

# Rhetoric of Desire and Despair: Badal Sircar's *That Other History* in Existential Vision

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In the novel *Death in the Afternoon*, for Ernest Hemingway, the elegant spectacle of the valiant bullfighter flirting with death is a metaphor for a true artist and an 'authentic' individual as well. This compulsive confrontation of life and death ennoble the art, artist and the world. In the formative years (1957-1970) Sircar was desperately seeking this courageous and elegant bullfighter in himself and in his art. Through the Writer in *Evam Indrajit*, Badal Sircar shows of his own desire, "The audacious assertion of life claims immortality in its brief spark. These are sparks. I have to write my play on the story of the claims of immortality of these brief sparks..." (Evam 43). In *Evam Indrajit* (1965), *Shesh Nei* (There's No End, 1970), *Pagla Ghora* (The Mad Horse, 1967) *Tringsha Shatabdi* (The Thirtieth Century, 1966) Sircar recurrently returned to the theme of existential question, nihilism and guilt-ridden impotent middle class individual. His heroes struggle towards a new understanding of 'being for self' (Sartre's term for 'consciousness') in terms of the 'Other'. *Baki Itihas* or *That Other History* (1967) is no exception. Here Sharad (Though in Bengali version, it was Sharadindu and V.L. Doshi in his translation curtails the name) witnesses the vicious presence of evil in the pathway of human existence. In *Evam Indrajit*, Indrajit during his conversation with the Writer directly raised the problem of evil in this godless universe but in *That Other History* Sircar demands the individual responsibility towards the evil.

INDRAJIT: I read a long time ago that all those atomic weapons are controlled by buttons. And there are interlocking systems so nobody can spark off an atomic warfare by pushing the wrong button. Just imagine, a minor oversight could destroy the whole world!

WRITER: So?

INDRAJIT: Nothing. This priceless, invaluable life – about which we think so much, measured and count... (Evam 40).

Indrajit questions the validity of living under the shadows of death. And nobody can forget how Camus begins his *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He too asks the same fatal question – to live or to die.

In the existential philosophy, this dilemma is the final stage of the 'definite awakening'. Camus elucidates the destiny of the war between man and the universe in the following ways,

Weariness comes at the end of the act of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return to the chain or it's a definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time the consequence: suicide or recovery. (*Myth* 19)

In *Caligula*, Cherea, assessing Caligula's dilemma says, "To lose one's life is no great matter ... But what's intolerable is to see one's life being drained of meaning, to be told there's no reason for existing. A man can't live without some reason for living" (Act II, 21). Here lies the question of voluntary death and living in an absurd life. By suicide an individual confesses that life is intolerable to him. And instinctively he counters it, ridicules it by suicide as Kirilov in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* did. And thereby he freed himself from the clutches of absurdity; it is one kind of revolt against the absurdity of world. But the absolute rebellion and sarcasm to absurdity lies not in this blunt escape but in living and loving the world. The defense against nihilism and self-destruction is the test of intellectualism of an absurd hero. For Heidegger, Camus and Sartre, death is the ultimate victor and the incarnation of the ultimate evil which terminates all of possible meaning, our struggle and our freedom. Thus Sartre says, "Thus the very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantages of the Others. To be dead is to be a prey for the living" (*Being and Nothingness* 695). The only essence of humankind lies in the constant struggle against death. Badal Sircar in his *That Other History* elaborates the two kinds of gestures towards life and death. One is represented by Seetanath who ridicules the absurdity and cruelty by voluntary death. And on the other hand, Sharad represents the absolute revolt and freedom.

