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Situating *Chhenra Tar* in the Theatre of the Bengal Famine: A Study of the Structural Elements of the Play

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Abstract

The decade of the 1940s saw a renewal of the theatre space with the People's Theatre Movement which embraced Social Realism. The output of this period reflected the political awareness of the authors. They sought to expose colonial exploitation, support freedom movements, social reform and represent the horrors of the famine of 1943 which was a disastrous consequence of the colonial policies during the Second World War. Tulsi Lahiri, an actor, musician and playwright represented the famine and its impact on rural Bengal in his most successful play, *Chhenra Tar*. This article analyses the development of the plot, themes and characters. It examines the form and structure and explores the use of motifs, symbols, language and music to achieve specific effects in the play. It finally seeks to situate Lahiri as an innovative playwright in his contemporary literary horizon.

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The 1940s was a tumultuous decade in India in terms of political, social, and economic developments. It was a decade of multiple freedom movements, riots, partition, and eventually independence. The Empire engaged in the Second World War with the resources from the colony. The scarcity induced by the War aggravated the long-term agrarian crisis that Bengal was already facing, into a massive famine. The Bengal Famine of 1943 was a culmination of several factors. There were several droughts and floods, a devastating cyclone that affected Midnapore, a scarcity of basic necessities, and inflation which resulted in the failure of exchange entitlements. A large amount of stock was procured by the government for the War. Due to the fear of Japanese invasion the colonial government's boat denial and scorched earth policies destroyed grains and created a huge gap in the supply chain which spiked hoarding and black marketing activities. The news reports about the approaching famine were suppressed and the government showed complete apathy in dealing with it. Corruption of the bureaucracy and the refusal of political parties to work together failed the Bengal Assembly's influence on the War Cabinet's decision-making. The anti-hoarding drives were hugely unsuccessful. The relief activity started but it was too little, too late. Almost 3 million people had died from starvation and the ensuing epidemic by 1944. The mortality rate concentrated on poor peasants, sharecroppers, and fishermen of rural Bengal. A lot of them migrated to the city. This widespread corruption, decrepitude, and moral degeneration disintegrated the fabric of society. This picture of desolation, destitution, and death was reflected in the literature and arts produced at the time.

The literature and arts shifted from the influence of High Modernism of the 1920s and mid-30s, which looked inside the human psyche and was involved in exploring the inner



workings of a mind, to Social Realism which focused more on social issues—portraying human life as a struggle for existence, a struggle within the binds of civilization, its norms, hierarchy, customs and morality. This change in content is also reflected in the heavy experimentations on forms and techniques which Sourit Bhattacharya classifies as ‘disaster realism’ (78). This was born out of the effort to create something new that could contain and portray the immense suffering, corruption, exploitation, desensitization, apathy, and breakdown of society during the famine. Many writers were part of literary organizations and theatre groups that were openly communist or left-leaning, resulting in the production of art and literature that were progressive and sometimes propagandist. On 25 May 1943, the Indian People’s Theatre Association was founded, which started a new era of theatre in India as well as Bengal.

Tulsi Lahiri as a playwright has always been empathetic towards the plight of the poor marginalized communities, his writing is deeply connected to their environment, customs, and dialect. In his objective, he has been close to the people's theatre movement. He wrote to present a truthful portrayal of the life of the distressed to raise awareness and establish social justice. He wrote to capture the horror of disaster, to question its sources, to show its consequences and to situate it in its historical background. Lahiri writes in his preface to *Banglar Mati*, a play, “নাটকের সার্থকতা নির্ভর করে নাট্যকারের এসব সৃষ্টিবিন্যাস ও ব্যঞ্জনা শক্তির উপর। ... আজকের যুগে সামাজিক, অর্থনৈতিক, রাষ্ট্রনৈতিক, প্রভৃতি সব কিছু সমস্যাই যেন জড়িয়ে গেছে। এর যে কোনও একটা ধরে টানলেই অপরগুলি এত স্বাভাবিক ভাবে, সজোরে, সবেগে এসে দাড়ায় যে তাদের এড়িয়ে চলা অসম্ভব।” “the success of a playwright depends on the play's structure and allusive power. . . .



In today's world, the social, economic, and political issues are intertwined. If you discuss one, the others come naturally” (2-3).

