

COUNTER-HEGEMONIC STRUGGLE THROUGH PERFORMING ARTS: '10TH PLANET THEATRE GROUP' PLAYING THE ROLE OF 'ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS' IN CONTEMPORARY BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

*In contemporary modern society, art is the application of creative human skill and imagination for the purpose of expression and communication. To make art relevant, independent artists mostly try to create their art as the product of their time, and it becomes very necessary to do so as capitalism continuously uses 'civil society' to propagate a cultural hegemony and distract the masses from any idea that generates deeper thought without them realising it. This paper examines how the '10th Planet Theatre Group' as 'organic intellectuals', projects counter-hegemonic ideas and is trying to repurpose the popular institution of 'civil society' to challenge the capitalist state and establish a socially progressive hegemony through their act of 'war of position'. They regularly stage and adapt classics like Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, *A Life of Galileo*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in the contemporary Indian context in order to portray the duality of state politics, religious hegemony, corruption, capitalist exploitation, and the subtle tendencies of dictatorship in the field of politics of our country. This theatre group keeping the fact in mind that they belong to a third world country, not only shows resistance in their content but also in their form of theatre.*

Keywords: Civil Society, Cultural hegemony, Theatre, Organic Intellectuals and Resistance

Introduction

The Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, while imprisoned by the fascist government during 1926 to 1935, wrote approximately thirty documents on political, social, and cultural subjects, known as the "prison notebooks". "Gramsci's most widely echoed concept is that of 'hegemony': that a social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct and overt means, but by succeeding in making its ideological views so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression" (Abrams 162). This predominant or the ruling class can manipulate the value systems of a society so that their view becomes the world view. In Terry Eagleton's words, "Gramsci normally uses the word 'hegemony' to mean the ways in which a governing power wins' consent to its rule from those it subjugates" (14).

In order to achieve this 'hegemony', 'culture' plays a very significant role for the ruling class. Herder in his unfinished *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-91), wrote of "Cultur: nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing more deceptive than its application to all nations and periods" (Williams 79). In the anthropocentric world, it was possible for the ruling class to win the consent of the subjugated people coercively, but in the modern world, the state and the capitalists propagate hegemony in every sector of the society by using institutions of 'civil society' such as schools, media, films, music, and nowadays social media as well. So, it kind of becomes necessary to trace the hegemonic projects among the cultural fields in order to be free from the predominant class. "Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall were the first to introduce Gramsci's concept of hegemony in British Media and Cultural Studies; in his well-known essay "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", Hall has this to say about Gramsci's work: "[...] in my view, the line in Cultural Studies which has at tempted to think forwards from the best elements in the structuralist and culturalist enterprises, by way of some of the concepts elaborated in Gramsci's work, comes closest to meeting the requirement of the field of study" (Hall 1981: 36; emphasis in original). This requirement dictated that we need to read media and cultural messages in the light of the workings of hegemony and at the same time remind ourselves that it cannot absorb all the contradictions of an unequal society: resistance may occur (counter-hegemony), thus disrupting the dominant hegemonic project of any given society" (Cere 126). This very idea of propagating a counter-argument against the state's hegemony gives birth to Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals". Gramsci divided the intellectuals, on the basis of their role in the society, into two parts i.e., the "traditional intellectuals" and the "organic intellectuals". The "traditional intellectuals" are the "refugees from bourgeois class, providing theory and ideology (and often leadership) for a

mass base of non-intellectuals” (for instance, philosophers, artists, religious ideologues etc.) (Gramsci 132), and the “organic intellectuals” are the ones who do not simply describe social life from outside in accordance with scientific rules but who use the language of culture or repurpose the institutions of ‘civil society’ to express the real experiences and the feelings which the masses cannot express for themselves. And this term given by Gramsci, “organic intellectuals”, fits very appropriately for a theatre troupe of West Bengal named ‘10th Planet Theatre Group’ as through their plays, they have been constantly portraying the reality of the socio-political atmosphere of Bengal.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyse 10th Planet Theatre Group’s credibility as “organic intellectuals”.
- To examine if their counter-hegemonic ideas are effective or not against the cultural hegemony imposed by the ruling government of Bengal.
- To understand the significance of art and how it affects the society.