In Enugu, some months before Sircar had written *That Other History*, he scribbled an important section of Charlie Chaplin's *The Autobiography* in his diary, "Over the years I have discovered that ideas come through an intense desire for them; continually desiring, the mind becomes a watchtower on the look for incidents that may excite the imagination – music, a sunset, may give image to an idea" (*Hijibiji* 266). Sircar's deep mediation on the nature of death was excited by news of a man's suicide read in France. In his diary written on 23rd January, 1964, he scrawled his ideas at random, "A picture comes. A story of man's suicide read in a newspaper. An imagination – first scene, the wife's opinion. Second imagination – second scene. And the last scene – the version of the ghost of the dead" (*Hijibiji* 230). In *That Other History*, Sircar directly spelled out the story as it is experienced by him during a creative process. The news of suicide comes to a couple, Vasanti and Sharad, and the wife is asked by her husband to weave a story from her own point of view. Act I consists of the enactment of Vasanti's opinion about Seetanath's suicide. She holds the domestic unhappiness as the cause of the suicide. Then the husband weaves a story. Sharad blames the "Lolita Fixation" as the cause of the man's suicide and in Act III, the dead man appears before Sharad and justifies his voluntary death as a revolt against the evil that gnaws human existence from the dawn of the civilization. Here Seetanath and Sharad engage in a dual. While

Seetanath insists that living in this cruel world is utter absurdity, Sharad asserts that redemption lies not in the death but in the constant struggle with the death. In the course of the debate Sharad for the first time encounters that he has been caged in his egotistic world and dragging drab meaningless world. He realized that man is born by chance, live by encounter and die by accident. Persuaded by Seetanath's discursive logic, Sharad confronts the dreadful presence of evil and decides to rebel against the hackneyed living by committing suicide like Seetanath. But it is the chance appearance of his friend Vasudev that saved him. It is not avoiding death by chance; but the main emphasis is on the fatal knowledge that Sharad comes to know. Now on, he has to carry the absurd world with the realization of its 'no-thing-ness' (Sartre's term).

The whole matrix of *That other History* structurally follows Camusian thought of suicide. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus says :

There are many causes for suicide and generally the most obvious one were not the most powerful. Rarely is suicide committed ... through hypothesis. What sets off the crisis is almost unverifiable. Newspaper often speaks of 'personal sorrow' or of 'incurable illnesses'. These explanations are plausible. But one would have to know whether a friend of the desperate man had not that very day addressed him indifferently. He is the guilty one. For that is enough to precipitate all the rancours and all the boredom still in suspension (13).

Here Vasanti's version confirms Seetanath's 'personal sorrow' and Sharad's 'incurable illness'. But the ghost's version nullifies all the hypothetical discourses and narrates an existential version of the event. Sircar in an interview with Biplab Chakraborty acknowledges the similarity of *That Other History* and *Evam Indrajit* with *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Pessimism* 169). The whole story is an enactment of a creative process happening within the mind of Sircar. In this way Sircar himself becomes the character in this play. Sharad and Vasanti are none but Sircar himself. The play is about the process of creating an art from a stimulus. In the process of a Sircar's creative adventure to write a story from a stimulus, a philosophy of life is discovered at the end. The story begins with the stimulus of an image of man committing suicide, and then the writer himself makes 'a feminine domestic story' to be told through Vasanti, then proceeds to a 'mature psychological realism' of Sharad, and ultimately sneaks into an existential supra-realism narrating the archetypal conflict of life and death. Thus in the process of storytelling Sircar arrives at the fatal question of validity of living an absurd life in the face of gnawing evil.

The play opens with a setting similar to Coward's 'drawing-room comedies' where a middle class couple, Sharad and Vasanti starts their usual Sunday business. Their conversation ranges from the payment of the electric bill to the wedding invitation. Initially they have planned to take a short holiday trip to Botanical Garden and Diamond Harbour, but ultimately decide to stay at home. Then Vasudev, the colleague from Sharad's college, came to their house for morning tea. In a jocund holiday mood they have started their usual Sunday. We come to know that Vasanti is a creative writer and

her recent story in a magazine is quite a successful attempt. Vasudev insists her to write a similar smash hit. But Vasanti says that she is out of any theme.

