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## Deconstructing the Absurd: Violence, Ideology and Othering in Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*

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### Abstract:

Absurd undertones in Badal Sircar's work may share thematic threads with Western playwrights, however the distinct realities of culture, aspirations, and societal conditions profoundly shape his exploration of "being" and the human condition. This paper delves into Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* (1974) to explore the pivotal point where characters grapple with the dissonance between their internal world and external reality. Through this analysis, the paper will investigate the ontological position of violence and how it is furthered in the socio-political discourse to examine how societal structures contribute to the construction of the self, shaping it as a product of violence and potentially perpetuating that cycle. The analysis also draws upon specific concepts from existential philosophy, particularly of Jean-Paul Sartre's, alongside Slavoj Žižek's understanding of ideology and the human condition in the modern era.

**Keywords:** Absurd, Being, Violence, Existential, Ideology.

The cat's universe is not the universe of the anthill

-Albert Camus

Albert Camus, in his seminal work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), tries to showcase a fallacy in human perception and that "the universe of the cat is not the universe of the anthill," firstly because the cat's perception of the universe differs from that of the anthill, and vice

versa; secondly, the human mind ultimately describes both their universes. Therefore, the knowledge presented in this context is both absurd and limited. The thought underlying the above quote extends beyond merely emphasizing human subjectivity and perception. It suggests an unfathomable human urge to seize, an impulse to seek a solid proof of the meaning of human existence, a belief that everything belongs to a single reason, a single answer to the daily hustle, pain, and destruction of past and future centuries, and an ultimate clarity to escape the dreary absurd. The ultimate truism of the above quote is thus the ultimate truism of the idea of absurdity.

Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* showcases the ultimate futility of assertion and establishes the problem of suicide as the most primordial and philosophical. "The literal meaning of life is whatever you are doing that prevents you from killing" not only exposes the hidden absurd but also the hidden violence behind this absurd and how at this conjuncture of life and death (the two extremities of human fate), violence remains a force consciously, unconsciously manifested in human discourse.

Badal Sircar's play *Evam Indrajit* (1974) comes across as an existential philosophical inquiry into 'being'. Like many playwrights of the Western canon, he explored the dreary and monotonous nature of life, contextualized in an Indian middle-class setting. Badal Sircar's work draws direct inspiration from movements across western societies, be it the absurdist movement or Jerzy Grotowski's poor theatre, where language ceased to be effective. Absurd theatre, in particular, is an anti-language model that makes people look, hear, and feel beyond the spoken words. In fact, the reader often encounters words as they confront the world, necessitating that they articulate and comprehend them. Despite this thematic overlap, Badal Sircar's exploration of 'being' is unique, with a rich tapestry of Indian sensibilities and the bourgeois aspirations of post-colonial Bengali society.

This paper delves into Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* to explore the pivotal point where characters grapple with the dissonance between their internal world and external reality. The paper will investigate the ontological position of violence and how it is furthered in the socio-political discourse in Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*, to examine how societal structures and forces contribute to the construction of the self, shaping it as a product of violence and potentially perpetuating that cycle. The paper is also an attempt to see how the inherent violent structures weave the existential self into the human subject. The analysis draws upon specific

concepts from existential philosophy, particularly of Jean-Paul Sartre's, alongside Slavoj Žižek's understanding of ideology and the human condition in the modern era.

The plays *Evam Indrajit* (1974) and *Baki Itihaas* (1973) by Badal Sircar begin with the same pronouncement of writer's block. It stands for a state that denotes a disquieting sensation about the present state of knowledge and a desire to know more, that eventually reveals the circumstances of the depth of "being." Particularly, *Evam Indrajit* adopts a nontraditional dramatic arc that is reminiscent of Beckett and Pinter's absurdist sensibility. The play's writer has few options because of the monotony he observes around him, but he steadfastly swears to pursue a possibility that he still believes exists. Through the condition of writer's block, Sircar is trying to create a much more profound and nuanced existential metaphor, portraying a futile human urge to find meaning in a world that is inherently devoid of it. Sircar's deft use of this condition prompts the reader to contemplate the fundamental aspects of being- in-the-world and the suffering that comes along with it.

This sense of unfamiliarity with the given becomes a symptom of the existential crisis as the writer struggles to write, "What shall I write? Who shall I write about? How many people do I know? And what do I know about them?" (Sirdar 3). Suddenly one feels strange, unsettled and "nauseous," as Jean Paul Sartre puts it. This recurring feeling of revulsion, alienation and disorientation prompts deep existential propounding often causing people to re-examine their identities and relationships in a tumultuous society.

