Utpal Dutt's Marxist Theatre through the lens of Artaudian Violence: A Study of Selected Plays

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the representation of violence in Utpal Dutt's (1929-1993) theatre. Dutt's Marxist theatre presents before us an important case study for the use of violence in theatre as an effective weapon to combat the inevitable disinterestedness of the audience in a capitalist social structure. Dutt believed that adroit use of violence in theatre could jolt the consciousness of an audience left alienated and exhausted through sustained exploitation. The essay briefly discusses Artaud's valuation of violence in his Theatre of Cruelty. It goes on to explore the possible similarities between the forces employed to overcome Marxist Alienation in Dutt's theatre and the Artaudian emphasis on making "metaphysics … re-enter our minds through the skin". The paper discusses Dutt's multifaceted use of violence in some of his plays. We examine *Ajeya Vietnam* ("Invincible Vietnam"), *Tir* ("The Arrow"), and *Thikana* ("Address"). It is deduced that Dutt's use of violence, though stylistically somewhat different from Artaud's notion of violence in theatre, seeks to achieve a similar objective: forcing the audience out of their comfort zone, and making them take cognizance of the outside world. It is also argued that there is a psychological aspect to Dutt's use of violence, beyond the Artaudian premise.

Keywords: Marxist alienation; Metaphysics; Theatre of Cruelty; Voilence.

Introduction

The representation of violence has long been an inalienable part of the theatre. One may go as far back in time as the gladiatorial combats of the classical world where the element of spectacle – which makes it a close relative of theatre in terms of viewing experience – was largely dependent

on the manifestation of violence. The dramatists of ancient Greece did not hesitate to present before the audience a man who has gouged out his own eyes (Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, c.429 BCE) or base their works on the numerous gory events of the Trojan War and its aftermath (Euripedes' *Hecuba* (c.424 BCE), *Trojan Women* (c.415 BCE) among many other prominent examples). It is undeniable that many of our fellow humans experience a primeval joy in witnessing violence – either directly or vicariously – being perpetrated on others. How else can one justify the remarkable interest with which reports of crime or other forms of violence are presented and followed on various television and print media? With the ever-increasing influence of social media, we often come across instances of cyber bullying where an individual (or a small group of individuals) is identified with some "shortcoming", and then repeatedly called out on public fora. Such "trolling" constitutes psychological violence facilitated by the worldwide web. The depiction and experience of violence, thus, represent a prominent phenomenon in our daily lives. As mentioned earlier, theatre practitioners have represented violence in their works for both stylistic as well as thematic purposes. Catherine Cusack observes:

> It seems to me that drama always had to reflect the violent forging of our world. And the refinement and changes in presentation of that violence in theatre continue to keep pace with the kinds of violence we inflict on one another. (Cusack 2013, xii)

Theatre, on account of its nature as an art form, has the potential to scrutinize realities that we come across in life, which includes violence. Lucy Nevitt explains:

> In the theatre we can play out different imaginary versions of the world, and so theatre provides space, structures and contexts for the contemplation of actual and potential violence … Since fictional framing and the relative safety of the not-real enable theatre-makers to push their ideas to the extremes of cultural imagination, it is inevitable that theatre will be concerned with violence. (Nevitt 2013, 6)

The representation of violence in theatre – in close imitation of life – is multifaceted and varied. This paper closely studies the use of violence in Utpal Dutt's political theatre through literary analysis of select plays, and attempts to interpret it in the context of Artaud's notion of violence in theatre.

Dutt and Artaud: The Influence of Marxist Thought

In Marx's understanding of a capitalist society, man is increasingly estranged from his human qualities, and focusses attention solely on material accretion. Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) applied Marx's idea to his art to arrive at the understanding that theatre practitioners need to find a way around the spell of indifference that will inevitably impact the audience.[1] Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is probably the most widely-recognized theatrical technique aimed at overcoming the disinterestedness of bourgeois audience. Ernst Bloch explains,

> As Brecht uses it, estrangement [Verfremdungseffekt] is directed against that very alienation … Therefore, people must be startled awake, if they are not to lose their powers of sight and hearing. (Bloch 1970, 124)

Brecht employed several techniques to startle his audience. For instance, his use of the German language was specifically designed to ensure that the words jar the hearer, rather than follow each other in smooth succession (Bloch 124). The unexpected ebb and flow of dialogues keeps the audience on tenterhooks, ensuring that they are never lulled into a sense of complacence by the events on stage so much that their emotional involvement proves detrimental to their ability to objectively assess the action enfolding before them. On similar lines, other dramatists have attempted to break through the estrangement of the audience in different ways.