When Vasudev has retired, Sharad gives Vasanti a clue from the newspaper for her next story. The short news covers the suicide of their distant acquaintance Seetanath. Vasanti starts weaving a story. Her narration is supported by visual representation. Her version determines domestic unhappiness as the cause of Seetanath's suicide. With the lights slowly fading, the setting shifts to the house of Seetanath and his wife, Kanak (in the original Bengali version her name was Kana). Here Seetanath and Kanak are seen struggling with their poverty. They have been scrimping and saving all the year to build a house of their own. Kanak is more obsessed with the economic security than Seetanath. She carefully cherishes the dream of having a home of her own on a newly bought land. Like Mrs. Thurlow in H.E. Bates' short story *The Ox*, Kanak is obsessed with a secure future. Kanak is a woman with an unthinking singleness of purpose to save enough money to build a home. She has been denying herself from minimum lavishness for that. She reacts hysterically when anything is said against her dream. And she knows her obsession and holds her deprived childhood responsible for that.

SEETANATH: OK. But tell me, why is having a house of your own so important to you, Kanak?

... ..  
KANAK: You could have understood it, if you had been brought up in the kind of condition in which I did ... Never had anything which I could tell mine – my very own. Let alone a room, but not even a simple sari or a blouse. Nothing! Not even a dirty little piece of string belonged to me. (Act II, 6)

We come to know that due to sheer poverty, Kanak's Sister had disgraced herself by becoming mistress of an evil man. But to Kanak her sister had done nothing wrong. She did all to survive and for a good life. Thus to Kanak, the desired home is the realization of her possessed dream. And to Seetanath, his wife is his only love. But suddenly this love story takes a twist when the bailiff appears on the gate. The bailiff brings the court-summon for an unpaid mortgage repayment. Seetanath tries his best to hide the truth, but Kanak ultimately comes to know that her dream is on mortgage, she also discovers that Seetanath has been lying about saving money and now, she is left with nothing. In a hysteric fit she locked herself behind the doors. Then an old man appears on the gate to unfold Seetanath's lie. He is the father of Kanak. He has been constantly blackmailing Seetanath for money for long. Seetanath has been so far given the money to cover the truth about her father's character. Seetanath has thought that the gambler father had caused enough shame to Kanak, so he lied to Kanak that her father had died in an accident. The sole purpose of Seetanath was to see Kanak happy, but in the course he has drained the money saved for the home and mortgaged the house. When the old man goes out, Kanak comes out of the room with a suitcase in her hand; she is about to leave Seetanath to go to Seetanath's rich friend, Nikhil to seek her desired security. She has decided to take the profession that her sister had shown her. In sheer shock Seetanath committed suicide by stabbing with a kitchen knife. In Vasanti's

opinion Seetanath was pushed to the edge of perpetual stillness when Kanak had deserted him. Here a happy conjugal life is destroyed by a crude revelation. But the version is weak, melodramatic and unconvincing story justifying a suicide for the cause of personal sorrow. The best criticism of Vasanti's story could be found in Sharad's comment in the beginning of Act II.

While in Vasanti's version it is the outer world which is vulnerable, in Sharad's version, it is the 'inner storm' that creates the deadly vortex in Seetanath's life. In response to Vasanti's melodramatic story, Sharad says; "Well, I feel that when a person commits suicide, he is usually a victim of some severe mental disorder. Deep inside him this thing is eating him. His nerves get highly strung and snap at the slightest jolt. In short he is very sick mentally" (Act II, 10). Sharad's version uses the setting of Vasanti's story and here Kanak is seen discussing about Seetanath's bizarre behavior in last few days with Vijay, Seetanath's colleague from the school. Here we see that Seetanath has decided to expel a student, Ashok because Ashok is caught reading Nabokov's *Lolita* in the class. While everybody including Vijay and the school secretary, Vidhibabu regards Seetanath's decision as an heavy punishment for a venial offence, Seetanath is seen adamant to punish him. Actually Lolita is a stimulus for Seetanath's long standing hidden guilt consciousness which was initiated ten years ago in the jungle of Chambalgad. Kanak narrated that ten years ago, Kanak and Seetanath went to Chambalgad to spend their summer vacation, and they befriended the forest officer Banwarilal and his little daughter Parvati. In the dark forest, in a hysteric fit, Seetanath raped Parvati. There in the heart of darkness, Seetanath realized his darkest evil in his heart. From then on he has been haunted down by the guilty feeling. He ripped all the relationship and memories related to Chambalgad and he shunned all the physical intimacy with his wife. Through perseverance he tried to control his sexual perversion. But Seetanath couldn't come out of the incident and the guilt feeling. Vijay knows that Seetanath preoccupied with some thought often scribbled the name Parvati and Chambalgad in the paper. Neither Vijay nor Kanak knows what exactly happens in Chambalgad. But in the end he confesses, "Day and night that ugly poisonous virus grew in my body – like some horrendous germs it spread though my system – multiplying in thousands, millions each moment" (Act II 16). Thus Seetanath is well aware of the Humbert within himself. By punishing Ashok, he wants to punish none but himself. His hatred for *Lolita* is his personalized guilt ridden psyche. He says in a fit of rage, "This is a very mild punishment for what he did. Actually, he should be tied to a post in the street and horsewhipped" (Act II, 11). But he realizes his mistakes at the end—one was punishing Ashok wrongly for his own guilt, and the other was to run way from the guilt. After a fiery debate over this issue of crime and punishment, Seetanath goes out to calm his mind. But he returns with a greater realization that Parvati was not an isolated event, but it is an expression of the poison ivy rooted deep in his psyche. He realized that he is suffering from dreadful pedophile disorder called Lolita fixation. He confesses before Vijay the sin he had committed in Chambalgarh and says that Parvati is still living within himself. He admits that when he has gone to the school secretary, Vidhibabu's house,

