

Ideological Single-mindedness and Pluralism at War in Badal Sircar's *Baro Pishima* (Elder Aunt) and *Shanibar* (Saturday)

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Abstract: People of each and every society have never been outside the ideological space, irrespective of their class difference. The veracity of the statement can be proven with the help of the myriad explanations of the term 'ideology' that have issued from various Marxist critics, since its first use in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The German Ideology* (1846). French Marxist critic Louis Althusser in his book *Lenin and Philosophy* says "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 109). Earlier Marxist critics equated the term with 'false consciousness', setting it apart from the scientific knowledge of truth. Raymond Williams, a later Marxist critic complicates the idea saying, "ideology is the general process of the production of meanings and ideas" (Williams 55). Gregory Castle in his book remarks, "The term ideology refers to ideas and beliefs that guide and organize the social and cultural elements of the superstructure" (Castle 110). As evident from these definitions among innumerable other definitions of the term 'ideology', any attempt to give harmonious and all encompassing definition of ideology is predestined to be futile. Amidst such diverse notions of ideology, critics however agree with few of the basic traits like- it is a system of representation, it is a system of ideas, it subdues the contradictions within society and it is the *prima facie* explanation of life-experience.

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The presence of the dominant ideology in a society does not secure itself as the one and only ideology because we live in a society where we find layering of ideologies, as Terry Eagleton puts it. The dominant ideology triumphs over all other less potent ideologies by smoothing over all the contradictions inherent in the society. Those human subjects, who live by this ideology, inevitably cultivate a rigid single-mindedness by assuming the dominant system of ideology to be the unified common sense view of things around. The dogged adherence of such people to the ideological stance makes it impossible for them to think that the ideology they are living may be imaginary, concocted and fabricated after all. People, blind-folded by the ideological single-mindedness are unable to see the general fluidity of life and multiplicity of reality. This paper is an attempt to vindicate the tussle between ideological single-mindedness and pluralism that constantly goes on in our society as well as in literary works. Badal Sircar's two plays selected here for that purpose: *Baro*

Pishima (Elder Aunt) and *Shanibar* (Saturday), are replete with the deep seated ideological crises which often disturb the tranquil surface created by the dominant ideology of the society. *Baro Pishima* (Elder Aunt) first staged on 11th Sep, 1960, relates the crisis of an amateur theatre group in carrying on the rehearsal after the sudden and surprise arrival of authoritarian and morally strict Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt). Love affair between Anu and Sombhu, with all its improbability, confusion and doubt develops concurrently with the plot of the drama, giving vent to various ideological stances assumed by the characters in the play. The amateur theatre group, consisting of Anu and her neighbours – Sombhu, Nitai, Dhrubesh, Anath, Rajib, Banani, Shashanka, Jagat, Ananta and many others, is enthusiastic about cultural activities. The staging of a play before a field full of people will not only entertain them but also promote solidarity, sociability, and refinement among them. This is a commendable effort in present day scenario. The value of cultural get-together is aptly understood by progressive minds like Anu, Sombhu, Nitai, and Jogin (Anu's father) even Elder Uncle. In this drama they stand for the liberal and reformist approach to ever-changing appearance of society. They show the intent to embrace the positive changes in the society and also to induce such changes if possible. Jogin, father of Anu has a transparent progressive heart which finds no fault in his daughter's taking part in the drama and late night rehearsals with the group. They imbibe the pluralism within themselves which is pre requisite to the appreciation of the fluidity of life and multiplicity of social and cultural truth.

On the other hand Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt), who represents the central opposing force in the drama, is parochial in her approach to life. Moral and familial ideologies which she has ingrained from her parents make her narrow-minded and intransigent. Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) is a product of orthodoxy who traverses within the circle of strict moral ideology. She asserts her traditional values with all her vigour and magnitude. Baro Pishima's (Elder Aunt) autonomy is in sharp contrast with the lucid multiplicity of other characters. Her conventional beliefs are behind her stern opposition of free mingling of boys and girls. Sombhu's bewilderment is prominent when he says, "Tobe tomar Pishima ke ei sadharan kotha Kota bhujhiye bolte parbe na" "Then can't you make your aunt understand this simple thing?" (44). His belief that only rehearsing together will not lead a group of boys and girls astray is quite strong. The moral ideology, Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) lives with is indented within her by her father, who is also the product of closed moral system. Anu casts light on him when she says about her grandfather- "sekaler gora lok" 'age old orthodox man' (44). In a way we can contend that Baro Pishima's (Elder Aunt) moral sternness is the result of that fanatical upbringing.