Lahiri's *Chhenra Tar* portrays the story of the famine's arrival, its peak, and aftermath centering a poor peasant family in a village in the north-eastern part of Bengal. It features a mingling of social realism, historical analysis, and the already existing individualistic, idealistic theatrical tradition of Bengal. Sourit Bhattacharya writes, “The writers of the Bengal famine seem to have this understanding in mind in their use of form and mode, which range from journalistic reportage, gothic horror, melodrama, satire, irony, and historical analyses, and through which the conjunctural nature of famine is presented” (47). Lahiri chose to show the social and moral degradation through the suffering of a single poor Muslim family. Its format is similar to the domestic tragedy that the Bengali audience was familiar with, but it went far and beyond to highlight the underlying historical, social, and political issues that caused the tragedy. The episodic nature of the play is useful in covering a large time frame. It is a 3-act play, each act contains three scenes. The first act covers the backdrop of the famine, the Second World War, and character introduction; the second act covers the height of the famine, starvation, and hopelessness; the third act contains the aftermath of the famine. The action of the plot is well distributed throughout the acts.

The first scene begins with a picture-perfect domestic household of Mahim, a childhood friend of Rahim, the protagonist. The thematic concern of Rahim's peasant identity is highlighted here. Mahim's son Bhavesh says to his sister, “My dear modern Lady, চাষা কথাটা কিন্তু মোটেই গালাগাল নয়। এই চাষারা না থাকলে যে তোমাদের fashion, culture, refinement,



sophisticism কিছু থাকত না।” “My dear modern lady, the word peasant is not at all a profanity.

If it were not for them, your fashion, culture, refinements, sophistication –nothing would exist.” (32). This is reiterated later by Mahim, who despite being the Deputy Director of Agriculture, considered himself the same as any peasant. Rahim's tired and dull spirit is reinvigorated by Mahim's respectful and encouraging words, “নিজের মেহনতে পয়দা ক'রে নিজে খাচ্ছিস, আর দশজনকে খাওয়াচ্ছিস তুই। দুনিয়ার অন্নদাতা তোরা। তোরা কি ছোট রে।” “it is by your own efforts you produce and provide for the world. You can never be unworthy.” (34). The next scene jumps straight into the immediacy of fund-gathering from poor villagers for the Second World War. The fear-mongering of the Japanese invasion by the collector and Joatdar Hakimuddin is met with hilarity and ominous warnings. The long comic exchange between Hakimuddin and his servant Kukra is placed here wisely by Lahiri to tune the audience's response to the antagonist. His villainy induces disgust, not fear. It is a testament to the exploration of the character later in the play – he is a fraud and a hypocrite with too much power. He is jealous of Rahim for spending his hard-earned money on his hobbies and family and he is angry that Rahim can see his true self right through the pious facade. The conflict between Rahim and Hakimuddin is also a conflict between two classes. The support that Rahim receives from villagers upon standing against Hakimuddin and his fraudulent money-lending activities tells us that no one is blind. They are aware of the marginalization and exploitation. What they lack is leadership, which Rahim fulfills. The anger of Hakimuddin prompts the main action of the third scene where Rahim is accused of theft by Hakimuddin to exact revenge. But before this, Lahiri sets up a picture of domestic bliss. Rahim's wife Phuljan is regarded as a companion for life by him. He truly believes in bettering her as well



as himself. He is seen sharing all of his ideas, progressive values, and interests with great gentleness. The portrayal of affection and love evident in their exchange is necessary for the impact of the play. When Rahim is informed that he is accused of theft, he tells his friend Srimanto, “গেরামের কয়টা ধনী আছে রে? পাঁচটা-দশটা ? উয়ারা তামাম গরীবগুলোকে মারি ফালাইবে ?... সব গরীব যদি একঠে হয় মাইরবার পারবে?” “How many rich people are there in the village - five? ten?

Would they destroy all the poor people?... Can they destroy us if we stand together?” (57). In his conversation with Gobindo, Rahim gets at the root of Hakimuddin’s parasitic existence –

“দুইটা মাইনষের খাটনী খাটিয়া উজাইতে মোর বিশটা বছর গেল। উয়ার চতুর পাকে কাম চোড়া চাকর। নিজ হাতে অ্যয় কিছুই করে না। উয়ার এত টাকা আইসে ক্যামন করি ? উয়ার টাকা ভাই অন্ধকারে আইসে যায়; আলো চলে না।”