he saw Vidhubabu's young granddaughter, Gouri. He says, "Yes, Vijay! Gouri!! Parvati may have dissolved into past but Gouri is in the present – today – now! Parvati was the victim of some dacoit. But who can tell what is in store for Gouri – what will be her fate" (Act II, 17). Vijay tries to encourage Seetanath to overcome his guilt consciousness, but Seetanath has already decided to kill the devil on which he has no control, he wants to end all his torment and to save the little girl, Gouri from his perverted scheme.

Like Nabokov's Humbert, Seetanath too is under the strong obsession of the pedophilia fixation. Both know their guilt and call their obsession as 'devil'. Seetanath's guilt gnaws him when he associates himself with Hurbert's crime. There are several similarities between Seetanath and Humbert. They are as follows :

1. Both are suffering from sexual perversion of pedophilia.
2. Humbert for the first time discovered the 'devil' in him in his relation with Annabel and here Seetanath in his relationship with Parvati.
3. After twenty-four years Humbert came under the same obsession when he saw Lolita, here, after ten years, Seetanath was tormented when he had seen Gouri.
4. Both saw in their second victim, the reflection of the first; Humbert saw Annabelle in Lolita, and Seetanath saw Parvati in Gouri.
5. Both practiced temperance to curve their fixation.
6. While Humbert is convicted in court, Seetanath punishes himself by committing suicide.
7. Both are married persons and their wives don't know about the disease.

As in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), the devil's gate is the gateway of the each narrative and the storytelling returns to the gate after each of the three versions, so also in *That Other History* the couple's apartment is the gateway of narratives. After each narrative Sircar returns to the couple to narrate the last few lines of their versions. Sircar uses this technique deliberately to impute the sense of continuation and make the impression that the audience is viewing nothing but a version or opinions of truth. This technique is also used to comment on the version. Whether it is Sharad's criticism of Vasanti's story in the beginning of Act II or Vasanti's reaction to Sharad's version in Act III, it is nothing but audience reaction to both versions. Vasanti's doubt over the possibility of Sharad's justification is nothing but to build the dramatic tension and to let the story roll further. As Sharad became angry when he had been criticized so also did Vasanti when she was criticized for being 'melodramatic' and 'unrealistic'. Actually both imply a subjective impression of the objective event.. In Vasanti's version, we find a feminine domestic story emphasizing on the economic security, the misunderstanding between husband and wife. Here the female character Kanak covers the central stage, while the male protagonist Seetanath is sidelined. On the other hand, in Sharad's version Seetanath, who is like Sharad a teacher and has the habit of collecting newspaper-cutting, takes the central stage. While to a female it is the outer world which is vulnerable, to a male it is the inner world. Each protagonist of the respective versions is the subjective projection of the narrator himself or herself. In his production in 1967, Sombhu Mitra