Dutt recognized the need to break through the obstacle created by the disinterestedness of his audience. This was essential to ensure that he could disseminate his ideas convincingly among the audience. In this context, he believed that the depiction of violence in theatre could be used as an effective technique. In "In Search of Theatre", he opines that astute representation of violence may be used to find a way around the lack of interest that plagues the audience. The bourgeois smugly believes that power structures in society are immutable. As a result, his superior position within the dynamics of social power relations is unlikely to be contested. He wishes to see stage characters as immutable "types" that he finds harmonious with his prejudiced ideas concerning social power structures. Marxist theatre rigorously questions such prejudiced ideas about the nature of social relationships. Dutt believed that violence destroys the "propriety" of bourgeois theatre (Dutt 1988, 32). Depictions of man's potential for brutality shocks and awakens our morality. Post-Holocaust modern theatre aims to help us deal with stark reality rather than cushion us from

it. In a social system that leaves our audience disinterested and mentally tired of functioning as money-minting machines, dramatists may depict brutality to shake the conscience of their audiences and force them out of their general indifference towards social issues.

Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) – a noteworthy torch-bearer of the French theatrical avant-garde in the inter-War years – may be considered a pioneering advocate for systematic use of "violence" in theatre. In his Theatre of Cruelty manifestoes, Artaud expresses his belief that our human instincts and impulses, which seem to have been deadened in the modern world, must be assaulted in order to be re-awakened. Theatre, as visualized by Artaud, should be a comprehensive experience for the audience which must force them to overcome their disinterestedness:

> Abandoning Occidental usages of speech, it [the ideal theatre in Artaud's opinion] turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility. (Artaud 1968, 57)

Artaud's idea of "assaulting" the senses is evident in his use of words like "trample", "pile-drive", or "benumb", which suggest that the director seeks to forcibly evoke a response from the audience. Artaud justifies the element of cruelty in his theatre thus:

> Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theatre is not possible. In our present state of degeneration, it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds … Furthermore, great social upheavals, conflicts between peoples and races, natural forces, interventions of chance, and the magnetism of fatality will manifest themselves either indirectly, in the movement and gestures of characters enlarged to the statures of gods, heroes, or monsters, in mythical dimensions, or directly, in material forms obtained by new scientific means. (64-67)

Though Artaud did not elaborately discuss Marxian philosophy as an important influence on his work in theatre, we may identify certain prominent connections. Artaud's rejection of literary drama – theatre which predominantly depends on the words of the playwright – may aid the democratization of theatre as an art-form: the unlettered proletariat may not be able to comprehend the nuances of written text but may still be

subjected to the theatrical experience in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. On similar lines, Dutt saw in theatre great potential as an efficient mass-influencer. The exploited multitudes, largely deprived of access to advanced education, may not be able to read a novel or a poem, but they can always watch a play being performed, and hear dialogue. Artaud's violent "assault" on the somnolent sensibilities of his audience was an attempt to force them out of their complacence and make them face reality. Man-made catastrophes like wars or nuclear accidents show that today we are imprisoned in a society without the ability to empathize with one another ("state of degeneration", to use Artaud's phrase). Unless forced extraneously to take cognizance, we are strangely apathetic to the plight of our fellow beings. Artaud's "assault" on the senses may be interpreted as such a force, aimed to awaken our conscience. Influenced by Marx's idea that man, in a capitalist society, turns apathetic to all rational or creative endeavours besides acquisition, Dutt, too, realized that he had to force his audience out of their comfort zone to ensure that his political theatre had the desired impact (Dutt, "In Search of Theatre"). Though thematically variant – Dutt's primary concern was the class rather than the individual, while Artaud looked to pierce the individual's consciousness – both these practitioners relied on violence as an effective weapon to ensure the desired impact on the audience. Let us examine Dutt's nuanced depictions of violence on stage by studying some of his works.

Dutt's Representation of Violence

Ajeya Vietnam

Dutt's *Ajeya Vietnam*[2] (*Invincible Vietnam*, 1966) critiques American aggression on Vietnam. The play (premiered at Minerva Theatre, Calcutta on 31 August 1966) shows us the Vietnamese people heroically defending their motherland from American imperial aggression. Dutt's objective in *Ajeya Vietnam* is to win the audience's sympathy for the oppressed Vietnamese people. His threadbare and direct propaganda against the imperialist aggressors leads him to sensationalise their violent acts on stage. In order to magnify the injustice faced by the Vietnamese, he depicts them as exemplary figures worthy of emulation: courageous, prepared to sacrifice themselves in the service of their motherland and magnanimous. In stark contrast, the Americans are depicted as bestial, blood-thirsty and decadent. A fourth of them suffer venereal diseases, sleeplessness, etc. (Dutt 1995, 166). Dutt juggles data to magnify the audience's dislike for the Americans, rather than empirically validate his claims made in the play.