The clash of two contradictory ideologies, followed by Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) and Sombhu respectively is blatant right from the word go. Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) cannot tolerate Sombhu from the moment of

her arrival. Sombhu, with his undaunted and free spirit, poses most potent threat to her moral decorum. Baro Pishima's (Elder Aunt) ideological single-mindedness will not allow any disorder or contradiction within the ideological domain. Her stubborn adherence to ideology is evident from her remark:

Bhebe chilam din satek er besi thakbo na, kintu mone hochhe aro thakte hobe. Toder ghorer ja abastha dekhchi, sat din e samle uthte parbo na (49).

I thought, I won't stay here for more than seven days but now an extended stay seems necessary. Seven days are not sufficient for me to clean up the mess of your house (49).

The stagnant moral ideology makes Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) believe with all her heart that chastity is the greatest asset in a women's life. The coming of age girls propelled by the influx of sexual hormones may easily squander away the chastity being in close proximity with boys. It also makes Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) see all young man as philanderer or at least loafer. The ideological bias is clearly visible when she says, "Anu boro hoyeche. Ekhon ei sob baunduler dol barite jutiye holla korbar buddhi tomake ke dile" 'Anu has grown young now. Who has given you the idea of bringing all those loafers inside to disturb the serenity of the home' (50). In her eyes Sombhu is no less than a nuisance. She addresses him in derisive terms—"Oi jyatha echore paka chhokra" 'That elderly precocious punk' (50). Ideological closure of her attitude comes to the foreground every now and then. She exerts her authority with unalterable rigidity—"Kal bosche na, kono din o bosche na. Antoto e barite noi" 'Not tomorrow. Never. Not at least in this house' (52). She dismisses the rehearsal altogether. After the acquisition of the knowledge of the clandestine rehearsal her rage becomes almost unstoppable. Her grudge against her brother comes out with bitter pugnacity:

Tumi ki korcho jano na? Ek pal baundule chhokrar sange mile ek math loker samne stage uthe nachbe. Harihar Chatujjer bongser meye. Baba thik e bolten –kalapani par hole uchchonhe na giye jai na.

Do you have any idea what you are doing? She will dance on the stage before the whole crowd with the gang of loafers—a girl from Harihar Chatujje family. Father used to say the correct thing—with the crossing of the ocean one is all but ruined (62).

In this play Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) embodies ideological single-mindedness and it is reflected in her talk, action, behaviour and attitude towards the truth of standard existence. Beneath the dominant ideology of Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) we notice the mushrooming of more flexible, progressive and capacious perspectives of real life process. The drama eventually is staged through devious manipulation of the situation by Sombhu and other members associated with the theatre group. The play ends happily with the union of Sombhu and Anu. Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) watches the drama, applauds the performances and also agrees to the match of Sombhu and Anu. This drastic turn around in Baro Pishima's (Elder Aunt) behaviour is deceptive because it does not mark any change in her fundamental ideological position. She adamantly believes that a grown up girl should not have any business other than