experimented with this idea. He employed one actor to play the role of Sharad and Seetanath and one actress to play Vasanti and Kanak. Each narration is the ejaculation of the subjective self of the narrator. And both are caged in their arrogant egotistic perspectives of respective gender, family and world. But in Act III, with the encounter of Sharad and the ghost of Seetanath, Sircar stretched the narration beyond ego and superego to the realm of an objective knowledge of human existence. Here Like the woodcutter's version of *Rashomon*, Seetanath's version is the binding force that resolves the conflict of all the versions of a truth. As In *Rashomon* with the woodcutter's version in the end, we realized the presence of evil in every human being, so also after the ghost's version in this play, we realize the audacious spark of human resistance to the evil in the universe.

Act III opens with the concluding narration and the critical remark of Vasanti's on Sharad's version. Sharad realizes that slowly he is becoming obsessed with Seetanath and his idea of suicide. He confesses that he is too obsessed to sleep in the night (18). His obsession with the idea of suicide causes Seetanath's ghost to appear before him. G.J.V Prasad in his article "The Third Gaze" says that Seetanath is the suppressed self of Sharad (73). Even I will say Seetanath dwells inside everyman, it is a matter of discovery of the suppressed self. Sharad knows that all were nothing but stories, but his irritation to reach at some definite conclusion shows that Seetanath is deep inside him. Seetanath's ghost takes Sharad to the knowledge of human existence beyond his routine existence. When Sharad asks Seetanath why he had committed suicide, Seetanath takes out a scrap book full of images. The images show that the human history is the history of unspeakable cruelty, beastly extortion and bloodbath. The images range from the Joan of Arc to the Vietnam War, from Bhima's Revenge to Hitler's concentration camps. Seetanath says that in the ancient Egypt, the wonderful pyramids were built on the frozen blood glued with sweat of the thousand labour, and in the ancient Rome, people laughed at the sight of lion tearing human heart with sharp claws. The scrap book is full of images of tragedy of humankind in Alabama cotton field, Spanish Civil War and Pearl Harbour. Seetanath holds the view that every man is responsible for everything happening around him and every human should take the collective responsibility of the guilt. Sartre nourished the same concept of responsibility which he called 'objective responsibility'. He says in *Being and Nothingness* "There is no innocent victim of war", "we have the war we deserve" (709) and "man is responsible for everything which happens to man" (708). In his play *Loser Wins*, Sartre through Franz's tape recorder addressed the whole humanity to take the responsibility of what has happened, what is happening and what will happen. In *Tringsha Shatabdi* (Thirtieth Century) similar philosophy of 'objective responsibility' can be found. Here Sharad arranges a trial of those who were responsible for the World War II. Almost the entire world is held responsible including the victims of the war. At the end Sharad accuses himself for the war too. Here Sharad like Franz also used the tape recorder to spread the message of responsibility of human being.

In *That Other History*, Seetanath realized that human history is either the visage of endless cruelty of one over another or the conglomeration of passive gestures

commanded by existence; and to him living in this absurd world is an act of passivity too, thus he has committed suicide. He persuades Sharad to accept his logic and to take the responsibility of every human act. He repeatedly asks Sharad "Why he lives" but Sharad has no answer. Then Seetanath shows that Sharad is living an inauthentic life dipped in world of daily routine. Sharad like Amal Vimal and Kamal in *Evam Indrajit* is imprisoned in the countless self-deceptive gestures like passing the exam, job, marriage, family and children. Seetanath sums up the life of Sharad in the following ways, "There was only one meaning to become man. Study, learn, pass the exam. To stand on one's own feet which means get a job. Which in other words meant that by regularly selling a big chunk of one's self, establish a timely boarding and lodging arrangement" (Act III 20). Seetanath narrated how he had continued living in the world of "being for others" and "being in itself" (Sartre's term for the states of unconscious being), till the day when he decided to put an end to the absurd of life, Seetanath shows that there is no difference between his own life and Sharad. Here Sircar marvelously shifts the dialogues which Sharad and Vasanti have shared early in the play to Kanak and Seetanath's conversation emphasizing how Sharad was engaged in his meaningless existence like Seetanath. The audiences realize that Seetanath is the alter ego of Sharad. Both are in the deadly vortex of absurdity. While Seetanath revolted against the absurd living by voluntary death, Sharad goes on living in the world of mechanical gestures. Then Seetanath leaves Sharad to realize the other history of human existence. As Seetanath's ghost had faded away, Sharad too decided to commit suicide like Seetanath; but the chance appearance of Vasudev with news of Sharad's promotion saved him. He returns from the valley of the dead with a dreadful knowledge.

