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An existential reading of Badal Sircar's Evam Indrajit

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Abstract
Badal Sircar's play "Evam Indrajit" challenges traditional narrative structures and delves into existential themes through its portrayal of characters navigating the monotony and meaninglessness of modern life. Set against an existential backdrop reminiscent of Camus' exploration of life's absurdity in "The Myth of Sisyphus," the play scrutinizes identity and societal norms through its characters Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit (Nirmal). These characters, symbolic of the ordinary and mundane, engage in repetitive actions that underscore the futility of their existence. The play's experimental style, characterized by circular dialogues and the incorporation of audience participation, enhances its absurdist themes. Through interactions and introspective monologues, Sircar critiques societal conformity and the cyclic nature of human existence. Ultimately, "Evam Indrajit" portrays the struggle for meaning in a world dominated by routine, highlighting the imperative of continuing life's journey despite its inherent meaninglessness.

Keywords: Badal Sircar, Evam Indrajit, existentialism, absurdism, identity, societal norms, monotony, meaninglessness

Introduction
"It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived." (Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 53).
Dinabandhu Mitra's Nil Darpan revolutionized Bengal's theatre in 1860 by depicting the oppression of poor indigo farmers by British landlords and money-lenders. Similarly, Badal Sircar's Evam Indrajit set new precedents in Bengal's drama and theatre in 1963. In this timeless play, Sircar examines the issues of identity and the meaning of life against an existential backdrop, accurately portraying the loneliness of post-independence urban middle-class youth.
Writer: There is no beauty in the people around me, no splendor, no substance. (Sircar, 200)
Sircar's Evam Indrajit aptly portrays the existential angst of modern people through its characters. Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal (Indrajit) represent the mundane and meaningless lives of modern individuals and also portrays their lives as a monotonous repetition of pointless activities. The unbearable similarity and ordinariness of the characters and their actions underscore this futile existence. The names Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal are not only very common but also phonetically similar and this emphasize on their lack of originality. As the play progresses, Indrajit adopts the fake name Nirmal to mingle with others. This alteration of name actually reveals his anxiety over disrupting the societal norm. However, the character of the Writer identifies this issue with naming. The Writer, another character in the play, highlights this issue of naming, adding depth to the narrative. The Writer's presence serves as a lens through which the audience can perceive the plot and characters, enhancing the play's impact and its exploration of the themes of identity and existential despair.
As an experimental playwright, Badal Sircar deliberately rejects traditional play structures in his play Evam Indrajit. Through the play's illogical, incoherent, and circular narrative, Sircar effectively captures the mechanical, mundane, and monotonous aspects of modern life. His use of repetitive and elliptical dialogues is reminiscent of Harold Pinter's play The Birthday Party. Like Pinter's characters, Sircar's characters inhabit a distinct linguistic universe of their own. The poem of Writer also manifests this monotonous circularity:
Writer: One-two-three.
One-two-three-two-one-two-three.

Four-five-six.
Four-five-six-five-four-five-six.
Seven-eight-nine-eight-seven-eight-nine (Sircar, 211).

The cyclic nature of the plot also demonstrates that society continues its cyclic rhythm, in which persons alter but the events remain the same. At the beginning of the play, Auntie asks the Writer to stop writing and at the end of the play Manasi does the same. Many of Sircar's plays are devoid of any plot or concrete characterization. The actors often change their roles in the middle of the performance. The participation of the audience is also encouraged. Audience participation in Badal Sircar's play Evam Indrajit is a distinctive element of his experimental style. In this play, the Writer character invites four gentlemen from the audience to join the performance, where they take on the roles of Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal. This interaction blurs the lines between actors and audience, enhancing the play's absurdist themes and challenging traditional theatrical conventions. Sircar's incorporation of audience members as actors underscores his commitment to breaking down barriers between performers and spectators, creating a unique and immersive theatrical experience.

Writer: They all are meaningless. There is just a large wheel going round and round. And we go round and round with it." (Sircar, 211).

All the characters are going round and round with the large wheel called life. Nobody is taking the risk to be the different. Indrajit is taking the fake name Nirmal to be common like Amal, Vimal and Kamal. He is not like the mythical character Indrajit (Meghnad) in the great Indian epic, the Ramayana. Indrajit of the Ramayana was a valiant fighter. He bravely fought against his father's enemy and ultimately was killed by Lakshmana, the younger brother of Shri Ram Chandra. But this Indrajit is scared of unrest. This Indrajit only wants the comfort of a dark, cloudy sky to hide himself. But sometimes he becomes rebellious like Meghnad and wants to fight against the society, against the world, and the people around him.