Violence as a phenomenon can be understood through the classic philosophical dichotomy between individuals and society. Almost every philosopher, from Socrates, Plato, Hobbes, Locke to Rousseau, and others, has their comments on this paradoxality: a person's personal 'being' versus an objective system outside him. Tony Stigliano's in his article "Jean Paul Sartre on Understanding Violence," explains this paradoxality and talks about how people exist within social frameworks as it is absurd for people, who have "actively and concretely thought about and imagined" their goals and plans, only to come up against "a mechanical boundary, the material world, which is unassimilable, even unintelligible" (Stigliano 57) . This conflict serves as basis to understand the complexity of how violence manifest itself in the play.

As the plot of the play moves forward, the writer picks up four characters from the audience in the hope of cultivating a thought worthy of being woven into the story of a play

with supposed interesting characters breathing an interesting life into the story. The names of the characters picked up turn out to be bogusly lyrical: Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal, to the extent that it makes the writer question the authenticity of the name of the fourth character "Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Nirmal? No, it can't be. You must have another name. You have to have. Tell me truly, what's your name?" (Sircar 4). The writer questions if these characters are even real or just figments of his own imagination. The names of the chosen characters amplify the sense of monotony and confinement that pervades his existence. The author is unable to distinguish between reality and their own poetic reflections as they introduce the characters into the narrative. This deliberate blending of the two elements serves to question the author's own understanding of the world.

Nirmal hides his identity in the first place because he believes "one invites unrest by breaking the norm," but soon reveals his true identity as Indrajit. Breaking the norm again alludes to the fact that human beings are not just rational beings but relational beings who exist in relation to the 'other'. Indrajit's dilemma not only displays a dilemma of an individual with society but also of a self with the 'other'. Sartre, in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), defines social relations in terms of individual versus collective dialectics. Sartre presents an analogy of people who, in the "ordinariness of everyday life," await the arrival of a bus at the bus stop. Despite their individual lives and thoughts, these people seem to share a common interest, despite not sharing the same age, sex, class, or social milieu, and without any interest in getting to know each other. In fact, the whole effort is not to interact at all or minimize it to a level that the integrity of the common goal (which is perhaps to reach a destination in this case) is not compromised. Sartre very interestingly points out through this analysis that subjectivity, isolation, and alienation can never exist irrespective of a structure. He says:

In other words, the isolation of the organism, as the impossibility of uniting with Others in an organic totality, is revealed through the isolation which everyone lives as the provisional negation of their reciprocal relations with Others. This man is isolated not only by his body as such, but also by the fact that he turns his back on his neighbor - who, moreover, has not even noticed him (or has encountered him in his practical field as a general individual defined by waiting for the bus) (Sartre 256).

Does the way people's interests depend on each other hold the key to understanding violence? Are the questions: Who am I? What am I here for—a confrontation with this 'Other'? This 'Other' doesn't necessarily refer to the other person, but rather to everything that exists in

reality or imagination and poses a threat to one's survival, sometimes manifesting as one's own 'Otherness', as in the case of Indrajit, who has a complex relationship with his own 'Otherness', Nirmal, a worldly project. One cannot understand Indrajit's sense of self, his pursuit of freedom, and his unadulterated persuasions without considering their situatedness.

The portrayal of the two women characters in the play is also remarkably symbolic. Mother's or Aunti's character only appear to ask the writer or Indrajit to eat food, limiting her character just to be the reminder of the primary fulfillments of life. But there seems to be more about the mother than just this. Simone De Beauvoir in her seminal work *Second Sex* (1949) examines gender as a social construct. She emphasizes a need to understand gender in its situatedness, as the term only appears as a reality in a structured world and not in some metaphysical plane. Beauvoir defines gender and understands a woman's position through existential ethics and phenomenology and therefore explicates that being a woman is a matter of one's actions in the world, their choices, social positions and experiences in the world rather than an eternal biological construct. Being ignorant of a society regulated by gender roles and defined by the gender construct, is nothing but fleeing the social conditions as human beings. The character of the mother has been showcased as an inessential part of social political milieu, who has lost her subjectivity in a well-constructed structure of middle class Bengali society, limiting herself to a role.

Manasi represents various women placed in different locales, performing different roles throughout the play. At the beginning, she plays an inquisitive girl who encourages the writer to pursue his literary output. Later, she takes on the role of Indrajit's cousin, captivated by his alluring promise of a life unencumbered by societal norms. She encourages Indrajit to think freely and dream freely, but subconsciously, she abides by the norm.