VASUDEV: ... Hey, are you OK? You are not going mad or anything are you?

SHARAD: Mad? Yes. Vasudev, I will have to be mad. For my job – my promotion. I will have to become mad – there is no other way for me to live. (Act III, 23)

Seetanath gives him the "Tree of Knowledge" which drives him mad like Indrajit. But he realizes that while Seetanath escapes the absurdity of life, he has to fight the nightmare every day from now on.

Here the play explains two different kinds of rebellion – one who escapes the absurdity by suicide and the other who believes in futile struggle without having any hope of redemption. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus has discussed about those two attitudes towards absurdity – first is an emotional response and other the is an intellectual rebellion. In *The Myth* Camus says about the first kind :

You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, insane characters of that daily agitation and useless suffering. (13)

Recognizing the evil of human existence Seetanath decides to ridicule absurdity by voluntary death. Frustrated by his desire Seetanath is consumed in the vortex of

despair. The terrible stasis of the existence fatigues Seetanath. He wants to escape into the world of oblivion. In the course Seetanath, like Caligula, enters into the realm of self-destructive nihilism. Camus calls Kirilov's suicide as 'superior- suicide'. Kirilov in *the Possessed* too realized that life is a bad dream and by suicide he wants a full control of his own life. He thinks that by suicide he can assert the liberty. By killing himself he wants to be a god. But to Camus and Sartre, suicide is the annihilation of all the freedom. Camus has denied the status of metaphysical rebellion to those who destroy the other and destroy the self. In *The Rebel* he says :

Hatred for the creator can turn to hatred of creation or to exclusive and defiant love of what exists. But in both cases it ends in murder and loses the right to be called rebellion. ... Apparently there are rebels who want to die and those who want to cause death. But they are identical, consumed with the desire for life, frustrated by their desire and therefore preferring generalized injustice to mutilate justice (73).

To Camus metaphysical rebellion is not an emotional reaction to absurd but it is an intellectual gesture. Suicide or death is the end of all our suffering and our freedom; it is a submission to life and death to dominate over the individual. Like Camus, Sartre too considers death as a limit to our freedom, and death removes all meaning from life - negative side of the nihilism. Suicide is an act of cowardice. To Sartre "Suicide is an absurdity which causes my life to be submerged in absurd" (*Being & Nothingness* 690). For an existentialist, death in the form of suicide is the temptation of an illusionary freedom from nihilism. Actually, suicide is an escape from the battle. The redemption lies in the futile struggle with a conscious dissatisfaction and simultaneous rejection. Thus Sisyphus who is an embodiment of metaphysical rebellion never commits suicide.

Here Seetanath like Kirilov wants to escape by rejecting the life. And Camus has criticized Kirilov for this rejection. For him living with awareness and accepting the absurdity is the hallmark of the metaphysical rebellion. Sharad here redeems at the cost of Seetanath. He accidentally escapes death but Sharad's accident implies his positivity which dwells inside himself. He always strives towards life force. In the battle of life and death he continually strives for meaning, value and preciousness of life; he says, "...the history of death cannot become the history of life" (Act III, 20-21). On the other hand, Seetanath aims at Kirilov's instinct, "If living becomes impossible. Die!" (Act III, 20). Seetanath dies but he explains to Sharad the essential contradiction of being alive. Seetanath's logic involves the instinct, while Sharad's accident implies intellect.

Thus *That Other History* is a play of revelation of the other side of the history of human existence. Like Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, the whole play *That Other History* happens in 'the land of memory' of both Sharad and Badal Sircar and in the process both realize the presence of the bullfighter of *Death in the Afternoon* in life and in art.

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