Methodology of the Study

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis approach, focusing on a close reading of the plays performed by the 10th Planet Theatre Group. The analysis is framed within Marxist literary theory, particularly based on the Gramscian theory of hegemony, and examines how this theatre troupe, as ‘organic intellectuals’, addresses the issue of propagating cultural hegemony through their plays and projects counter-hegemonic ideas. The study also considers secondary sources, including critical essays, scholarly articles, and newspaper articles.

India was colonised by the British for almost two hundred years. And, hegemony is an integral part of colonialism. In order to politically manipulate the colonised, the coloniser has always used both the methods of hegemony, coercion and consent. Even after the British rule, they did not hesitate to speak well about it. “For example, in the British Channel 4 production *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (six parts, broadcast 2002-2003), presenter and writer historian Niall Ferguson promotes the idea of ‘goodness of empire’ and specifically suggests that a world without the British Empire is unimaginable: ‘Without the British Empire, there would be no Calcutta; no Bombay; no Madras. Indians may rename them as many times as they like, but they remain cities founded and built by the British’ (Ferguson 2003: xxi)” (Cere 135). Although the people of India always had the training of being hegemonised, the counter-hegemonic movements had a coexistence otherwise India would never have been independent. This independence was acquired by many acts of violence and radical movements. But in the modern age, these kinds of actions may not be a healthy option to protest against the hegemony of the ruling government, which is why Gramsci’s concept of war of position becomes very important in this scenario. The war of position involves a prolonged struggle in the cultural and ideological realms, aiming to reshape societal norms, values, and beliefs instead of a direct assault on the state’s political institutions. It focuses on building a coalition and spreading new ideas within the institutions of civil society. This means influencing educational systems, media, religious institutions, and other cultural bodies to build broad-based support. Based on this idea of war of position, the 10th Planet Theatre Group chose theatre to put up the dubious political narratives of contemporary Bengal through their plays against the ruling government of West Bengal. On the contrary, Karl Marx criticises this kind of indirect resistance as it has less possibility to achieve its goal,

“A resistance too long prolonged in a besieged camp is demoralising in itself” (Gramsci 496).

Indian theatre in itself has been a part of hegemony since the very beginning of it. Although the origins of Indian theatre are uncertain, some scholars believe it may have been based on Vedic rituals. According to *Natya Shastra*, Bharata staged the first play (*Amrta-manthana*) of Indian theatre, which was based on the story of *Samudra Manthana* (“Churning of the Ocean”). It portrayed the episode of churning the ocean for nectar (*amrta*) and ended in the victory of the gods against the demons but not with a neutral point of view. “But since the play was written by the very god who creates laws also, there was no chance of its being censored or prohibited. Indirectly Brahma himself admits that it is a propaganda play. He says, “put that play on stage; it will enthuse and please the gods” (IV, 2) (Rangacharya 13). Indian theatre not only in its content but also has been hegemonised in its form. In post-

independence India, theatre was unable to decolonise the strong western influence on it and ended up creating a colonial assimilation. The National School of Drama (NSD), while presenting “plays like Girish Karnad's *Tuglaq*, Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure* bore the traces of the Western dramatic sensibilities and practices and could not represent any significant creative departure from the West or originality of the Indian sensibility and treatment” (Kumar 5). Proscenium theatre and the use of props and huge setups, in themselves, propagate a hegemony, as they are a sign of theatre of the first world countries. It requires capital to create a stage with proper acoustics. But in order to reflect the economic condition of West Bengal, 10th Planet experiments with simple and minimal sets and does theatre in intimate places as well. In this context, Sharanya Dey, the director of the 10th Planet Theatre Group, mentioned,

“Indian theatre flourishes in minimalism. There is no use of props in Indian folk theatre or classical theatre. Only, the actor is doing everything. The basic idea of Indian theatre is to create theatre in the imagination of the audience, which Western theatre disapproves of.”