Manasi embodies a perpetual struggle. Manasi's multitude of possibilities depict her ultimate conflict with the 'Other', as a woman, a wife, a daughter, and most importantly, as a human being. Manasi showcases the fundamental human experience of existing within and for society—the most profound struggle of being human. Manasi, in several roles, seems to be born out of a different scarcity of experience, dreams, desires, and projections of life. Readers' perceptions of Manasi also change depending on how people imagine her to be. She is therefore also a reflection of the 'other', encompassing several possibilities. She is the writer's inspiration, a challenge to Indrajit, and a prototype of a typical wife who slips into "the nondescript positions of womanhood in the play, claiming modesty, foolishness, and ignorance as their

nature in spite of their insightful words" for Amal, Kamal, and Vimal (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta 53).

In the very beginning, Manasi's life seems to be "an audacious assertion of life," burning with a vivacious will to live. However, it later turns out to be a meaningless projection of the roles of womanhood, where life merely showcases the trails of time as the years pass by. In *Reflections and Responses to Badal Sircar's Evam Indrajit* (2022), Sourav Chattopadhyay and Sohini Sengupta reflect upon these varied identities of Manasi, plunged into worldliness, and admit that "while there is distinct individuality in each Manasi, after a point it becomes difficult to tell which Manasi she is. The play, in a sense, examines how social perception and others' imagination shape Manasi, or the woman herself (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta 53).

Manasi and Indrajit continuously shape each other. Their relationship mirrors the paradoxes of romantic relationships. "An immortal dramatic theme," as the writer proclaims (Sircar 16), where, on the one hand, synthetic fusion of the two is the ultimate goal and the impossibility of a unified consciousness on the other. Therefore, the portrayal depicts a genuine conflict in which love is both a constant pursuit and an occasional impossibility. Their conflict highlights the contradictions between what one assumes a romantic relationship to be and the innate conflict with the 'other'. On the one hand, the 'other' is the ultimate basis of one's being, constantly creating one's self-identity; on the other, it is capable of destroying subjectivity with just one look. In Badal Sircar's play, love is therefore a rebellion, a seeking, and a continuous hustle. At the same time, marriage is quite an antithesis, a commitment, a secured idea, a mere optic for the public eye.

Sartre's foregrounding work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is one of the greatest philosophical works of the twentieth century, in which he talks about "look" or "gaze," a constant presence of the other, altering, manipulating, and influencing one's sense of self and the world around. If human beings are most certain about anything, it is perhaps their sense of being, existence, and sense of 'I'; it is 'I' who thinks, it is 'I' who assumes, and it is 'I' who experiences. This sense always conflicts the 'Other', another free subject who assumes a similar sense of agency. Therefore, according to Sartre, this world is a projection of numerous free subjects and struggling consciousness. When the 'Other' exerts a look, it makes one lose their agency of being able to exist as a free subject. It starts a struggle to regain the lost subjectivity by trying and making the 'Other' turn into an object as well "the Other cannot look at me as he looks at the grass" (Sartre 222). Therefore, this ongoing struggle condemns man to

a short-lived, temporary victory, often achieved through the entrapment of free will through ideology, fundamentalism, and the imposition of multiple fixed identities, as exemplified by the characters in the play.

Amal, Kamal, and Vimal are embodiments of fixed identities, as everything in their world is devoid of substance and possibilities. Their names suggest a very generic, interchangeable, singular identity, limiting the possibility of an existential 'Other'. Amal is the epitome of a typical Bengali middle-class man who is much invested in Western culture, films, and literature. He appears to be driven by an aspirational force framed by a narrative where the grass is always greener on the other side and everything is yet to be achieved. His life is a typical representation of the "object-dominated world of acting individuals governed by need and threatened by others" (Stigliano 58).

