

The Forgotten History of Our Times: Revisiting Utpal Dutt's *Titu Mir* in Contemporary India

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This paper is an exploration of the most recent revival of Utpal Dutt's play Titu Mir in 2019 by the ensemble group Theatre Formation Paribartak in India. Islamic religious reformer Titu Mir led a peasant rebellion from 1827 to 1831 in the Barasat region of Bengal and the play focuses on a narrative of revolutionary resistance to colonialism. Titu Mir becomes an articulation of political theatre against the Hindu right-wing agenda of expunging Muslim national heroes from Indian history. This essay seeks Titu Mir's relevance as a site and theory of materializing historical contradictions, and as part of a 'gestic' feminist criticism of theatre. The essay attempts to understand how critique of patriarchal ideology is enmeshed in critique of colonialism in Titu Mir, especially in those moments where the play addresses complexities of political violence, interracial romance, martyrdom, alienation in the colony and deep-rooted misogyny in the project of colonialism.

The very first scene of Utpal Dutt's play *Titu Mir* introduces the representative members of the ruling section of the Bengal province in British colonial India in the early nineteenth century. The play is about a peasant rebellion led by Islamic religious reformer Titu Mir, who organized and led the rebellion from 1827 to 1831 in the Barasat region of Bengal.¹ The scene is set in the house of Crawford Pyron, the agent of the British East India Company, who has invited Krishna Roy, Debnath Roy and Manohar Roy (local landlords), as well as local magistrate Peter Alexander Esq. and army captain Richard Brandon, for dinner. While the guests arrive one after another, the conversation among them establishes the historical context along with a sense of foreboding that the dinner party will culminate in something more than a mere assembly of principal characters. It becomes apparent when Pyron informs his guests,

I have seen a face. About three years back, at Narkelbaria. A determined, violent, sweaty face. I have been pursuing him ever since and every blink of his eyes, every wrinkle of his brows are now documented in this report. I know him now.

His own brother does not know him the way I do. His name is Mir Nisar Ali. (Pyron comes in front of Krishna Roy) Don't you know him? He is your subject. He is a resident of your *zamindari* (estate). Have you seen him? Don't you understand, a terrible menace has stood up, thumping his chest, so close to you? He is a giant. People address him as Titu Mir.²

Krishna Roy is not perturbed at first by Pyron's information and claims that he has already taken adequate measures to stop all rebellious activities. However, Pyron succeeds in convincing the landlords that Titu Mir has emerged as a leader of the discontented peasants and finally reveals his plan,

PYRON: ... The two of you, along with Inspector Ramram Chakrabarty, are going to Calcutta tonight in a fast coach.

...

PYRON: There will be a council meeting tomorrow afternoon [with the secretary of the governor general and all significant landlords of Bengal] ... You should tell them that there must be forceful propaganda in Calcutta that Titu Mir is an enemy of all Hindus, that he is defiling Hindu temples, raping Hindu women and spreading caste pollution. All newspapers must publish relentlessly that Titu is throwing beef at every Hindu temple ... The day after tomorrow, early in the morning, Mr Debnath Roy, you will gather all your militia and musketeers along with four hundred *Habshi*³ warriors and then – you will attack Titu Mir.

...

PYRON: (*after a brief pause*) You will murder Titu, his wife Maimuna, and his son Gauhar on the spot and return.

KRISHNA: Oh, your words are like music to my ears!

DEB: Aren't you coming with us to attack Titu?

PYRON: Me? Are you crazy? I am not part of all this. I am now immersed in the poetry of Bipradas (*a medieval Bengali poet of the fifteenth century*).⁴

The character of Crawford Pyron, a composite character of British administrators during the rule of the British East India Company from 1757 to 1857 in India, is an exemplar of the dramatic representation of British colonialism in political theatre of Utpal Dutt. Pyron is an orientalist scholar and at the same time he is a zealous accountant of profit for the Company. This combination renders him capable of diabolical acts like fanning communal hatred against the rebellion. With his scholarly mind, Pyron could imagine the full potential of Titu Mir's teachings of dignity to the poor Muslim peasantry and his call for solidarity of all rural dispossessed in forming a full-scale rebellion against the Company and its collaborator landlords. However, through his investment in orientalism, Pyron could also put his finger on the raw nerve of communal tension between Hindus and Muslims in India and he focused on the propaganda to paint Titu Mir as an anti-Hindu zealot and his reform as Islamic fundamentalism.

Dutt draws the attention of his audience towards the coalition of oppressive forces that came together to quell peasant rebellions against the Company Raj. The key words in Pyron's rather lengthy speech, I would like to emphasize, are *propaganda* against Titu

Mir as an enemy of all Hindus and the deployment of *militarized force* (both local militia and Company *fauj*). Every staging of *Titu Mir* – the play Dutt wrote in 1978 – consequently becomes a reminder of the role of propaganda and political violence in the colonial history of communal tension, which have been repeatedly used in the post-colonial period by the religious right to tear down the fabric of communal harmony.⁵ This play also challenges the Hindu conservative history-writing practice that delegitimizes anti-colonial struggles led by Muslims as mere religious fundamentalism, therefore more anti-Hindu than anti-colonial. Performing *Titu Mir* is more about restoring Titu Mir's vision of a revitalized rural dispossessed, ready to take on every oppressive force, to the history of anti-colonial peasant rebellions.