Amidst a socio-political turmoil and enormously hegemonised state of West Bengal, the 10th Planet Theatre Group, as ‘organic intellectuals’, is trying to portray the reality of this state through their ‘theatre of resistance’ by constantly staging the plays like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*, *A Life of Galileo*, and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. While asking about why this group, most of the time, is particularly staging classics in order to showcase their time, the director of this group, Sharanya Dey answers,

“Obviously if someone wants, he or she can write a play about their time but I choose classics because the great playwrights have told the story of my time in their plays in a better way and it very appropriately fits into my time. What I only need to do is to adapt or translate the play into Bengali.”

For example, playwrights like Jean Anouilh and Bertolt Brecht adapted Sophocles’ *Antigone* as a political gesture to rationalize Greek tragedy and to relate the ancient story to the problems of their own times. In the book, “*Why Read the Classics?*”, Italo Calvino states regarding the significance of classics,

“A classic does not necessarily teach us anything we did not know before. In a classic we sometimes discover something we have always known (or thought we knew), but without knowing that this author said it first, or at least is associated with it in a special way” (Calvino 3).

Based on the argument in Utpal Dutt’s *Dialectics of Theater*, theatre in its part of content is very much interrelated with a basic concept of Marxism, ‘Dialectical Materialism’. Dialectical materialism, the philosophical framework developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, offers a way to understand social and historical change through the lens of material conditions, class struggle, and contradictions. Its application aims at analysing and improving society by identifying and addressing the underlying economic and social conflicts. And, a good play is one which provides contradictory ideas or conflicts throughout its plot in order to create the ‘drama’ or the art of investigating the truth of opinions (dialectics). So, performing theatre in itself is an act of resistance. For instance, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the protagonist, in order to capture the throne, is always in a dilemma and having contradictory ideas with Lady Macbeth, the witches, and even Macbeth himself. And within these contradictory ideas and conflicts, Macbeth’s desire for power and the causes behind his dictatorial activities after murdering Duncan are very clearly established. The 10th Planet Theatre Group for the first time staged *Macbeth* on 23rd March, 2024 at the ‘10th Planet National Theatre Festival’. The director almost kept all the scenes in the play without any major change but what he did was that he used the plot of *Macbeth* to tell a story of the rise of a dictator and his fall, and then again with Malcolm, he put a hint of the rise of another dictator as he uses the dialogue,

“Every dictator brings a change and every change brings a dictator”, which according to Sharanya Dey is nothing but a critique of the political parties that come into power in West Bengal. “During 2011, we all thought that the corrupted leftist government would go away and we would have a new government who would really think about the working class but when the present government came into power, West Bengal entered into another darker political phase” (Sharanya Dey).

In this play, they are not only portraying the hegemony that is going on in their content but also in their form of theatre. Keeping the fact in mind that they belong to a third world country, the director deliberately uses very minimal set and design at the proscenium, which is a clear site of resistance from a very economic point of view. The group thinks that being able to do theatre in India is a luxury. So despite staging Western plays, they are trying to blend the minimalistic design in a way that it neither degrades the quality of the theatre nor be a victim of the hegemony of the Western theatre. In support of this argument, Rabindranath Tagore's essay Rangomancho (The Stage) fits very well. There Tagore states,

“One may opine that if Kalidasa had given attention to the stage and setting of *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, he would have dropped the scene of the chariot running after the doe. But, since he was a great poet and so the chariot may stop but not his pen... When Dushyanta and his chariot driver stand in the same place and share the speed of the chariot through their dialogue and their performance, the audience can easily appreciate that the stage is small but not the imaginative faculty of the poet. So, for the sake of *Kavya*, the spectators are gladly ready to exonerate the shortcomings of the stage. They add their passion and creativity to take this small stage to a magnificent height” (44).