Various scenes of torture on stage aid Dutt's propaganda against the American imperialist aggressors. General Fitz-Coulton proposes methods of torture that shock us not merely in their brutality but also in their value as "entertainment" for the Americans. He tells Colonel Finny:

> You must inflict pain upon them [the Vietnamese people]. If you don't derive the pleasure of research out of torture, if you don't experience a scientific thrill on seeing the naked, yellow bodies suffer in pain, then you aren't equipped to fight in Vietnam. (167)[3]

Appalling forms of torture are presented by Fitz-Coulton before his colleagues in terms of scientific experiments which are pursued merely for the sake of deriving pleasure out of inflicting torture on the Vietnamese people. The general shows his colleagues a chart which has violent methods of torture enlisted on it:

> First, thrusting a knife slowly [into the victim's body], Second – a noose made of barbed wire, meant to strangulate the victim. Third – smashing the fingers with the stock of a rifle … Fourth – injuring the eyes of victims beyond repair by activating the fume of a flame-thrower near the eyes. Fifth to eleventh – psychologically devastating victims by torturing one before one's near and dear ones, like [torturing] sons in front of mothers, wives before husbands, and so on … Carefully note the twelfth instrument – electric shock – discovered by the American military intelligence … Look at the chart – the two wires must be tied to the breasts in case of women and to the genitals in case of men. (167)

Once Fitz-Coulton is informed that even these gory tactics have failed to overpower the Vietnamese, he acknowledges that it is not always his objective to make his victims confess or speak of the whereabouts of their comrades. Rather, it is the "scientific experiment" that matters (167). The general seems to have become addicted to pleasure derived from violence. The matter-of-fact, journalistic, chronological listing of the methods of torture suggests that he has become immune to the devastating consequences of his proposals. Perhaps he does not even consider that his victims are human. His actions serve to prove his monstrosity. His blood lust and depraved state of mind is exposed further in discussions with his colleagues:

> We know that that we will not win this war. But we must ensure that we leave a mark on the face of Asia, a frightful, indelible impression, so that the Chinese communists – enemies of the world

> - … (*the facial muscles of the hysteric general contort, his mouth begins to froth*) Like we stabbed the children of the communists
>
> in Indonesia … Let no one escape … Catch hold of the women … tear out their breasts … Mutilate this country beyond repair. (170)

Evidently, the violence that the general has engendered and perpetuated has psychologically impacted him as well. His instincts and cravings have turned unnatural. In the words of Saidiya Hartman,

> The affiliations … outline a problematic of enjoyment in which pleasure is inseparable from subjection … and bodily integrity bound to violence. (Hartman 1997, 33)

The fact that the colonial aggressors enjoy spectacles of torture – especially those perpetrated upon defenceless victims – serves to magnify their monstrosity and foment the hatred of the audience towards them.

The American army hardly copes with the guerilla fighters of the Vietnamese people's army, and directs rage at innocent citizens. They hurl poisonous gas indiscriminately on commoners. The infant grandchild of Kim is one of the first victims of their chemical weapons (174). Several villagers, including Doctor Vinh and his assistant nurse Mao, are held captive and subjected to inhuman atrocities. The gory episode of Mao's rape by American colonels Wheeler and Knight is enacted on stage. Dutt writes a detailed stage direction describing a darkened stage (barring the occasional flashes of search-lights) where the desperate attempts of Mao to free herself from the devilish clutches of Wheeler and Knight assume ghastly proportions (194). To the audience, this is not merely the infliction of violence to assert one's superiority but the violation of life itself. The Americans continue their violent torture on the Vietnamese throughout the play. In fact, most of the items enlisted on Fitz-Coulton's list (referred to earlier) are tried one after another on stage. The American army officers force Kim and Bui to march naked before their troops who can barely control their lust on witnessing such a "strip-tease show". Mao is subjected to repeated electric shocks, and ultimately murdered (197-200). A dagger is slowly thrust into Doctor Vinh's body as he is questioned by Wheeler and Knight. Thuan's fingers are smashed with the stock of a rifle. Doctor Vinh's eyes are destroyed (201-203). Even the young kid Pupu is reported to be shot dead by the blood-thirsty, deranged American army (209).

The violence that is presented on stage has the potential to impact the

audience viscerally as well as psychologically. The audience may be able to identify with the sense of pain that the Vietnamese experience, even though they are not directly assaulted. We often attempt to understand performed violence in terms of our real experiences of violence inflicted on our own bodies. Such actions on the part of the audience would aid the dramatist's endeavour of generating fellow feeling among the audience for the exploited Vietnamese. The sickening exhibition of violence helps Dutt achieve two objectives. First, in tune with Artaud's ideas, he attempts to break through the complacence of his audience. They find it difficult to remain indifferent or unmoved in the face of the appalling atrocities perpetrated by the Americans. Second, Dutt also manages to fulfil his political purpose of projecting the Americans as monstrous villains, and thus, garnering sympathy for the Vietnamese. Dutt's use of violence in *Ajeya Vietnam* has stylistic as well as thematic significance.

In spite of their spine-chilling atrocities, members of the American army come across as cowardly at the end of the play. Wheeler kneels before armed Vietnamese guerrillas in abject surrender without even trying to put up a fight (221). We learn that the possession of instruments of violence, or even the infliction of torture, does not make the aggressor infallible. Their military superiority, set against the disenfranchised state of their victims, gives them only a momentary advantage. The American generals are lulled into believing themselves superior by the sadistic pleasure they derive out of the violence perpetrated by them. However, the moment they are faced with an opposition on relatively equal footing, their courage deserts them. In contrast, the resolute courage of the Vietnamese is further strengthened by the atrocities that they suffer. For instance, Thuan – in spite of the torture inflicted upon him – is able to gather his strength and courage in one final heroic attempt to thwart the Americans from operating their radio-set to transmit vital war information. He manages to destroy the device even as he is fatally shot (205). Doctor Vinh continues his research for an antidote to American chemical weapons even after losing his vision (214). Dutt suggests that the Vietnamese manage to gather superhuman strength and courage that neutralizes all forms of violent torture because they fight for a just cause. The imperialist aggressors, on the other hand, seek to pillage and ransack. Their actions ensure the audience's hatred; while the heroic resistance of the patriotic Vietnamese is aggrandized.