“It took me the work of two people for twenty years to get by. He is surrounded by those good-for-nothing knaves, and doesn't earn anything by himself. Where does all that money come from? The money flows in the dark, out of the reach of light.” (54). With this knowledge, Gobindo is worried about his friend getting into legal trouble in an unjust system— “আরে ভাই ! ঐ শয়তানগুলার হাতে যে টাকা --- তারে হাতে ফির হাকিম-হুজুর উপরিওয়ালা। সেগুলো যে খালি ঠকের কথা মানে। গরীবগুলার বুদ্ধি কি?” “Oh my brother! The money these devils have - the judges and officers are under their control. They just stand by those fraudsters, what would the poor folks do?” (56). However, it is shown that Rahim, with his intelligence and honesty is able to handle the accusation with transparency and rationality.

The first scene of the second act begins with the ominous news of advancing famine in Hakimuddin’s discussion with his subordinates. This scene shows how Hakimuddin



mobilizes his underlings into action and the perpetual game he plays with them. His mask never comes off in front of them. He doesn't dirty his hands so that he can deny involvement in crimes and shift the blame to someone else. He plans to loan off his stock at an exorbitant interest rate to the peasants because of the fear of it being seized by the government at a low price. In the second scene, Lahiri describes the terrible suffering brought by the famine. The death toll rises from starvation. We are informed that Rahim's mother has died. The loaned paddy is finished, and all stocks have been seized by the government. The political leaders are in jail. People are now selling their wives and children. All the land has gone to Joatdars, and Hakimuddin has taken Rahim's land. The hungry mob of many villages gathers to make a plan of action. They decide to loot the houses of the rich folks. But Rahim discourages them from doing so, "এক দিনের লুটে ৩৬০ দিন প্যাট চলেনা" "because a day's loot cannot sustain the hunger of 360 days" (80). There is no reason to become an animal because even then survival is not guaranteed. He tells them to appeal to the government for relief kitchens together because they are taxpayers, they fund the war, and they have every right to demand so. In the third scene of the second act, Rahim is unable to tolerate the starving face of his son, Bachir. Lahiri shows the vulnerability and hopelessness of a husband and a father unable to provide for his dear ones. Rahim laments, "দুনিয়া মোক জানোয়ার বানাইবার চায় কিন্তুক মুই জানোয়ার হবারে নই। জানোয়ার নিজে নিজে মইরবারে পারে না, কিন্তুক মাইনষে তো পারে।" "The world wants to make me an animal, but I will not become one. An animal cannot take its own life, but a human being can!" (88). Lahiri builds the climax of this Act little by little. Phuljan convinces Rahim to let her take Bachir to Hakimuddin's relief kitchen. Her eventual return because she is denied food throws Rahim into a fit of rage. The entirety of the scene progresses fast with action



after action that is essential to drive the plot. In this scene Rahim divorces Phuljan, however, this impossible action is justified by well-placed plot points that string the scene with heightened emotion. The intense melodrama is brought about by Hakimuddin's animosity to deprive them of food with the help of a legal loophole— Rahim pays Chaukidari Tax, and his family is not eligible for relief. In the heat of the moment, he decides to divorce her so that she is no longer refused relief. He takes Bachir with him to the city with a promise to return after two months. To Rahim, it is an act of granting freedom to his wife so that she can live, but in reality, it is the breakdown of a family, the guilt and consequences of which all of them have to suffer later.

The third act takes place four months later. Rahim had come to the city with Bachir and Mahim had helped him get a job. Lahiri had already established Mahim's character as a friend and a mentor to Rahim. Here he convinces him to return to the village and reunite the sick Bachir with his mother. This scene engages in a deep discussion about religious precepts and their rigidity, about customs, and humanity. It foreshadows that religion will later be used as a tool to keep Rahim and Phuljan separated. The second scene is set in a hopeful tone. The famine has subsided and people are returning to the village once again. Friends are reunited, and the grief of loss is veiled by the optimism for a new beginning. It is a masterful interlude much needed after scenes of heightened tension. But it is also placed here to falsely convince the audience that the ending will soon resolve all problems and the status quo will return, as Rahim's friends prepare for their reunion. The final scene of the play is the anxious arrangement of remarriage. It is a race against time as Bachir's condition worsens. According to the holy Hadith, one can only remarry a divorced wife after she has married and divorced



someone else. The entire village supports the reunion and has already hired Kana Fakir, a fraud and an addict, to marry Phuljan, so that she can marry Rahim again. But Hakimuddin becomes an impediment. He had already convinced Phuljan that even coming to her husband's house to meet her sick son would be against Hadith. The marriage is set at night, and everything is prepared but Rahim realizes what a dishonour it would be for Phuljan to marry someone like Kana Fakir. Despite the threat of disobedience, Rahim goes to fetch Phuljan, finally declaring to Hakimuddin – “তোমার হদীজ ধরি তুমি বেহেস্তে যান মুই খেলাপ করি

জাহান্নমে যামো।” “You go to Heaven with your Hadith, I will disobey and go to Hell.” (116).

