

## RECOVERING THE HISTORY OF THE MARGINALIZED IN UTPAL DUTT'S PLAY HUNTING THE SUN

---

**Mukul SK**

Research Scholar, Department of English,  
Aligarh Muslim University,  
Aligarh UP, India

---

### Abstract:

After the Independence of India, writers and social activists come forward to wipe out the social evils and diseases inherited from British-colonized India. They strive to re-arrange the social order by challenging and re-defining the established order of the society in which the marginalized ones enjoy no voice, no expression, and no power. They use the art, theatre as a means to create social awareness. Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun* is a play in which he tries to create discourse for those who live at the margins of the society, and put forward a revolutionary message to the society. The play dramatizes the voice of the oppressed, the marginalized and constructs a resistance against the disastrous social powers and forces. This chapter discusses how Utpal Dutt undertakes to dig out the history of the marginalized sections of the society and re-posts them at the proper layer of the society.

Keywords: the Marginalized, the oppressed, resistance, theatre, social powers and forces, Utpal Dutt.

---

Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) is an eminent Indian playwright who brings the dramatic conventions and styles from abroad and suits them with Indian society by contextualizing them in the Indian socio-political conditions. Actor, director and theatre activist, Utpal Dutt leaves a significant contribution to the Indian theatre by incorporating and experimenting new dramatic techniques and conventions in the Indian theatre. He draws many influences from the schools of Brechtian theatre and like Brecht, tries to make people aware of their situations by highlighting social issues and problems. He produces a good number of plays in Bengali language and sometimes himself translates them into English. Some of his notable plays are *Coal* (Angar, 1959), *The Runaway Soldier* (Ferari Fauj, 1961), *Waves* (Kallol, 1965), *Unconquered Vietnam* (Ajeya Vietnam, 1966), *Barricade* (1972), and *Enter the King* (Ebar Rajar Pala, 1977). *Nightmare City* (Duswapner Nagari, 1974), *Hunting the Sun* (Surya Shikar, 1971) and *The Great Rebellion* (Mahavidroha, 1973) are some of his plays translated by the playwright himself.

Though the play *Hunting the Sun* is set in the historical background of the kingdom of Samudragupta in the fourth century Indian, it is not a historical play. The play portrays the caste system, power politics, gender discrimination, social inequality which are relevant and prevalent in the present society. The play is set in the historical background seemingly to avoid the direct attack on the bourgeois class and their power-dominations. The play puts the character Indrani as a voice, a resistance to the power of the devilish king Samudragupta and his rule. She is a disciple of Kalhan, a Buddhist monk, who carries his messages to the society. Kalhan carries out research with his disciples and gathers knowledge of the world to make the society learned of the truth of the earth whereon they are living. Indrani is imprisoned on the charge of her spreading the message that the earth is round not flat which goes against the Shastra Ramayana. And at the end of the play, she is killed when she does not withdraw her teachings.

The play highlights the stratification of the power in the society where people living at the lower stratum of power possess nothing and lives a life of the animal. In the opening scene of the play, we can see how the society brands a section of the human as a slave and treats them as an animal. Madhukarika, a branded slave is declared to be sold at the open market along with her ten-year-old son. Suryavarma, a man of the king, offers Madhukarika his slave for sale and treats her like cattle. The following talk shows the injustice, violence and inhuman treatment meted out to the people living at the lower stratum of the society:

Surya: Proficient in all household duties. Look at her teeth and you will realize how young she really is

Haya: That's the way you tell a horse's youth.

Surya: Also a slave's. Slave and beast are similar animals.

Basu: What is your name?

Madhukarika: Madhukarika.

Basu: Who sired this child?

Madhu: I do not know.

Basu: What do you mean?

Surya: She cannot tell because all the males in my house have slept with her one time or another. And yet her body is still young. Behold. (He displays her arms and legs)

Basu: How much do you want for her?

Surya: Thousand dinars.

Basu: Too much.

Surya: You get two for the same price, damn it. What a bargain! You get a mother and child!