Tir

Tir ("The Arrow", 1967) is arguably the most contentious work in Dutt's

oeuvre. The outbreak of the Naxalbari Movement at Naxalbari in northern Bengal in May-June 1967 was a turning point in the political history of West Bengal. In spite of the fact that the Congress party was ousted from power in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1967 (with the United Front government assuming office), the growing dissatisfaction with the system, especially among the youth, could hardly be mitigated. The Naxalites, with their destructive, ultra-left ideology, ran amok throughout the state. The spark was allegedly provided by the police strong-arming and torturing peasants who had joined hands in revolting against capitalist crop hoarders. These hoarders, often in league with the corrupt administration, would illegally stock food grains in order to trigger unnatural demands in the market, which, in turn, would ensure a higher price for the grains stocked by them. Dutt, attracted to the ideology of the Naxalites, visited the revolting peasants to learn about their first-hand experiences. He constructed *Tir* (premiered at Minerva Theatre on 16 December 1967) around these narratives. He depicted various incidents of police violence with the objective of portraying the state administration as domineering and peremptory, blind to the rightful demands of citizens.

Tir bears witness to Dutt's conviction that the proletariat may ensure freedom from exploitation only by overturning the social order forcibly. The bourgeoisie shall leave no stone unturned to ensure that the exploitative social order is perpetuated. The capitalist hoarder Satyaban does not hesitate to push the helpless villagers to severe penury and extreme hunger for monetary gains in his business. He functions in league with administrative agencies of the government (formed by the Congress party, which was in power in West Bengal for the first twenty years after Independence). In line with Mao Tse-tung's idea that political power can only grow out of the barrel of a gun, Dutt celebrates the heroic attempts of the revolutionaries to regain control over the fruits of their labour. The dramatist is keen to prove the futility of democratic methods in bridging the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots". The villagers are gulled into giving up their weapons and resort to peaceful methods to secure their rights, only to be rudely shocked to the realization that they have been cheated. Birsa – one of the rebel leaders – realizes the folly of believing in the promises of the bourgeoisie:

> Satyaban: Birsa Oraon, didn't you'll threat me with death just a couple of days ago?
>
> Birsa: We did. And at that time, you didn't dare to strong-arm us in this manner.

> Satyaban: But now I can do whatever I want. Call it exploitation, or preserving the rights of the capitalist – it can be done now. And it will continue.
>
> Birsa: It is only because we have put down our bows and arrows that you could bring a helpless girl from the field –
>
> Satyaban: Precisely. You'll don't have bows and arrows now. You are no better than wild beasts whose claws have been shaved off. So, we will hit out this time. You know, Birsa, it is either you'll or us – one or the other class always hits out aggressively and dominates – at all times. (233)

Dutt uses violence in *Tir* to aid his characterization. While the rebels show heroic courage and resilience to counter the state's offensive, the police seemingly lack courage to face the peasants in frontal combat. Rather, they use unethical means to capture, and then violently torture them in isolation. In one such instance, we find Panjiar – a police informer – treacherously plotting the arrest of one of the rebels named Gajua. Panjiar tips off the police about Gajua's whereabouts. Gajua is hit on the head with a rifle stock, and his cries smothered by a number of policemen who brutally press his mouth with a belt. The ruthless and unprovoked violence of the police climaxes right after Gajua's arrest. They open fire on unarmed women busy with a folk ceremony. The male revolutionaries are not present in the area during the ambush as the ceremony is meant only for women. The police, at Panjiar's behest, take advantage of this situation to brutally hunt down the helpless women. Dutt convincingly directs the audience's anger and hatred towards the police by magnifying the monstrosity of this episode enacted on stage. The first bullet strikes an invalid woman, who does not even realize who shot her. The bullets hunt indiscriminately: The pregnant Debari dies, leaving her husband dumbfounded with grief. The police continue to shoot even at the corpses in their insane blood-lust (303-305). The dramatist presents this gruesome sequence elaborately on stage, detailing the violent action of the police as vividly as possible. Dutt writes in his stage direction:

> Even before the women realize what is going on, the rifles [of the police] roar in unison. The corpses get scattered all over. The firing is as ruthless as it can be – there can be no justification for such violence; even the corpses are shot at … all the corpses lie still, only Somari tries to grab at the baby tied to her back, but falls down again. (305)

Like in *Ajeya Vietnam*, Dutt magnifies violence of state agents to force his audience out of their complacent numbness. Thematically, he presents agents of the state administration as cold-blooded murderers. The victims of their violence are unarmed women, rebels who are caught off-guard, or, as we shall see later, children. These violent, unequal conflicts expose them as cowardly. The police are reported to escape hurriedly in a truck the moment the men of the village, armed with bows and arrows, shout their war cries and begin to approach them. In contrast, Debari – in spite of being hit by bullets – valiantly tries to shoot an arrow in retaliation in her final moments (304).

