

Exploring Human Relationship in Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun*

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Abstract

Through the proscenium theatre, street performance, the traditional strolling theatre-in-the-round and cinema, Utpal Dutta explores the revolutionary theatre to the widest mass of people. He redefines his relationship with the political leadership by giving political messages through a highly sensitive and rapidly changing political scenario. The present paper interprets Dutt's play *Hunting the Sun* (1971) and projects that the pre-Mughal period when the Buddhism was emerging as an intellectual revolutionary force has the conflict between science and religion. It also explains that the human relationship is based on the Varna system granted by brahmanic religion. The human beings are separated and lived in accordance to the Puranas. By rejecting the truth, knowledge and science, the King Samudragupta accepts the darkness and false ideas. The slaves and women live a degraded life. They are insulted and dishonoured publicly. The women have no space and power.

Key words: slave, Varna system, Buddhism, Utpal Dutt, *Hunting the Sun*, dominance

Modern Indian playwrights, inspired by the Western Theatrical tradition, begin to explore the tension between modern and traditional way of living. The conflict resulted from the negation of scientific view for the superstitious social as well as religious taboo has captured their attention. The changing society compels the playwrights to reinterpret the great Indian tradition. As Gurcharan Das, a great Indian dramatist hopes that "Indian writers need to examine our rich, rational tradition and not be swept by the mystical side alone" (03). Through the proscenium theatre, street performance, the traditional strolling theatre-in-the-round and cinema, Dutta explores the revolutionary theatre to the widest mass of people. He redefines his relationship with the political leadership by giving political messages through a highly sensitive and rapidly changing political scenario. Utpal Dutt, born in 1929 in Barishal (now in Bangladesh), acquires a reputation as a film actor. He has begun his theatrical career in college at St Xavier's, Calcutta. His productions in Bengali *Angar* (1959), *Ferari Fouj*, *Titash* and *Kallol* have brought him success. His play *Kallol*, a savage criticism of the Congress that was in power in 1965, becomes the cause of his arrest. He has produced a series of documentary plays at Minerva. He joined the Naxalite movement and was jailed in Bombay in 1968. Dutt has established the Vivek Jatra Samaj for rural and suburban audiences, and People's Little Theatre for the urban proscenium. As a prolific writer, Dutt has left behind the valuable writings on theatre, literature and cinema. His *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*, *Shakespeare-er Samaj Chetona* and *Girish Manash* are notable. He is seen as an inspiration and role model for the activist theatre person. Dutt has received the National Award for Best Actor in *Bhuvan Shome* in 1970 and a Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1990.

The play *Hunting the Sun* is a translation of Bengali *Surya Shikar* (1971). It "vehemently critiques the brutal, inhuman attitude of the ruling class towards common people" (Roy and Banerjee 87). It also reveals the pre-Mughal period when the Buddhism was emerging as an intellectual revolutionary force. It is set in Ayodhya during the reign of Samudragupta. The Emperor Samudragupta declares Ayodhya as the seat of his Empire instead of Pataliputra. His capital becomes full of prostitutes, courtesans and dancing girls. The license to prostitutes is given with the Emperor's seal. By the gracious permission of Samudragupta the slaves are sold at public places. Bribe though it is termed as vulgar and thought to be a word of the Chandalas and Shudras is accepted from the people by the Mayor, Shishumar. The General Hayagreeva and Lord Chamberlain Basubandhu conquer all men, beasts, barbarians and monsters with the consent of the Emperor. While telling the situation of the country, Mahasveta, a courtesan says:

Mahasveta (handing him two coins): This country's gone to the dogs. Bribes at every step. No one lifts a finger without a bribe. The Empire's about to collapse, no question. (*Hunting the Sun*, 29)

The Emperor Samudragupta, son of Chandragupta, has driven off the monsters and barbarians and has conquered the three worlds. And no enemy is left for him. Banga, Kalinga and Kamrup quake in his fare. He now worries for his conquests that are over and he is royally bored. The hungry Emperor seeks new conquests. So the royal hunter decides to hunt the sun that is remained as an unconquered.

Samudragupta, the Emperor of India, the King of Magadha captures kingdom after kingdom. While knowing the Buddhist conspiracy within the kingdom through Virupaksha, the Emperor turns into a cunning politician. He builds a reputation by protecting Buddhists in his Empire. He denies the idea that Kalhan is arrested because he is a Buddhist. He searches for a devastating charge against Kalhan. He thinks that Kalhan's philosophy will change everything in his kingdom. He plans to kill him. He considers Kalhan as a cause of usurping the Emperor's prerogative of hunting the sun. So the Emperor announces that 'only the king hunts the sun and not the mendicant in yellow robes'. (69) He realizes that Kalhan has made a bonfire of every book that the people swore by. He also comes to know that the high priests like Virupaksha are brazen liars who have peddled superstition for thousands of years. Therefore, the Emperor assumes that "there is no Heaven, no God, no immortal soul—*neti, nihil*—that we live and die in a chaos of matter" (69). The royal priests believe that without blind, unquestioning, thoughtless faith, neither religion nor society can last for even a day. Therefore the Emperor Samudragupta orders to arrest and to kill Kalhan for his teaching against religion.