Next, the play which this theatre troupe most frequently represents is Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. The purpose of adapting this play in the context of West Bengal is only to point out how corruption has become a part of the system and 'cut money' is making its way among the political leaders, stealing the basic rights of the common people and their money. "Cut money is the unofficial commission charged by local politicians for getting government grants for local area projects approved—so named for the 'cut' of the total money given by the government department. The 'cut' is usually taken in cash, to prevent any records of the money coming on the taxman's radar" (The Times of India). Several times the public has been the victim of cut money in West Bengal. The ruling government in 2020 was alleged in the charge of corruption in the distribution of relief to people affected by the Cyclone Amphan. "The West Bengal government has received over 2,100 complains until last Friday, amid reports of clashes and attacks on panchayat and block development offices and villagers' protests against alleged embezzlement by the... grass-root leaders. Earlier, there had been several allegations and actions in cases involving ration distribution during the lockdown" (The Print). And, it is an act of hegemony as well because most of the time the illiterate portion of the society fails to figure out the actual culprit behind these events and ends up blaming only the local politicians. Gramsci coined the term 'subversive' for hegemony in this kind of circumstance. "The purely Italian concept of "subversive" can be explained as follows: a negative rather than a positive class position—the "people" is aware that it has enemies, but only identifies them empirically as the so-called signori.... The peasant, and even the small farmer, hates the civil servant; he does not hate the State, for he does not understand it" (Gramsci 272).

Brecht wrote the play, *The Threepenny Opera*, to criticise the corrupted banking system of his time, and the 10th Planet Theatre Group chose this play to showcase the corrupted system of the current government. Despite showing the courage to portray the reality of the political scenario of West Bengal, this theatre group has been criticised for their clear and direct political comments. But, this theatre group believes that using metaphors in the present situation of Bengal might be deceptive for the audience. Gramsci, on the role of the 'organic intellectuals', stated something very similar in the *Prison Notebooks*,

“The organic intellectuals of the working class are defined... by their “directive” political role, focused on the Party” (132).

The Threepenny Opera is a play about a gangster named Macheath ('Montu Bhai' in the 10th Planet's production) who sustains his illegal activities by having connections with the top-ranking police officer to very important politicians, and in order to do so, he needs to provide them capital regularly. 10th Planet very sufficiently uses the Brechtian method of 'alienation' to mock the government. Montu Bhai, when for the first time, flees with Polly to marry her, and she asks him if it is right to get married with the money of theft, the actor who plays Montu bhai or Macheath in this play, breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience,

“There’s no problem when the government runs with the money of theft, so what’s the issue if we get married with that money?”

Then, again some actors in the play directly sing to the audience,

“Keeping the government grants in the bank/ We can distribute the money of corruption/ Some local leaders will have some portion of that money/ And, the Queen will have the rest of it.”

Using the Brechtian method of ‘alienation’ in itself is an art of resistance against the hegemony. In the modern day, hegemony that has been propagating through the institutions of ‘civil society’ is invisible. The ordinary mass gets influenced by it and stays in a state of illusion as the state does not want them to be aware of the stark reality. In theatre too, by ‘suspension of disbelief’, the audience takes the help of imagination to trust the stage as whatever space the director wants it to establish. But the intention of breaking the fourth wall is to make the audience understand that they are just watching a play and it is better not to be carried away by the emotion. As, Brecht perfectly strikes out,

“I don’t let my feelings intrude my dramatic work. It’d give a false view of the world... I’m not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their hearts warmed” (14).

Later, he also mentions,

“It is a kind of report on life as any member of the audience would like to see it. Since at the same time, however, he sees a good deal he has no wish to see: since therefore he sees his wishes not merely fulfilled but also criticised (sees himself not as the subject but as the object), he is theoretically in a position to appoint a new function of the theatre” (43).