It does not take the rebels too long to identify Panjiar's treachery. They serve him punishment which, too, is gory. Gabriel smothers his face while Jonaku stabs him to death. Reminding the audience of the police shooting at corpses of the women earlier, Jonaku pulls Panjiar's body down into the bushes, and keeps stabbing him. The murderer's face, Dutt tells us, turns ferocious (313). Just like the earlier episode, Panjiar's murder is enacted on stage. But the dramatist secures an opposite effect this time: the audience's sympathy is drawn towards the murderer. We feel that Panjiar gets only what he deserves. Further, the enactment of violence before one's eyes is also shown to numb one's human sensations. Jonaku, after stabbing Panjiar to death, remains perfectly calm without manifesting even an iota of emotion:

> He [Jonaku] even picks up a copybook and begins to write on it. The others breathe a bit heavily [as they witness the murder] – but Jonaku is now an altered human being. (313)

The gruesome episode of the helpless women hunted down like animals by the police – his pregnant wife among them – has transformed Jonaku into a revenge-seeking machine, almost devoid of natural human impulses.

The police do not spare even the kids. Manglu – Birsa and Sanjho's son – is heinously tricked and captured. The dramatist describes the episode of Manglu's torture – enacted on stage – in gruesome detail. A red-hot bayonet is repeatedly thrust into Manglu's body:

> Satyaban: Look here, dear Manglu, just a word from your parents would save your life, but they refuse to speak … I have no scores to settle with you – (*he thrusts the bayonet into Manglu's shoulders, Manglu cries out in pain*) …

> Satyaban: Here, your parents abuse me, Manglu. Is this genteel behaviour? Manglu, my dear – (*thrusts the bayonet – Manglu muffles a cry of pain*) …
>
> Satyaban: Do you hear, dear? Now turn and face the other side, your backside now. (*Satyaban kicks Manglu to make him face the other side*) … (*thrusts the bayonet*) (322)

The kid falls unconscious due to pain, but his heroic parents refuse to capitulate. They are stern in their resolve not to reveal the whereabouts of their guerrilla unit. Birsa is blindfolded and stabbed to death, as a number of policemen hold him still. This event, too, is enacted before Sanjho's eyes (323). The officers can hardly believe their eyes when they find that Sanjho's resolute commitment to the cause of the rebellion does not suffer in spite of being a helpless witness to the inhuman torture inflicted on her son and husband. The police then attempt to rape her (324).

The incident of the attempted rape decisively drives the audience's sympathy away from agents of the administration. In our discussion of *Ajeya Vietnam* earlier, we saw Dutt making similar use of sexual violence. The depiction of sexual violence secures a potent dramatic effect.

Following this episode, Dutt indulges in some wish-fulfilment in his depiction of violence inflicted by the rebels. They spring from one tree to another eluding the surveillance of the police. They manage to destroy search-lights which are enmeshed in steel wires with their special arrows. They continue to shoot arrows with immaculate accuracy even in darkness after the lights are destroyed. At the end, Satyaban is captured by the rebels. The climax shows the rebels standing around the capitalist as he gradually sinks into a muddy whirlpool. This sequence of violence is different from similar sequences in *Tir* in that it does not appear as gruesome or ruthless on stage. The peasants seem perfectly calm, rather than wildly passionate, as they stand by watching their class adversary sink to his death. They mock him and remind him of several atrocities that he had masterminded on the villagers (324). Dutt's presentation of violence here represents a major step of education necessary for the proletariat in their class struggle against the bourgeoisie. In the concluding lines of the play, Jonaku announces:

> Sympathy, love – these characteristic emotional qualities of peasants and workers would overwhelm us earlier. How does it feel now? …Haven't we learnt some of your [the capitalist's] ways?

> Won't you tell us how well we have aped your gross lack of sympathy for your fellow humans, the absence of ethics in your conduct? … If we cannot become as ruthless as they are, how will we defeat them? (326)

In *Tir*, Dutt concentrates his energies on validating his political convictions rather than organic development of plot. He is determined to validate Mao's idea that battles are won by the heroism of men, and not by the superiority of mechanized weapons. The unwavering spirit of the fighter who operates a weapon, rather than the weapon itself, determines the fate of a battle:

> Trilok: That is precisely what Mao Tse-tung says. Man is always superior to weapons. (317)

Trilok – who functions for the police to annihilate the rebellious villagers – further observes:

> Naxalbari is not just an event; it represents an idea as well. It is a philosophy, the ideas of Mao Tse-tung. It is spreading … So, we must act quickly, use all our weapons and machines indiscriminately and nip the idea in the bud. America against China – the same battle is being fought even in Naxalbari. (317)

Dutt's portrayal of the final sequence discussed above, thus, may be read as an expression of his political conviction. We find the villagers, with their crude weapons, overpowering trained personnel of the Eastern Rifles armed with modern artillery because, Dutt would have us believe, they fight for their legitimate right to life, while the capitalist aggressors seek profit at the cost of life and liberty of the villagers. On a similar note, Dutt shows Satyaban's capture at the end being facilitated by a worker, rather than one of the peasants who are at the forefront of the rebellion. The unity of peasants and workers – not just ideological unity, but the active joint participation of workers and peasants in armed struggle – has always been insisted upon by Maoist political thinkers as a prerequisite for the success of the rebellion against the bourgeoisie.