AMAL. What are you asking? This is the day of the Madrassesees, We Bengalis will die at the hands of other Bengalis. Actually it's all my fault. I had an offer from P.Q.R. Company. Didn't take it. Thought I should get promotion in my office—so why go? What's the point? I'm fed up with life (Sircar 42)

Violence here cannot be understood as a disruption of the natural state of things but rather as a pervasive force that shapes the lives of the characters, who conform to predefined roles and are obsessed with owning a home, making a career, and getting promotions in life, perpetuating an unending cycle of discontentment, relocation, continued dissatisfaction, aspirations for tremendous success, and subsequent relocation. For all three characters, Amal, Kamal, and Vimal, the present is a time of anticipation, whereas the future is a time for actively experiencing life, which eventually never comes. Amal is also highly disillusioned with reality, as he believes "literature should embody all that's true, good, and beautiful. It has nothing to do with politics. Politics is dirty (Sircar 9). He is unable to perceive a world beyond his own, where ideology and systematic evil permeate the system at every step.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is known for his indubitable commentary on the nature of ideology. In his *Six Sideways reflections on Violence* (2007), he talks about "systemic violence," which he considers "catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political system" (Žižek 2). Žižek communicates his philosophy in a unique and provocative style that aligns with his philosophy's purpose of disorienting people and shaking



them out of a dogmatic slumber where they have internalized ideology to such an extent that they no longer truly consider the thought behind anything.

Amal, Kamal, and Vimal play several parts throughout the play, from being college professors and board members of the interview panel to playing themselves. The characters swiftly transition between roles, to convey the ideological constraints of different people in different roles. Characters in various roles appear to be ideologues, people who are not ready to change their minds about anything. Their education, class consciousness, political stance, and economic mindset seem to have influenced their worldview, which has become permanent and unmovable. These are people who have pretended to have found the truth, the ultimate gospel, and they have decided to spend the rest of their lives as ideologues and fundamentalists, discouraging the process of social and ethical progress.

AMAL. Plutocracy-monarchy-democracy.

WRITER. They are Amal, Vimal, and Kamal.

VIMAL. Imperialism, fascism, marxism.

KAMAL. Economics, politics, sociology.

AMAL. Quotations, tender, statement.

VIMAL. Report, minutes, budget.

KAMAL. Meeting, committee, conference.

AMAL. Civilization, education, culture.

VIMAL. Literature, philosophy, history? (Sircar 53)

This conversation, and the baggage that each term conveys above, is to understand that ideology doesn't really harness the truth or complete reality of the world around. It is an incomplete explanation under a structured framework that caters to symbolic ways to understand complex realities. People associate with these symbols and feel so aligned that eventually, an identical narrative starts to shape the whole society and its worldview.

Vimal, too, is a caricature of such a society. He represents the “intellectual minority” in the Bengali middle class, who have typical interests in literature and politics and have larger-than-life ideas but still succumb to the mundane in their own way. “Kamal. Do they ask technical questions? Vimal. Not very. Actually, it’s not the answer that matters. It’s the way you answer” (Sircar 26). Vimal’s pursuit remains largely theoretical, with just words floating in the air where what matters is a mere projection, the exterior. Vimal is among those who have the curiosity and the right questions to ask, but are too comfortable asking them. This again alludes to the conflict between a sense of individuality and complacency in a society that often stifles subjectivity and expression, the only difference being that some accept and succumb to their facticity forever while others struggle to keep transcending and becoming like Indrajit.

Zizek’s thoughts correspond with some aspects of existentialist thinking, or at least have some common inspiration in their origin. In *Interrogating the Real* (2005), Zizek maintains that human subjectivity centres on the validation of the ‘Other’: “I desire an object only insofar as it is desired by the other”(Zizek 42). In other words, subjectivity is also consistently ruled or overruled by the ‘Other’, sometimes being a byproduct of a shared ideology. Throughout the play, the ideology functions to create a symbolic order. Amal, Kamal, Vimal do not seem to live life beyond their functionality in the social set up.

Kamal similarly comes across as a character with his own baggage of inferiority and ideology. Despite coming from a lower socioeconomic background than others, his complexity drives him to such an extent that it nearly blinds and bitterly permeates his perception of others. His desperate attempts to climb up only encircle him more and more, and he never manages to perceive himself beyond his functionality. Amal, Kamal, and Vimal are synchronized to a level of terror, and images of their lives shown through the different stages of education, career, and marriage are only a montage of life that is tiresome and repetitive. Slavoj Zizek in *Six Sideways reflections on Violence* distinguishes subjective violence and systemic violence. Subjective violence is a kind of violence that can be attributed to a particular group or individual, however systemic violence is a form of violence inherited from the very system and is often normalized through ideology. Systemic violence, therefore, according to Zizek, is a mystified and dark matter (Zizek 2). The capitalistic, cutthroat, competitive world showcased in the play keeps the violence hidden and the system afloat.