The Emperor asks Indrani by what right she has read the books of Vedas. She replies that by a right recognized over centuries by such masters as Kanad, Gautam and Kapil. She narrates the distortions of Shudras in *Ramayana* in the form of Shambhuka. She proves herself as a scholar and dialectician. The Emperor knowing a dangerous subversive and rebel in the teaching of Kalhan agrees that Kalhan is the real menace and he has the disgusting habit of blurting out the truth, a practice that wantonly undermines State and Religion. So he plans to destroy Kalhan's reputation systematically. As he says:

We must first systematically destroy Kalhan's reputation, and so anticipate and obviate the protests of the country's scholars. We shall not engage Kalhan in astronomical disputation, because we shall inevitably lose. No, we shall deliver a flank attack and take him by surprise, to speak militarily again. You will therefore be our star witness, and you will assassinate his character. (77)

The Emperor wants Indrani, a daughter, to bear false witness against her father. He forces Indrani to stand in court and testify under oath that Kalhan has regularly and criminally raped her. He expects that she will term Kalhan as a hypocrite, a charlatan and a seducer. He commands her to say not only that Kalhan has violated and deflowered her but also that his scientific pretensions are merely a cover for shameless lust and debauchery. Because he thinks that it is essential for State, Religion and King. Indrani, an aggressive and intellectual woman, very deliberate in her defiance says that she spits on this state, its forged religion and its king. Indrani refuses the proposal of the King. Dutt describes "the inspiring story of an enlightened shudra woman, Indrani, whose resilience and strength of character condemns her to torturous death, but also manages to convert a ruthless warrior into a changed man" (Talati-Parikh 172). Samudragupta explains why he wants to destroy Kalhan and Indrani. To him, they wish to banish from this world all poetry, music and dreams. They wish to shine the brutal light of truth into all the dark corners of their cherished childhood and spirit away all their beautiful lies. So he says how he can breathe in a world of harsh realities and how a person can live without the ecstasy of falsehood. He accepts his inhuman oppression against the slaves. He says that it is the humiliation of humanity.

Kalhan, a teacher of Indrani, is the greatest scientist of Aryavarta. He asks for his disciple, dear to him as a daughter, to the Emperor whose General Hayagreeva has arrested her. The Emperor promises to free Indrani if Kalhan proves that the earth is round. Kalhan accepts the challenge. He visualizes the advanced knowledge of man by doing experiments. He declares that “it is the earth which rotates- but the little creature thinks the sun rises and sets. The sun does not revolve round the earth; it is the earth that goes round the sun” (63). With this he argues that man’s knowledge advances with time and today’s science need not to be restricted by the truth of an earlier age. He wars against the people who wish to imprison science in the sophistry of filthy and unscrupulous diplomacy. But his thoughts are taken as ‘blasphemy’ and challenge to the *Vedas* and *Puranas*. The superstitious nature of society is projected through a telescope that is called as a tantric machine or the instruments of black magic and witchcraft.

Basubandhu, the pioneer of astronomy never stands by Kalhan and denies the truth that the earth is round. He accepts the lies as the necessity of the Empire. He rejects the materialist philosophy that undermines the foundations of brahmanical religion. While saying the need of some irrefutable and unchallengeable lies for the building of the Empire, he hates humanity intensely. The people like Virupaksha admit that ‘eyes can make a mistake, but the holy books cannot’. Kalhan not only questions the Vedas but also disproves them. Kalhan believes in utter abnegation. He has renounced all the pleasures of the flesh and conquered temptation. He says that there is no alter-life, no heaven, no hell, no sin, no virtue and no god. In his philosophy acquired from the Lord Buddha, the prostitute and the Empress are the same. Mahasveta, a prostitute of Magadha takes shelter at the feet of Tathagata and spends the life of a Buddhist *parivrajika*. From the mind of slaves, he removes the superstition that ‘the King is God Himself’. Kalhan suggests the way to bring down Samudragupta’s kingdom that erected on sin. He hopes all the slaves of Ayodhya can do this work. In the guidance of Kalhan, Gohil, a slave, establishes the band for rebellion against the King. He also tells his disciples that they should engage themselves in the service of science that is their religion. While knowing of torture of Indrani, Kalhan resents saying that Samudragupta’s kingdom is a kingdom of rakshasas, a kingdom of beasts without conscience.