On the contrary, the Brazilian theatre practitioner and drama theorist, Augusto Boal, did not completely agree with the Brechtian idea of ‘alienation’. He coined the term “spect-actor”, blending the words, “spectator” and “actor”. It is an approach to theatre that seeks to empower individuals and communities by turning passive audience members into active participants. Contradicting Brecht, in the book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal wrote,

“The spectator is less than a man and it is necessary to humanise him, to restore to him his capacity of action in all its fullness. He too must be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors, who must also be spectators... the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action! Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!” (135).

Brecht’s *A Life of Galileo* talks about how Galileo becomes a victim of the church and the dictatorial state and what consequences he confronts when he speaks against that very state. And, often, artists in Bengal too go through several problematic circumstances despite staying in a democratic country. At the starting of this play, the theatre group takes the names of some artists, writers, or activists who have faced similar kinds of circumstances in their lives, such as Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasrin, Gauri Lankesh and so on. Through this play, 10th Planet not only tries to portray the religious hegemony but also criticises the tendency of ‘hero-worshipping’ in our country. Mainly in India, the famous actors are considered to be the ‘hero’. No matter how critical the situation is, the ‘hero’ will be there to rescue you. And, this manipulation of showcasing everything in a good way again makes the audience illusioned. Every time we get into trouble, we need a ‘hero’ to survive. This way of making people realise that they are unable to do something on their own is also an act of hegemony. Interestingly, many actors from the Bengali film industry have joined the current ruling party, and their image of the ‘hero’ is being used very diplomatically to win the elections. In the play, the actor who plays Galileo says to the other character, Andrea Sarti,

“Unhappy is the land that needs a hero”.

So, counting on all these points, it can be implied that 10th Planet Theatre Group is a true ‘organic intellectual’. Although the question on their success remains-- their purpose is to portray the reality of the society to make the

people aware of the situation in West Bengal and propagate counter-hegemonic ideas, but any idea cannot be the absolute. The counter-ideas that they are trying to generate can be again countered with another idea, just like the theory of dialectics. This group has been doing theatre in Bengal since 2017, and the current government is not taking any progressive steps towards the betterment of the state except beautifying the urban parts of it. Sharanya Dey, the director of this theatre group, said,

“In my initial days there was a scope of hope in my plays that a certain change would come someday but with time, I realised that art cannot change society. After Guernica, war should have ended but what I think that good art can make people sensitive and art is the vocal cord of the society. People are watching art or practicing art because they cannot say it vocally in front of the government out of fear and out of many things. Though art has the power to say what the society wants to say and what the society should look like and how a government should behave.”

The word ‘should’ in a way is very problematic because all the struggle that the ‘organic intellectuals’ are doing against the hegemony of the state is all about how the government sets things for the people and becomes a dominant class. So, if the ‘organic intellectuals’ too try to impose ideas upon the people while conducting the counter-hegemonic movements, it would bring them on the same platform with the ruling class. What the “organic intellectuals” think is right for the society may be beneficial only to a certain group of people. The concept of ‘Bourgeois socialism’ can be referred to in this argument. Marx and Engels argue that bourgeois socialism is an attempt by enlightened members of the bourgeoisie to manage or soften the harsher elements of capitalism, thereby preserving the system rather than aiming for a classless society. Bourgeois socialists want to maintain capitalism with some "humanitarian" adjustments. Also, “Zola, expounding his famous theory that the theatre must show a ‘slice of life’, even wrote that the playwright must not take sides, displaying life exactly as it is, without even being selective” (Boal 65). In addition to this, Baudrillard in 1991 wrote the article *The Gulf War did not take place*, where he argued that the Gulf War was not really a war but rather an atrocity that masqueraded as a war. So, in a post-truth world, it is hard to trust any narrative completely. Being conscious individually may be the only way out of it.

Conclusion

Though artists, as ‘organic intellectuals’, may not bring changes in a holistic way in the society, it can make an individual sensitive, and any sensitive individual can be careful enough about the hegemony that is going on around them. So, if art can change only one individual, and because of that individual, the society would not be the same anymore. As the Welsh poet and writer, Dylan Thomas wrote,

“The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it” (Griffith).

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