Phuljan is reunited with her son, but her values contradict Rahim. Rahim apologises to her, and tells her that they can run away from here and begin life somewhere else, but her refusal to even enter Rahim's house and talk to him for the fear of sinning is the final blow to his hope. He questions her, “যে মানুষটা একটা মুখের কথা থাকি বাঁচে, তার জীউটা দুই পায়ে খেঁৎলাইলে হদীজ খেলাপ হয় না---না?” “A man who can live with just a word from you, to crush his heart and soul is not a sin?” (119). He addresses her, “শুনি রাখ। এইটাই তোর ঘর। তোর ছাওয়াল নিয়া তুই এইঠেই

থাকবু। মোর ভুলে এত দুঃখ পালু। মাসুল-খেশারৎ যা দেওয়া নাগে মুই দেমো---হা আল্লা---” “Listen [Phuljan].

This is your home, you will stay here with your son. You suffered so much because of me. I will recompense if there is a need for any—Oh God!” (118). Rahim had wished that she would realise that the merciful God in Heaven would know their heart and forgive them. When she couldn't, he refuses to dishonour and punish her any further. Rahim ends his life so that Phuljan can be established at his house legally as the mother of Bachir, and have a safe place



to stay. Rahim's death pushes the villagers to the edge. They realize that Hakimuddin must not go unpunished for his crimes, and they decide to kill him.

Lahiri's use of melodrama and analytical accounts of history make it individualistic, but at the same time concerned with questions of community and the larger society. The melodrama highlights the individual tragedy and the analytical accounts interjected in the scenes try to portray a comprehensive picture of the consequences of war, famine, destruction, and degeneration. Lahiri uses leitmotifs, symbols, and irony to produce the necessary dramatic effect. Often the names of characters are imbued with symbolism and irony. The name Hakimuddin, derived from the Arabic 'haquim' means wise, healer, ruler, and authoritative. In the play, Hakimuddin may be a person in power but not a wise healer. He is the complete opposite— a petty, repelling, cunning, disruptor who harms people. Hakimuddin's loyal servant is Kukra, who always follows him around, commits theft, and plants evidence to incriminate Rahim just as his master instructs him to. He even serves jail time taking the blame upon himself. Kukra's father is named Shialu. Such names loudly allude to the animals like dog and jackal in Bengali respectively, as if the progeny of the wild jackal has been domesticated with servile and loyal tendencies like a dog. Later in Act 2 scene 2, a minor character named Tameez, which means discretion, manner, and sense, talks about selling his children. The character Kana Fakir is a quack, and an addict, who has no sense of morality. He contaminates water bodies of villages with cholera and sells his fake medicine. His name 'Fakir' means an ascetic, a holy person. Ironically he is base materialistic. He keeps demanding more and more money to marry Phuljan and makes distasteful remarks about his opportunity with her.



The most important leitmotif that runs throughout the play, and has titular reference, is the musical instrument dilruba. This motif is connected to Rahim's spirit, hope, prosperity, and marital love. At the beginning of the play, Rahim's tired and soulless demeanour changes with Mahim's encouragement and participation in music that reminds him of pleasant, simple, childhood. The instrument is introduced by Mahim, an idealistic, progressive, and inspiring character. Thus, it retains that tone of inspiration and spirit throughout the play. The instrument is used to make a social statement. As purchasing such an instrument is an expense generally regarded as out of reach for a peasant, it is also a symbol of Rahim's leisure pursuit. Leisure pursuits are associated with cultured life, fulfilment, and prosperity which arouses Hakimuddin's jealousy seeing it achieved by someone whom he regards as socially beneath him. Thus the instrument is also the symbol of Rahim's claim to the status of a human being with wants, desires, and needs, rather than an alienated, miserable, soulless worker. The instrument is featured in every scene that takes place in Rahim's house, it is always being tuned or played. In Act 1 Scene 3 it is used to accuse Rahim of theft. In the final scene of the play, the instrument becomes the symbol of marital love and hope for unification. The sick Bachir requests his father to play the instrument so that his mother will hear it and come to them. Towards the end of the play where Rahim is at his wits' end, has little control over his life and fate, and has no hope left of getting his wife back, a string of the instrument snaps, with it snaps his hope and spirit. His final words in the play, “মোর যন্ত্র বাজিলয় না। আল্লা ! তার খালি ছিঁড়ি ছিঁড়ি গেল ! আল্লা !” “My instrument will play no longer. Oh God! The strings are broken. Oh God!” (119) are desperate cries of a person driven to insanity.