Dutt has been held guilty of over-estimating the importance of the uprising at Naxalbari, and indeed, of the Naxalite movement in general. The dramatist himself confessed later:

> I have been accused later by many of my comrades of exaggerating in my play the importance of the Naxalbari uprising. When I

> read the script of the play now, I cannot help confessing that I had indeed done so. (Dutt 1982, 76)

In spite of obvious exaggerations, the audience is perhaps moved by the honesty in Dutt's passionate call for armed uprising in order to overturn the exploitative social order. He explains:

> But even if this is left-adventurism, there is more heroism in it than in a thousand resolutions and speeches. A pistol held firmly in the hand and a finger on the trigger – such an image can rouse the people to take up arms. Even if the time is not ripe for an insurrection, the revolutionary theatre must look forward to the time when, inevitably, it will be. (Dutt 1971, 226-27)

We may end our discussion of *Tir* by considering whether Dutt's exaggerated emphasis on violence for the sake of political propaganda curbs aesthetic merits of the play. Satya Bandyopadhyay – Dutt's long-time associate – explains this aspect of the production:

> There is a great deal of controversy surrounding *Tir*. Is it art or is it straightforward political propaganda? All kinds of propaganda – if it is honest, beautiful and inspirational – turn into art. In this regard, the play *Tir* is indeed artistic. (Bandyopadhyay 1996, 76)

In terms of the Artaudian premise of violence, Dutt uses it liberally in *Tir* to force his audience out of their indifference. However, his use of violence is thematically significant, too. Like in *Ajeya Vietnam*, the appalling violence perpetrated by the state administration decisively turns the audience's sympathy away from them. *Tir* was written with a definite political objective. Dutt attempted to justify the politics of destruction embraced by the Naxalites, by portraying it as a natural reaction to the strong-arming tactics used by representatives of the state administration. The representation of violence aids his purpose in this regard.

Dutt's Use of Violence: Psychological Aspects

Representations of appalling violence on stage in *Ajeya Vietnam* or *Tir* are meant to turn the compassion of the audience away from the violent offenders. Besides being identifiers of behaviour unbecoming of humans, the brutalities dramatized in these plays serve another purpose. Analyzing the impact of cross-border violence on lives of civilians residing close to the India-Pakistan border, Devika Ranjan points out that men in most

households along the border turn to addictive substances to cope with the frustrations of not being able to carry out duties as bread-earners of families, as traditionally expected in patriarchal social structures (Ranjan 2019, 66). Such men are driven by the psychological pain of not being able to perform designated roles like their peers, who do not face similar hurdles in their daily lives. Applying Ranjan's findings to Dutt's plays, one may argue that the perpetrators of violence in *Ajeya Vietnam* or *Tir* are forced to turn themselves into slaughter machines devoid of humanity by the colonial aggressors or administrative institutions who recruit them. Often, they are compelled to live away from their families, without access to the popular indicators of a decent life. Their only purpose in existence appears to be the instillation of fear in the minds of those that they seek to dominate. Such a situation leaves them psychologically devastated. Like the alcoholism of the men analyzed in Ranjan's work, the use of violence by these men in Dutt's plays soon turns into an addiction that, they feel, may help them cope with the psychological trauma of being "useless". This perhaps explains the infliction of violence on kids or debilitated old civilians who are not even part of the armed resistance organized by the dominated people.

The dramatization of the increasing intensity of their violence actually serves to expose the weakness of such characters before the audience. In addition to the bloodthirsty maniacs that we come across in the two plays discussed above, there are other characters in Dutt's oeuvre who validate our argument that addiction to violence becomes a means for the aggressor to escape the trauma of being redundant. In this context, we may turn our attention to Dutt's characterization of Captain Richard Brandon in *Titumir* (1978). Initially, Brandon seems different from other British officials. He treats the native villagers with some dignity. His respect for women is especially praiseworthy.[4] However, he eventually turns into a monster, who specifically orders his troops to rape all young women in Gokhna. He derives bestial pleasure in discovering their mangled remains dangling from trees (Dutt 1999, 355). When Chapa challenges him to justify his altered self, his sense of utter frustration is evident. He cannot bear that he has been forced by circumstances to change himself from a civilized human being, with an aesthetic consciousness, into a slaughter machine at the service of the East India Company. He shouts in rage:

> Brandon: (*in anger*) Do not remind me of the past, do not remind me I was once a man! … I was a civilized human being. I read Walter Scott regularly. I used to play the piano … my fingers must have now turned into dry twigs adept only at handling guns and

> swords … at the service of the Company. A civilized man is now a hired murderer working for traders! (356)

These words expose the psychological weakness of the aggressor, who is pathologically dependent on acts of unbridled violence to sustain himself. Thus, the dramatist makes use of violence as a marker for the audience to understand the psychological state of the perpetrators of violence. Such practice adds finer nuances to Dutt's use of violence, beyond the Artaudian premise discussed earlier.