Basu: But a thousand dinars? You can get a slave in the market these days cheaper than a dog. The wars go on, and the markets fill with prisoners and the prices are falling

Surya: These are not common market slaves. This Madhukarika is an expert at bath and massage. She is going for a song. I would not have sold her but for debt, I have to pay.

Among the slaves, woman section is more helpless. The inhuman treatment meted out to them goes beyond limitation. They suffer physical and mental torture in equal intensity. As we can see the inhuman treatment of madhukarika does not stop here. Madhukarika, a mother, is asked to take off her clothes in front of her ten-year child. When she draws back, she is forced to do it. All this happens in front of Hayagreeva, the general of the kingdom, who, instead of protecting the values of humanity, facilitates the inhuman marketing of human-selling. As we see here:

Basubandhu: ...woman, take off your clothes.

Madhukarikadraws back.

Suryavarma: how now, slave? Why do you play the coy woman? You aren't even human. Take off your clothes. The Lord will look at you.

Madhukarika: I am a mother, and my son stands before him. I would rather you did not make me naked.

Suryavarma: what's the world coming to? I suppose one of these days cows will demand to Be clothed.

Madhukarika I am not a beast of burden. I am a mother. Please do not dishonor me thus.

Vasubandhu: My Lord suryavarma, I have no time for comedy. Strip her and I'll probably buy

her. I have the money with me.

Suryavarma: strip, woman. I'll rip the skin off your back.

Madhukarika: do not dishonor me in the street, sir, I beg of you.

Suryavarma(roaring): as a slave has no honor and therefore cannot be dishonored. Shishumar, Seize her and tear her clothes off.

Utpal Dutt here portrays a harsh picture of social stratification where the people of higher stratum do everything whatever they like with the power of the state. This is exactly what

Hayagreeva, the force general does with the powerless slave Madhukarika. A general is meant to protect the social values of humanity. But this power rather degrades the female section quite at the level of an object meant only for physical pleasure. Here is how Hayagreeva treats Madhukarika when she seeks help from him to defend her from being naked in the open market.

Madhukarika throws herself at Hayagriva's feet.

Madhukarika: help me. You are a soldier. Think of your mother who was a woman and helps

Me.

Hayagreeva: think of my mother? But I am not of woman born. I was conceived in the stem Of a tree. I have no mother, woman. The worrier Hayagreeva was brought into Into the world without a mother's help.

Madhukarika: are you saying that you will stand here and watch a defenseless woman stripped Naked.

Hayagreeva: yes, and I shall laugh, watch and laugh. Women to me are a single night's fantasy. With daybreak, nothing is left but a despicable mass of flesh, fat, and bones. This has been my experience for years. You are no better. Go away.

This is how the woman is marginalized to an object of physical pleasure. Hayagreeva enjoys the social power of the higher stratum and plays with the values of female virginity. He also takes over Indrani and dishonors her chastity. This is clearly revealed when Vasubandhu puts this question before him "To you, therefore, a woman is merely flesh that you enjoy for a night?" And he replies, "Naturally. Every night I suck the life out of a fresh body and the following morning toss the dry flesh on the dung-heap and they have one more applicant for the cathouse".

This stratification of woman as the object meant for physical pleasure and for producing the child is also manifested through the character of the empress Urmila. She, though the empress of the kingdom, has to bear the same identity and brand that the society stamped on the back of a woman. The king neither cares her needs does not give any importance to her expression. Asking Samidragupta says to his wife: "You will, you will. You are merely an instrument of statecraft, and a womb to bear heirs to the throne, nothing else. You have no will of your own. We need a smile from you to please our children out there. So smile". The queen is also some kind of slave that has no voice, no right, no will of her own. Daruda, the jester, says: "you see, the queen is also a variety of slave. jeweled variety".

In the play, Utpal Dutt also portrays the dominating social forces and powers that are transmitted through different intuitions and systems—laws and prison, permission and prohibition, knowledge and discourse—in the society. Many contemporary thinkers study

these hidden social forces and highlights how these social forces serve the domination of the people in power.