Indrajit stands out and is throughout driven by the desire for two extremities, as he exclaims, "I can't help it. But there are times when I think life is vast, when I forget how

ephemeral my life is in the total flow of time—a mere second. I forget that my existence is a pointless particle of dust. I start believing that nothing is more valuable than my life in the world” (Sircar 41). Existentialism centres around this fundamental human condition, grappling with overwhelming freedom on the one hand and sacrificing alternative possibilities on the other, dictated by societal expectations. Thus, a dilemma distinguishes Indrajit and paradoxically alienates him: “But it’s not enough! It’s the gift of the tree of knowledge. The starlit sky confuses everything. It confuses every little thing” (Sircar 41). Indrajit feels misunderstood. As he attempts to express his anxieties, he consistently encounters dismissal. While Amal, Kamal, and Vimal exist passively as ‘being-in-itself’ in Sartrean terms, denying their facticity and existing as disembodied minds, Indrajit affirms his facticity, tries to defy it, and yearns to live ‘being-for-oneself’, consistently transforming and surpassing his facticity into transcendence but fails and fails miserably. After all, “he knows too much—altogether too much,” (50) but therefore suffers indecision to the extent that his mind constantly battles a distant dream; the more he dreams, the more distant it looks.

Meaningful is the search embedded in the “round and round and not dying” (Sircar 50) circular motion of the life of the characters, but ironically, it is in this life that the meaningful also gets lost as the facticity of life, material conditions, gender equations, and ideological stances become the end in themselves and what once appeared to one as a solid basis of existence only exhibits death in life as in the case of all the characters and apparently Indrajit:

That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia’s existence does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied. For if, bridging the gulf that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (whatever it may be), we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve ( Camus 13).

Indrajit is asking improbable questions in a world of highly probable sets of questions and interpretations. He asks, “But why? Why? Why? The same old road... I walk and walk and walk and walk. Keep on walking. And yet, is there no escape?” (Sircar 55). The reason he is able to pose such questions even in the midst of a dull and mundane life lies at the very heart of the choices one can possibly imagine and seek. What sets Indrajit apart is his anxiety, which serves as the foundation for all his existential musings. Nevertheless there is a remarkable

difference between Albert Camus' absurd hero Sisyphus and Indrajit. Camus describes Sisyphus as a:

A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock (Camus 77).

Indrajit however finds disillusionment in the concrete rather than finding meaning in the act of rebellion itself. This sense of concreteness obscures the true nature of the problem by limiting the possibilities of the choices one is able to make. As a result, Indrajit becomes as much part of the shared ideology as Amal, Kamal, and Vimal, consistently driven by the same limitations that dictate their sense of interpreting reality and perception of the world.

Violence can be seen as a human condition with its immense capability to denunciate the 'Other', sometimes one's true authentic self, vis-à-vis its interpellation and furthering in the socio-political realm, fueled by scarcity and maintained by power structures. One generally perceives violence as a phenomenon visible to the naked eye, still it is rather symbolically embedded in human life, so much so that often it is served to man as a promise of life. Amal, Kamal, and Vimal come from different backgrounds and are a product of their circumstances, but not once in life do they try to rise above the given; there is no aspiration as such. They do not know the alternative way of thinking, living, and being other than subdued by ideological constraints.

Indrajit, on the other hand, is a highly conscious man who suffers from inaction. He even contemplates suicide and reaches the peak of existential anguish. "I'd jump off, run, or at least fall under it. Do something. But nothing happens. That's because no train operates on those rails. I have found that out. Sometimes I think..." (Sircar 55). Albert Camus views suicide as the most fundamental question. He believes that people frequently ask the question of whether life is worth living and what it means to be human. However, they often escape from their human condition, aiming for a totality of being that must always be achieved, and in doing so, fail to understand that their power lies in their ability to witness the horrors of history, the monotony of life, and the meaninglessness of pursuits, along with the hopeful individual

constantly making himself, which brings one back to the thought with which the paper began "The cat's universe is not the universe of the anthill". Man searches for meaning in every place but falls prey to stagnant ideas. The more he struggles for recognition, the more he feels alienated, only to realize that he is not the measure of all things. As far as it is difficult for a cat to comprehend anything about the ant's world, it's almost impossible for a man to step out completely from his perception of the world; therefore, he has all the more reasons to analyze his perception and his ideas and continue to think and act upon his version of reality through contemplation, choice and critical thinking, as the writer says. "We must live." We must walk. We know no sacred places. Yet we must go on with the pilgrimage; there's no respite" (Sircar 60).

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