Manasi: And who are you supposed to be fighting?
Indrajit: The world! The people around us! What you called society. (Sircar, 215).

However, he is acutely aware of the outcome. He understands that his anger is futile and his struggles are as meaningless as Sisyphus' endless labor. By adopting the pseudonym Nirmal, he seeks to shed his inherent rebellious nature and embody the essence of an ordinary middle-class youth who accepts life as it unfolds.

Evam Indrajit is a three-act play. The first act begins with a conversation between Auntie and the Writer. Auntie assumes a maternal role throughout the play, expressing concern for the Writer's well-being.

Auntie: Night and day- scribble, scribble, scribble. No food, no drink, just scribble. Only God knows what will come out of all this scribbling. (Sircar, p. 197).

In Evam Indrajit the central character is the Writer, who narrates the story without ever being assigned a definitive identity of his own. The Writer struggles to create a meaningful play but ultimately fails to produce anything substantial. His quest to write reflects a larger theme of existential search and creative frustration within the play.

Writer: What shall I write? Who shall I write about? How many people do I know? And what do I know about them? (Sircar, P. 197)

Simultaneously, the Writer is keenly aware of his lack of understanding regarding the people around him. He acknowledges his ignorance of the suffering masses, toiling peasants, sweating coal-miners, and snake-charmers. Moreover, he perceives the people around him as unromantic in their daily realities.

All the characters in the play - the Writer, Manasi, Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal (Indrajit) - are embodiments of the existential void of modern life. The play portrays the aimlessness of their existence, emphasizing the cyclic nature of time and life. The Writer, Manasi, and Indrajit engage in role-playing. Though their behavior subtly diverging from the clichéd characters of the play, yet all ultimately blend into a sense of nothingness. All of them become entangled in an unending cycle, akin to a colossal wheel.

Conversations between different characters enable us to realize the social reality of the contemporary time. The narrative encompasses all the social fields like literature, philosophy, science, politics, cricket, football, cinema and music. The harsh reality makes them unhappy and dismayed. Indrajit refuses to accept the rule that forces an eight-year-old boy, carrying a child in his arms, to polish shoes. At times, Indrajit attempts to defy these societal norms. He harbors a deep love for his first cousin Manasi and wishes to marry her despite the societal taboos surrounding their relationship. He condemns the societal rules yet understands that his anger is futile, akin to beating his "head against a wall". (Sircar, 216). This wall metaphor is crucial, symbolizing 'the system' or 'the state'. The wall imagery in Evam Indrajit evokes parallels with the speech of Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami during his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech in 2009, where he captivated the audience with his insights.

"Each of us is, more or less, an egg. Each of us is a unique, irreplaceable soul enclosed in a fragile shell. This is true of me, and it is true of each of you. And each of us, to a greater or lesser degree, is confronting a high, solid wall. The wall has a name: it is "The System." The System is supposed to protect us, but sometimes it takes on a life of its own, and then it begins to kill us and cause us to kill others--coldly, efficiently, systematically." (Murakami,2009)

Amidst all these monotonous characters, the character of Manasi stands apart. She embodies life. Life for her is a colorful acceptance. She is actually a foil to other characters. She has no complaint against life. She gives advice to Indrajit that one must have faith in life. 'Live! Live long'- was her motto to life. This sentence reminds us of the immortal lines of Jibanananda Das's poem "One Day Eight Years Ago" (At Bochor Ager Akdin):

"Yet still the owl wakes,
The squashy decrepit frog begs for two moments more of life
When another dawn beckons, in imaginable warmth of desire!" (Das,47)

But for Indrajit life is the same old road where one must have to walk without any destination.

"For us there is only the road-so walk on. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top-even if it just rolls down." (Sircar, 250).

The Writer also knows that there is no hope, no end of our journey. But at the end of the play he also asserts that "we must, we must, we must. We must live. We must walk." (Sircar, 250). The play ends with this assertion of life.

Though our journey is meaningless we have to walk to sustain our existence.

Conclusion

Badal Sircar's "Evam Indrajit" emerges as a poignant critique of modern existence, echoing existentialist themes akin to Camus' exploration in "The Myth of Sisyphus." Through its portrayal of characters like Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit (Nirmal), the play vividly depicts the repetitive and mundane lives of individuals trapped in societal norms. Sircar's experimental narrative style, characterized by circular dialogues and audience interaction, enhances the play's absurdist atmosphere, challenging conventional theatrical conventions. The characters' futile struggles against the monotony of life and societal expectations underscore the play's central theme of existential despair. Despite the bleak portrayal of human existence, "Evam Indrajit" ultimately asserts the necessity of persevering in life's journey, embracing its inherent meaninglessness with resilience and determination.

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