To save his daughter, Kalhan never prepares himself to humiliate the science. He does not alter his ideas for the sake of her life. He knows his daughter Indrani would not live at the price of the humiliation of science. Twisting of the idea that the earth is not round means humiliation of truth and the betrayal of science. As Kalhan tells to the Commander:

“... Science is illuminating the future course of Bharatavarsha. We are preserving for our future generations the wealth of truth. If Kalhan declares his ideas to be false, I do not know how long the power of your ignorance and superstition will continue to rule. I can’t betray the future. If the price of betrayal is the price I have to pay to get Indrani released Indrani herself would denounce her guru” (91).

Anyhow Kalhan never allows the banner of science to kiss the dust. But the Commander Hayagreeva gives orders to destroy the telescope and rebellious books. The books that contain the knowledge, the discoveries, the realizations of men are burnt. The soldiers, the Commander of Samudragupta destroy the treasury of ideas accumulated through centuries by the Buddhist philosophers. Kalhan in disgusting tone says that those who try to burn books to suppress the voices of men are devils, rakshasas and barbarians. He hopes that these ruins, these charred manuscripts these splinters of glass are “the witness of the barbarity perpetrated by a fiendishly ignorant Hindu Empire will send a call into the future asking them to remove the veil of darkness and awaken an era of light and the eclipse of superstitions. It will be a world where knowledge will not feel ashamed to show its face, where truth will not be imprisoned, where science will not be tied to the wooden wheel and tortured to death” (92-3). Kalhan asks Samudragupta whether he is a kshatriya and continues whether this is the kshatriya religion that

tortures the helpless and innocent girl. The Emperor forces Kalhan to say that he is a liar, the earth is flat and not round, the moon is a god, the puranas are true, the gods are true, Iswara is true, the brahmanya religion is true. But Kalhan asks for the death and declares that ‘there is no religion, no gods, no Iswara, no Heaven, no hell, there’s nothing’ (101). According to him, there is only Man and Science in this world.

Kalhan while looking at the suffering of Indrani feels guilty. He says that he will never utter a lie though a father’s heart is being torn into pieces, though a father’s senses are choked at the sight of the daughter’s torn flesh. He supposes Indrani’s killing as a sacrifice to the cause of truth. He hopes that there will arise from the drops of Indrani’s blood a science that will crush the structure of blind ignorance. The Emperor makes Kalhan as an incarnation of god, the mortal enemy of religion and a temple for the propagation of religion. He returns Kalhan just as the Lord Buddha, the enemy of Vishnu, into the tenth incarnation of Vishnu himself. The Emperor wins by mutilating Kalhan but his ideas live to dispel the darkness of the mind in the world.

The innocent woman’s life is endangered by lustful rulers and not by science. Urmila, the Empress of Magadha, seeks the company of General Hayagreeva. The General calls her ‘a prostitute’. Urmila desires to spend one night with him. She is bored of palace, empire, power, jewels and money. Hayagreeva thinks that the Empress is ‘a maniac’ and has a ‘sexual sickness’. Samudragupta also knows that she has pursued Hayagreeva in a display of desire unworthy of the royal position in the state ‘like a cheap sensation-hungry courtesan’. He finds out that she is really a whore. He makes her the mistress of household rather than the Empress. Henceforth, the Queen becomes the jeweled slave. Urmila screams for Hayagreeva when he is put under the elephant’s feet. The sight of Hayagreeva’s body bursting open under the elephant’s foot makes her scream in the royal gathering. She cries for him and avoids the rituals at ceremony. The Emperor thinks that the Empress is merely an instrument of statecraft, a womb to bear heirs to the throne and nothing else. She has no will of her own. The King states that the Emperor needs a smile from woman to please their children out there. Therefore, the Empress has no voice and space in the kingdom. “Indian hierarchical society that deprives people of their freedom and basic rights, that ostracize people because of their caste, and forces them to live on the fringes of society, has got vividly portrayed in Dutt’s heart-wrenching play *Hunting the Sun*” (Roy and Banerjee 91).

The human relationship is based on the Varna system granted by brahmanic religion. The human beings are separated and lived in accordance to the Puranas. The Emperor protects the Puranas, the Gods and Goddesses for the well-being of state, religion and king. The priests like Virupaksha, guide the King and try to preserve the dignity of brahmanic religion with the Vedic scriptures. By using the royal men and means, Virupaksha and Basubandhu, earn a lot of money and property. They always worry about their interests. Though the Emperor knows the futility of gods and hypocrisy of the Priests, he never acts in a rational way. By rejecting the truth, knowledge and science, the King Samudragupta accepts the darkness and false ideas that are the earth is flat, the moon is a god and the Emperor is god himself or incarnate. The Commander, the General of Empire believes that the King is a God incarnate. They follow the King’s orders and work for him by splitting their blood. The slaves and women live a degraded life. They are insulted and dishonoured publicly. The women have no space and power. They are treated as cattle. The slaves like Gohil, Madurika and Veerak are sold and branded. They are humiliated and oppressed by the Emperor and the brahmanic religion. The slaves are considered as inhumane beings that have no rights to speak and to live a dignified life. They have been prohibited from the knowledge of Vedas and Puranas.

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