As we can see in this play how the social discourse projects the king as God and makes the society obey his power as supreme. Gohil, a slave, is taught about the king as God and believes that his power cannot be challenged. He is shocked when he comes to know from his guru Kalhan that the king too is a man like him elected by the common people:

Kalhan: In Ayodhya alone, they have kept in chains a hundred thousand slaves. Let those slaves shatter their chains stand up, and bring down this State erected on sin. This is the only way

Gohil: Do you preach rebellion against the king? Sannyasin, are you mad? Have you lost your senses in your grief for your daughter? Is the king God himself?

Kalhan: That's superstition.

Gohil: The king is God . . . That's what I have known from my childhood days . . . My father told me . . . My grandfather had told my father . . . The king is God.

Kalhan: It's only a false superstition. Even Sri Ramchandra could not become a king without the people's consent. Nananagaravastavyanprithagjanapadanapi, sammaninayamedinyahpradhanaprithvipatih. This is what the Ayodhyakanda of the Ramayan has to say on the matter. Don't you feel ashamed to acknowledge a small creature like Samudragupta as omnipotent even while you stand on the soil of the same Ayodhya?

Gohil: The king . . . The king is God . . . That's what I have believed so long.

Kalhan: In this Bharatbhumi the king was elected by the people, and controlled by a collective of the people.

Even the Sashtra and old scriptures are changed and manipulated to ensure the power and domination of the state. This is clearly revealed when Indrani challenges the learning of the Puranaya and Ramayana and proves them as manipulated in terms of the state power:

Samudragupta: But the Ramayana tells us how the incarnation Rama killed Shambuka for reading the Vedas.

Indrani(boldly): Which Ramayana is this? The storyofShambuka is not to be found in the original Ramayana. It is an interpolation ordered by the state and written into the Ramayana as recently as ten years back. It is part of the current campaign against shudras, a contingency Valmiki could not have foreseen.

But every power can be resisted. We can here refer to the inquiries of Foucault who views that the individual possesses the power to resist the domination of the power of the state. The individual has the power to challenge the authority of the state. In Foucault's view power is one that no one alone can possess. In an interview he says:

Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes machinery that no one owns. Certainly, everyone doesn't occupy the same position. (Foucault 156)

This is what the play shows through Kalhan and his disciples. He prepares his disciples to revolt against the power of the autocrat king. He creates revolutionary spirits among the slaves and directs them against the king. He rejuvenates the spirit in Gohil and asks him to lead the force of the slave to end the disastrous power of the king. He says to Gohil: "In Ayodhya alone, they have kept in chains a hundred thousand slaves. Let those slaves shatter their chains stand up, and bring down this State erected on sin. This is the only way". When Indrani is imprisoned he goes to the palace and challenges the power of the king. This is here how he shows his boldness:

Kalhan: Who among you is the Emperor?

Shishukumar: Do you not recognize him?

Kalhan: How can I, my son? I have never seen him before.

Dardura: Isn't there a halo around his head?

Kalhan: The Emperor is but a man. How can he have a halo?

Samudra: It is a crime to call the Emperor a man.

Kalhan: What is he?

Virup: He is the living God. He is God on earth.

Kalhan: Are you not insulting your God? If you call a man God, are you not dragging God down to the level of man?

Thus Indrani does not bow his head before the power of the king even when she is crushed to death by the stampede of an elephant. On the other hand, a huge mob of rebellious slaves gathers in front of the palace to bring the power of the state down on the ground.

To conclude, Manoj Mitra, through the historical context, unearths the history of the marginalized—the woman, the slave, the children by dramatizing the injustice, violence, and torture meted out to them. He also, like Brecht, tries to awake the drowsy conscience of the people to think of themselves about the respective social situations. The play also invites revolutionary feedback from the audience to bring social injustice to an end.

#### References:

- Dutt, Utpal. Three Plays: Hunting the Sun, The Great Rebellion, Nightmare City. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2009
- Dutt, Utpal. Towards a Revolutionary Theatre. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 1982
- Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. Print

- The History of Sexuality, Vol. I. An Introduction. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings.1972-1977. Ed. Colin Gordon. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980. Print.
- Saha, Nripendra. UtpalDutt: A Comprehensive Observation. Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2005. Print.
- Sharmila Rege, "Caste and Gender: The Violence Against Women in India," Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives ed., P.G. Jogdand (Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995)