getting married at the earliest. The girl should do away with making public appearances frequently and also hanging out with male companions as it would surely bring defamation and ill-repute. The orthodox ideological position remains intact till the very end of the drama as she accepts the proposal of Pratima (Sambhu's sister-in-law) who nominates Sombhu as an eligible groom for Anu, only after knowing that he is a mechanical engineering student of reputed Jadavpur University with a bright future. Once the responsibility of the girl is shifted from Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) to the would-be husband she has no problem with the girl making public appearances. Thus Baro Pishima (Elder Aunt) addresses the ideology of elite class family and moral baggage, subjecting it to the test of multiplicity of life experience. In this respect, the drama is perfectly in sync with Pierre Macherey's comment "...the literary work is both the analogy of a knowledge and a caricature of customary ideology" (Macherey 68). The conflict between ideological single-mindedness and pluralism can be traced in Badal Sircar's one-act play *Shanibar* (Saturday) also, which was first performed on 19th Oct, 1959. Unlike the previous play here we find both the conflicting phenomena in the same human subject. Badal Sircar uses the device of day-dream deftly to give voice to the inherent contradictions which are suppressed by the dominant ideology in general circumstances. Here it is worth mentioning that Badal Sircar's *Shanibar* (Saturday) closely resembles James Thurber's short-story 'The Secret of Walter Mitty'. Though Badal Sircar clearly states that except the important role of day-dream there is nothing common in between these two literary creations. *Shanibar* (Saturday) beautifully delineates the experience and aspirations of a middle class clerk within his limited circle of movement. Being victimized by the dominant ideology of capitalist society, the protagonist Dibyendu leads a hectic, mechanical and fragmentary life of a modern day employee of a company. At the outset of the play we notice how the ideology of the family roles can turn a human subject's thinking process as unidimensional. Dibyendu's mother is governed by this ideology and it is discernible from the short milk-episode. In it she implores each and everyone in the family-Nabendu, her husband, Sunanda too drink the milk which is supposed to nourish the health. Her ideological rigidity is exposed by her remark after being asked to drink it herself- *Shono meyer kotha! Ami dudh khabo* 'Listen to the girl-what she is saying-I will drink the milk' (117). Dibyendu, falling into the trap of exploitative human agency has no option but to live the Capitalist ideology. This ideology weaves around him the web of illusory, distorted and fantastic version of reality. Resultant single-mindedness allows him to concoct an apparently perfect and unified explanation of the situation around him. After the back-breaking work load of the week, Dibyendu finds himself burdened with further work even on a Saturday afternoon. Being tied up by the ideological position, he must comply with the taxing demands of higher authorities of the company. After knowing about the work load thrust on Dibyendu at the last moment, Paritosh a fellow clerk in the company comments on the consequence of denying to fulfill

this exploitative demand-“Arthat sidhe bhasai korbe to koro noito rasta dekhthe hobe” ‘Therefore in simple words-unless you do it, you will be sacked’ (117). The situation of the worker as such is poignant because it is easier for the company to find another worker for the vacant post. It is very tough to find job elsewhere for workers like Dibyendu in general socio-political scenario of unemployment. The higher officials are indifferent to the economic prosperity of their workers who carry the company on their shoulders. Being denied of any share of profit, Dibyendu vents his dissatisfaction- “Ar bonus er bela, promotion er bela (bhyanchaiya) directors are seriously considering, but you see- byas hoye gelo” ‘When it comes to bonus, promotion (grimacing) directors are seriously considering, but you see- that’s all’ 95 (117). Instead of protest Dibyendu works with single-minded devotion to meet the ever increasing demands of the higher officials. Bishu, the typewriter retorts in his day-dream justifiably- “Ki hobe oto khete Dibyendu da? Company raja kore debe?” ‘what is the use of so much hard work Dibyendu da? The company will never make you rich’ (119). The most noticeable thing here is that they are capable of acknowledging this injustice in Dibyendu’s day dream but not in real life. The ideological influence has tied up their limbs and voice of protest in real life. Here we realize the significance of Pierre Macherey’s remark in his book *A Theory of Literary Production* – “...for ideology exists precisely in order to efface all traces of contradiction” (Macherey 146).

Four bouts of day-dream on the same Saturday afternoon provide much needed jolt to Dibyendu’s dull, monotonous, and seemingly natural existence. The disparity between his compromised and unquestioning real life situation and the plurality of possibilities reflected through day-dream is the moot point of concern here. The contradictions smoothed over by the ideological single-mindedness in general situation resurface by the dint of the alternative means of day-dream. Four different bouts of day-dream concerning four different overlooked aspects of life tear apart the veneer of illusory ideology which claim to provide a near perfect explanation of the life-existence. In the first bout of day-dream we see Dibyendu always one step ahead of the demands of the officials. He completes works on the tenders of Electricity Board, Health Center and Railway in incredibly short span of time with almost super-human ability. To top it all he gets promoted to the post of Assistant Director for the remarkable work in his wishful thinking. His ungratified urge for romance permeates the second bout of day-dream. The following conversation illustrates this aspect suitably:

Sagorika. Na ekhanei bhalo. Apnar kaje osubidhe korlam na to? Dibyendu.

Kaj? Na, na kono kaj nei.

Sagorika. Nei? Ei je dekhlam ki sob kaj korchen kagaj patra niye.

Dibyendu. Dekhechen? Tobe boli kajta ekhon bandho thak. Osubidhe tai hok.

Sagorika. Kaj bandho thakle je pet bhore na!

Dibyendu. Mon to bhore?

Sagorika. No, it’s better here. Hope I am not hampering your work.

