বিশ্বকর্মা।
>
> Benimadhab Chatujjye says, he will make her learn! Benimadhab Chatujjye can animate stones, infuse life into wooden dolls and can beat a donkey into a horse…I am a teacher. I create. I make living deities out of heaps of clay. I am almost like Brahma. I am Bishwakarma, the divine artisan. (Translation mine; Natyasamagra 5: 90)

Not only does this recall the self-laudation of Dr. Higgins but also takes us back to the actual image of Pygmalion, the sculptor who, with divine blessing, managed to animate his beloved sculpture, which took the shape of Galatea. In fact, the linguistic training of Moyna, the way in which Benimadhab orders others to burn her old clothes and give her a scrubbing bath, the astonishment of all at Moyna's transformation after she is dressed for the role of a princess, the way in which Benimadhab even corrects her pronunciations during her outbursts – all mirror corresponding scenes and incidents in *Pygmalion*. However, all such comic capers are combined with much more sinister realities in Dutt's play which offer a powerful critique of both patriarchal chauvinism and bourgeois commodification. Unlike Eliza who finds love in Freddy and parental protection from his father owing to his providential financial success, Moyna, having been de-classed due to her training, is left without any other refuge, and finds neither romantic fulfilment, nor her previous independence. Instead she is sold off to Birkrishna Da, by Benimadhab, to save his theatre, which destroys her budding affair with Priyanath, the young English-educated playwright who had joined The Great Bengal Opera to voice his rebellious ideas through theatre. Moyna is thus subjected to a life of degradation, lovelessness and physical abuse in order to ensure both the longevity of the theatrical company and her own career as an actress, a fate that resembles that of the famous Bindoini Dasi. Moyna's fate may well be seen as Dutt's subjective and historicised intensification of the questions and fears latent in Shaw's play, which, however, never transcends the world of middle-class morality and attendant devices of *deus ex machina*. Instead, not only does Dutt initially introduce us to the sweeper, a much more downtrodden version of Shaw's dustman, who scoffs at the malaises of Babu-culture and the elitism of theatrical companies, busy with kings and

queens, but he also self-reflexively presents through Priyanath the need to voice through theatre the plight of those sweepers or impoverished starving refugees who were then thronging the streets of Calcutta. It is he who writes a stirring play on Titumeer, to protest colonial atrocities, and though a habitually opportunist Benimadhab initially decides to forsake that play in order to avoid arrest, unlike the makers of 'Gojodanando' (1876) who were accused of sedition, the play ends with Benimadhab slipping into the role of Titumeer and brandishing his tin sword at the face of watchful colonial authorities and sounding a clarion call for rebellion against the raj with his whole troupe. The illusion of theatre thus becomes real and the tin swords become prophetic precursors of future resistance. Produced five years after Utpal Dutt had himself been jailed on charges of sedition; the play also metaphorically pronounces an uncompromising declaration of artistic commitment to a chosen political stance – a significance that is highlighted by PLT's own subsequent performance of *Titumeer* (1978). Unlike the reclusive Higgins, sneering at the word from his study, Benimadhab emerges as an undaunted artist, embodying highest social responsibility, who, along with Priyanath, turns the stage into a site of resistance and contestation by heeding those undermined voices which remain invariably absent from the middle-class drawing rooms which also delineate the limits of Shavian socialism.

CONCLUSION

What emerges in the process is a glimpse of that rich tapestry of Dutt's dramaturgy which unhesitatingly interweaved cultural capital from Russia, Germany or England to produce a revolutionary theatre that resolutely preached revolution by highlighting existing injustices on the one hand and on the other excavated subaltern voices from the past to create the cultural

ambience which fosters revolutionary spirit. His enterprise, in this context, resembles that of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan author who uses his colonial education to explore in vernacular both Kenya's neo-colonial reality and the tradition of popular anti-colonial struggle in his plays and novels, one of which, (*Devil on the Cross*) evolved out of a synthesis between his long fascination with the Faust myth, encountered owing to his colonial English education, and the local legend of Marimu creatures (Thiong'o 80-84). Dutt's own extravagantly expansive oeuvre contains several such instances of cultural cross-pollination which cumulatively create a transnational poetics of the oppressed that also offers a successful alternative to nativist nostalgia by utilising the international outlook of contemporary Bengali literary culture. Since the evolving dynamics of all postcolonial societies entails a constant re-negotiation of boundaries amidst dizzying heterogeneities, a theatre of the future would necessarily have to "think beyond narratives of originary or initial subjectivities and focus…on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha 1). Utpal Dutt would continue to serve as a dazzling paradigm of successful postcolonial transformations, leading to the creation of a transnational poetics of resistance which not only transcends national or regional prejudices but also emphasises the possibility of turning the spectator into that 'Spect-Actor' (Boal P. xxi), who like Benimadhab Chatterjee, would slip out of his expected role and like the sailors of Khyber would keep on firing the salvos to challenge those injustices, which committed theatre everywhere always strive against.

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