Thikana

The plays discussed above show Dutt securing desired impact on the audience through depictions of physiological violence on stage. However, he also attempted to explore the psychological impact of violence (on both victim and oppressor). We will discuss one illustrative example in this context. Dutt chose the Bangladesh War of Independence, 1971 as the subject for *Thikana* ("Address", premiered at the Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta, on 2 August 1971). Here, Dutt dramatizes the depravity of West Pakistani military officials who are shown to execute innocent civilians in cold blood. Six innocent residents of Manikganj are arrested on cooked up charges of murdering an army official. Dutt dramatizes the effect of neurosis induced by fear of violent death on each of the prisoners as they await their final moments. The convicts are intimated of their fate two days before they are forced to stand before a firing squad.

Dutt makes the West Pakistani army officials speak a strange brand of Bengali throughout *Thika¯na¯* (Dutt 1997, 1). This is not customary in his other works, where we come across several foreign characters who speak the local language with relative ease. The use of language may be connected to the presentation of violence in *Thika¯na¯*. The characteristic mispronunciation of words by the army officers inflicts psychological trauma on the local residents, as it serves to remind them of the torture they have suffered, at the hands of those who speak in that specific manner, over the course of their struggle for independence. Nevitt explains,

> If someone uses a racist or homophobic term of abuse, their use of that term draws on and takes power from a history of similar abuse … It isn't a description, but an action, a violent action. (Nevitt 2013, 30)

Out of all the convicts, Rasida embraces her fate with the greatest forti-

tude. She is apparently frail and socially underprivileged, struggling to make ends meet through her tea stall. She has no direct involvement in the freedom struggle. In championing her courage, Dutt shows that the fortitude necessary to stand up against imperial aggression, or any other form of exploitation, springs from strength of mind and character rather than muscle power or position of eminence in society. Dutt carefully details the brutality that she is subjected to – she is walloped by several army personnel at once, her eye is put out, her fingers are severely fractured and then the wounds are acidified. However, her spirit remains unconquered (Dutt 1997, 57). She risks her life on various occasions to aid the *muktiyoddha¯s*. She sleeps peacefully even hours before facing the firing squad, without betraying the slightest sense of fear. The West Pakistani army officers plan to triumph over the spirit of the Bengali freedom fighters by sending out a message through the violent torture inflicted on Rasida. But the frail old lady reverses their design: she becomes a symbol of strength and indefatigable spirit for the *muktiyoddha¯s*. She even refuses the stretcher that is given to her and gallantly walks to face death (69). Her actions serve to counter the popular notion of superiority of the colonial aggressor based on the strength of their weapons and army personnel. Rasida is tortured and murdered on stage, in full view of the audience. Here, Dutt makes use of the Artaudian premise of the use of violence on stage: it is difficult for the audience to remain nonchalant even after witnessing such brutalities. Additionally, these brutalities aid the dramatist in his design of garnering the audience's unforgiving hatred for the West Pakistani officers.

The other convicts held behind bars struggle to accept the illogical ends that are designed for them. We find each of them reacting differently to their misfortune. The actor Jamini realizes that he has lived a life of narcissism and vanity. His stage success blinded him to his own follies, reducing his real life to a psychological extension of his stage grandeur. His vacuous ego even forbade him from trying to understand and value his beloved Selima. The fear of death breaks the spell of self-obsession and myopia for Jamini. At the end, he tries his best to save the other convicts by (falsely) claiming to be responsible for the murder of the army officer. Though his plan does not succeed, he is able to make some amends for his life of selfishness and lack of concern for others.

Sahabuddin, businessman by profession, has always valued material assets over humanity. He hopes that his large outlay on the jute industry (vital to economic stability of the government) will bail him out at the end. The character remains shorn of morality even as he faces death. He attempts to save himself by accusing Rasida of the "murder". Unlike Rasi-

da's gallantry, he tries to run away from the firing squad, only to be surrounded and captured in a manner that reminds the audience of hunting dogs cornering an animal that is about to be shot dead. Thus, he fails to find respectability in his final moments.

The psychiatrist Dr Anis uz-Zaman examines the "disintegration of psychic standards" in his co-convicts as they face death. The doctor dreams of recognition as a pioneer in the field of neurosis and psychosis. His present state provides him with an opportunity to contribute major case-studies to these fields of medical science. He tries his best to cope with the impact of fear on his mind through his academic exercises. Colonel Waliullah's threats of brutal torture do not affect him. Instead, when the colonel destroys the doctor's academic papers in a fit of anger, Dr Zaman sensitizes the audience to the fear of potential failure that motivates the actions of the West Pakistani army (60-61). However, we need to remember that the doctor's method of combatting fear is essentially selfish. He looks to etch his name forever in the history of medical science, but, unlike Rasida, does not seem invested in the heroic struggle for freedom of his motherland.