An important symbol is the high-heeled shoes that Rahim buys for Phuljan. It symbolizes progress, inquisitiveness, and learning. It is also a symbol of care and companionship. Rahim tries to better Phuljan, and supports her in learning new things. But the scene that unfolds around her trying to walk in those shoes also foreshadows the difference in character between Rahim and Phuljan. She is naive and ignorant. This naivete would later hinder her from deciding to go against the rigid rules of religion and save the family.

A significant structural element in the play is songs. There are a total of seven songs, some complete and some incomplete. Lahiri himself was a renowned singer and songwriter. He had been the Music Director of HMV and the Gramophone Company. Traditionally Bengali theatre included music, song, and dance that referenced mythological and medieval cultural elements. In this play, the songs serve a specific purpose. The first song is described as a contemporary commercial song in the standard dialect, sung by Mahim's daughter Maya, a typical middle-class young modern lady. However, most of the songs are composed in the Kamrupi or Rajbanshi dialect of the North-eastern part of Bengal, which is the same dialect spoken by the rural characters. These songs are also an opportunity to present folk arts on the stage, such as *bahurupi*, a folk tradition of dressing up as mythological or strange characters and performing songs and dance that were often satirical, humourous, and scathing portrayals of daily life. Rahim's friend Gobindo sings of the daily squalor and suffering of the poor villagers while dressing up as the mythological *Jambavan* for festivities. Gobindo compares their existence to ghosts, constantly fighting known and unknown diseases, living decrepily, and praying to the gods to make their life easy, but no god is satisfied with the devotion of



the powerless. Rahim sings about a dream in which he had died and faced judgement alongside Hakimuddin, and Hakimuddin had been sent to Hell for corruption. It is clear that he frames his thoughts as a dream sequence so that Hakimuddin could not claim defamation. These public performances are important communal activities that bring people together. Often songs are used to portray harmony and participation between two religions. The last song in the play is sung by Gobindo in Act 3 scene 3. He had been taught to sing it in the standard Bengali dialect by two Bengali Bhadrakalok, who advised him to roam about singing in the streets of Calcutta as a minstrel and earn his livelihood. This politically aware song calls out the people responsible for the famine— those thieves, who disguise themselves as protectors, the hoarders, the black marketers who loot from people. Those demons and blood suckers need to be remembered and chased away, then only the famine will go. In the play, Gobindo is a choric character. The placement of the song is evident in itself, it is the playwright himself talking through Gobindo.

The use of the Kamrupi or Rajbanshi regional dialect (which has now gained the status of a language) intends to represent the story and characters in a lively and authentic manner. Linguist Rameswar Shaw notes that this dialect was spoken in areas such as Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Coochbehar, Uttar Dinajpur, Srihatta, Tripura, etc. (652). Lahiri himself was born in Rangpur, he had spent a long time there, and only later in 1928 did he come to Calcutta. He was genuinely familiar with the dialect. The intonation, music, and rhythm of regional dialect give the dialogues a poetic quality. This enhances the melodramatic appeal of the play.

The play was staged by the theatre group *Bahurupi*, directed by Shambhu Mitra, for



the first time on 17th December 1950, in the first theatre festival organized by *Bahurupi*, a few years after the famine. This might not be an immediate response, but a well-thought-out, comprehensive, and exhaustive one, presented in a form that was experimental yet familiar. It had innovative historical, and analytical accounts, yet was a highly successful tragedy. It combined idealistic melodrama with naturalist elements. It embraced progressive ideals but never appeared propagandistic. Lahiri combined the best of both worlds and that is reflected in the structural balance of the play. It is a literary masterpiece with historical significance.

** The quotations used in the article from *Banglar Mati* and *Chhenra Tar* have been translated by me. Original quotations are immediately followed by translations.



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