Dibyendu. Work. No, no... not at all.

Sagorika. No? But I just saw you working on the papers.

Dibyendu. You have seen? So to say let the work be stalled for now and inconvenience prevail.

Sagorika. Stalled work will not feed your belly.

Dibyendu. But it will definitely feed the heart. (123)

The passage emphasizes on the human requirement of a warm and cordial love relationship. Life's fulfillment comes only through such strong emotional bondings. Material prosperity is required undoubtedly but it should not be the be all and the end all of human existence. The repressive capitalist society allows little scope to the middle class workers to devote ample time for the love and care of their near and dear ones. Thus the inexorable trap of capitalist ideology functions. In the third bout of day-dream his worst nightmare comes true. He gets dismissed from his work to the utmost dismay of other family members. But he gets a new lease of life via the sixteen thousand bucks won in cross-word puzzle competition. The investment of the money in the independent construction company bears rich fruit. In the fourth bout of the day-dream all the ideological restrictions and limitations get blown away as Dibyendu raises his voice of protest against the authority with unforeseen intrepidity:

*Na hoyi. Howa sambhab noi. Office e chakri kari bole ki ami apnar chakar?
Apni officer bole ki ja khushi tai ottyachar kore jete pare? Saptai ekta din ki
chutir adhikar amader nei? Amra ki jantra? Amra ki rakta mangser manush
noi? Amader ki ghorer kaj nei? Amod ahlad nei?*

No it is not done. It is not possible within this short time. Just because I work in the office does not mean that I am your servant. Do you have the right to torture us the way you want just because you are the officer? Why can't we have even a single peaceful day off in a week? Are we machines? Are we not human beings of flesh and blood? Do we have no family responsibilities? Do we not need recreation, relaxation?(131). In this bout of daydream he puts serious question mark on the authority of Basu, the Manager of Tomlinson Jenkinson and Company. He is given capital punishment for this and is unwilling to meet even Sagorika, the girl he fancies about. The dire consequences of his enraged outburst against the dominant ideology of the society are poignantly dramatized here. With the breaking of the charm of the day-dream, he comes back to the dull, monotonous and humdrum social existence where keeping mum is the key to survival. He must endure the excruciating stress without protest and work on till retirement. We also find day dream in other well-known works. As for example Charles Lamb's essay 'The Dream Children' and also in a popular TV show named *Mungerilal ke Haseen Sapne*. On the thematic ground the plot of the play *Shanibar* (Saturday) partly resembles Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* which is the saga of Willie Loman, a middle class man, tangled inescapably in the web of ever widening expectations of the family. But unlike *Death of a Salesman*, the plight of the protagonist in *Shanibar* (Saturday) remains unrelieved and unalleviated.

In these two dramas- *Baro Pishima* (elder aunt) and *Shanibar* (Saturday),

we discover the manifestations of different kinds of ideological single-mindedness. Raymond Williams in his book *Marxism and Literature* claims "A dominant class has this ideology in relatively pure and simple forms" (Williams 1277). The character of Baro Pishima in the first play seems to prove this statement with her authoritarian and assertive single-mindedness. In the second play *Shanibar* (Saturday) the protagonist seems to be well under the grip of dominant ideology with latent seeds of pluralism and multiplicity buried within. In these two dramas we see multiple layering of ideologies with the overshadowing of minor ideologies of the society by the dominant one. Terry Eagleton, in his book *Criticism and Ideology* asserts "The literary text is not the expression of 'ideology' nor is ideology the 'expression' of social class. The text rather is a certain production of ideology..." (Eagleton 64). This is applicable to most of Badal Sircar's plays as the ideology of the middleclass moulds much of his sensibilities and dramaturgy. Pierre Macherey muses on the delimiting aspects of ideology-"Ideology is a false totality because it has not appointed its own limits, because it is unable to reflect the limitation of its own limits" (Macherey 147). The ideologies in these two dramas also function in the same pattern, giving impression of the comprehensive explanation of particular truth of life. Single-mindedness robs human beings of a comprehensive and holistic view of a life. Pluralism brings closer to reality aura to human sensibility. The progress and reformation of society is impossible without the consideration the consideration of multiple facets of life's fluidity which is demonstrated by pluralism. Though most of the people are under the insidious effect of ideological effect of ideological single-mindedness, they hardly reckon it. In such a harrowing situation only pluralism can open the flood gate of investigation into the real life processes from diverse perspectives.

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