The bank employee Hasmat – Jamini's erstwhile romantic rival – turns towards appreciating his competitor's nature. The fear of death seems to have lent him magnanimity as he is able to see the genuine worth in Jamini's selfless attempt to set his co-convicts free. He faces his fate with calmness, denouncing the West Pakistani aggressors with conviction for one final time. We are moved to respect his fortitude. Thus, the minds of each of the characters are impacted differently by the fear of violence, and they devise diverse methods to combat the fear.

The violence presented in *Thika¯na¯* has certain ideological implications too, in the context of the power relationship between oppressor and oppressed. The victims are never given a chance to confront the aggressors on equal terms. The torture sessions are conducted for each of the prisoners separately, where they are held captive. They have little chance of defending themselves, let alone hitting back at the oppressor. Even their death is arranged in a manner that is grossly unfair: each of them must take turns to stand alone in front of a firing squad comprising trained marksmen. The oppressors emphasize this sense of inequality in their violent treatment of the prisoners to re-iterate the hierarchy that exists in the relationship between the West Pakistani army and the Bengali civilian populace. In case such a hierarchy is firmly established in popular imagination, at least a section of the oppressed people may believe it is their immutable fate to be ruled by the oppressive West Pakistani administration.

Conclusion

We have seen in this paper that the representation of violence in Dutt's Marxist theatre helps us understand the complex dynamics of power in society. Nevitt explains:

> Physical violence is a process through which power and powerlessness are inscribed on and through bodies … Part of the spectatorial experience is the realisation of vulnerability … The intention here is to present the attacker(s) as powerful and the spectators (not just the immediate victims) as powerless. (Nevitt 2013, 63)

Representation of gruesome violence does not merely inform us of events around us, but may achieve the greater end of helping the audience come around their disinterestedness. Susan Sontag, discussing the efficacy of images of violence, remarks:

> But they are not much use if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us. (Sontag 2003, 80)

Hartman opines that representation of violence may also serve to facilitate an invisible identification, where the beholder is able to experience some of the atrocities that the victims suffer. Of course, getting raped, whipped or mutilated cannot be compared to the experience of witnessing such acts on stage, but the representation may force the audience into a state of mind where they dwell on the actual consequences that a victim of such crimes is likely to suffer. Hartman explains,

> The grotesqueries enumerated … are intended to shock and to disrupt the reader/spectator. By providing the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence … hoped to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved. The shocking accounts … assault the barrier of indifference, for the abhorrence and indignity roused by these scenes of terror … give rise to a shared sentience between those formerly indifferent and those suffering. (Hartman 17-18)

Though Hartman writes with the backdrop of literary/dramatic representations of slavery in nineteenth-century America, her ideas are equally applicable to representations of violence in other contexts.

Utpal Dutt was squarely opposed to the notion of nonviolence, and attempted to reiterate the history of our blood-stained strife for independence:

> And yet non-violence must be paraded as typically Indian. To spread a smoke-screen over the appalling violence of the Indian bourgeoisie and landlords, and also to disarm the masses so that they do not resist, do not revolt, do not take up arms. It is one of the ideological weapons of the ruling class to enslave the minds of men.
>
> The political theatre in this country was supposed to retaliate with dozens of historical plays, rediscovering the history of armed struggles against imperialism. (Dutt 1988, 11-14)

He explained his ideas further:

> They [the Indian ruling class] are trying to use this synthetic godhead [the Gandhian legacy of nonviolence] to break the back of the people's resistance, to alienate the people from their own martial traditions. It is a measure of their success that, in a country of Sikhs, Dogras, Rajputs, Garwalis, Purbis, Marathas, Santals, Oraons, Mundas – people who have throughout history preferred death in battle to slavery – the ruling class has managed to convince a large section of the people that submission is virtue, that to take up arms is a sin, to trust to fate is religion, that illiteracy and ignorance are bliss. (Dutt 2005, 124)

Though there is no direct evidence to suggest that Dutt's use of violence was inspired by the manner in which Artaud attempted to theorize violence in his Theatre of Cruelty manifestoes, we may argue that the Indian dramatist used violence in his Marxist theatre to achieve an objective that was not dissimilar to his French predecessor. As argued in this paper, in spite of stylistic differences, both Artaud and Dutt sought to use violence to awaken the conscience of their audience.

Notes:

- Dutt made a four-part television series ("In Search of Theatre") as an initiation into the Indian theatre movement. However, his objective was impeded by the Doordarshan authorities, who decided that the concluding part of the series ("Violence in the Arts") was not suitable to be telecast on national television. In the fourth part, Dutt discusses the justification for violence in theatre. Interested researchers may access "In Search of Theatre" at the archives of the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Kolkata.

- Dutt prepared an English translation called *Invincible Vietnam* (*Epic Theatre*, no. 4, October 1967, 1-40).

- All necessary translations of primary and secondary material in Bengali used in this essay are done by me.

- Chapa – one of the native women – points out that Brandon treats even his mistress with greater respect than the Indian men accord to their wives. Refer Dutt's *Nātak Samagra*, vol. 6 (Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh, 1999), 337.

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