This essay is an exploration of the most recent revival of *Titu Mir* in 2019 by the Theatre Formation Paribartak ensemble group. In a short piece, published in a digital social media platform, Joyraj Bhattacharya, the director of the 2019 revival, writes that political theatre must return to sincere and truthful exploration of people's collective emotions.⁶ Bhattacharya continues that the fascist propaganda in contemporary India has already numbed the popular sense of rationality through 'collective hysteria' and it is important to return to history – in terms of both content and form – and to theatre-makers like Sophocles, Shakespeare, Brecht, Dinabandhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt.⁷ Bhattacharya's reference to collective hysteria echoes what the character of Pyron intends to create within the playtext through propaganda and political violence, and Bhattacharya, quite rightly, implies a parallel between Pyron's careful fanning of communal hatred and contemporary Hindutva manipulation of public sentiment through the media. Bhattacharya's use of the term 'collective hysteria', however, requires further discussion concerning feminist approaches to hysteria in theatre studies.⁸ These feminist approaches enable us to bring in questions of gender and sexuality and the nuances of feminist politics to understand the performances in this revival of Dutt's political theatre.

I have attempted to seek *Titu Mir*'s relevance as political theatre in twenty-first-century India, as a site and theory of materializing historical contradictions, and as part of a 'gestic' feminist criticism of theatre. Drawing from Elin Diamond, I would like to argue that Brechtian theory is 'a theorizing of the workings of an apparatus of representation with enormous formal and political resonance' for feminist politics and hence becomes useful to understand a post-colonial historical play.⁹ The centrality of gender and sexuality in the colonial project makes it imperative to introduce the feminist analytical framework and feminist political positionings in post-colonial readings of colonial history.¹⁰ Dutt's reading of Brecht and his engagement with Brechtian theatre in his own theatre practice are equally relevant in laying out the significance of the staging and restaging of *Titu Mir* in contemporary India.¹¹ Dutt's characters represent the historical conditions through which the past becomes accessible to the audience. A post-colonial feminist intervention, I would like to suggest, offers us an opportunity to build on Dutt's playtext and Theatre Formation Paribartak's performance. I have drawn from Diamond's formulation of 'gestic' feminist criticism to foreground those moments in *Titu Mir* that 'conceal or disrupt patriarchal ideology'.¹² The process of

thinking through, however, involves digging a little deeper into patriarchal ideology where it has had points of interaction with colonialism and its impact on colonial modernity. I have made an effort to build on Diamond's formulation to explore how critique of patriarchal ideology is enmeshed in critique of colonialism in *Titu Mir*, especially in those moments where Dutt, as a theatre-maker, confronts complexities of interracial romance, alienation in the colony and deep-rooted misogyny in the project of colonialism.

***Titu Mir* as contemporary political theatre**

In 1978, when Utpal Dutt wrote *Titu Mir* as an independent play and produced it with his group People's Little Theatre (PLT), his aim probably was to bring back histories of peasant rebellion in Bengali popular imagination, especially after the massive electoral victory of the Left Front in the assembly election of 1977. From his interviews around the late 1970s, it becomes quite clear that political questions about communal tension and their social fallout were not at the centre of his creative vision at that point in time.¹³ *Titu Mir* was written as *jatra*-theatre – Dutt's effort to amalgamate *jatra* (the folk form of Bengali theatre) with regular proscenium theatre – to appeal to the larger masses about histories of anti-colonial struggle, about peasant histories and subaltern heroes, to wean the audience away from the public theatre.¹⁴

It is important to briefly revisit Dutt's reflections on the effectivity of *jatra* as a form 'immediately reflecting the social conflict of its time in vigorous, violent terms'.¹⁵ Though Dutt was interested in *jatra* from his first forays into theatre-making, he became a part of it in the early 1970s when he started writing playtexts for different *jatra* companies. His growing familiarity with the form resulted in a deeper understanding of the ways in which *jatra* could mould any content according to its own conventions and present to its huge urban and rural working-class audience new interpretations of social conflict within an internalized, intelligible grammar of actions. Dutt stated, quite frankly, that he could not have written *Titu Mir* without his first-hand experience of the impact of *jatra* on its audience, and that is the rationale to consider *Titu Mir* as a fusion form of *jatra* theatre – an effort to create 'specifically Indian myth' of historical conditions that produced religious warriors who politically opposed imperialism.

Titu Mir was revived in 1993 by PLT, a few months after the destruction of Babri mosque by Hindutva forces in December 1992. Dutt was part of the discussion within the group to revive the play as a protest, but unfortunately he passed away in August 1993. India as a country acutely felt the human cost of the destruction of Babri mosque in the forms of widespread Hindu–Muslim riots, explosive blasts in densely populated areas by religious extremists and a rise of Hindutva forces in the public, political and sociocultural spheres for the next three decades. PLT's decision to revive *Titu Mir* during the initial aftermath of the Babri incident, and the group's efforts not only to perform the play within Calcutta but to take it to smaller towns and rural hinterlands, reflect Dutt's steadfast ideological position to use theatre as a political weapon for the leftist cultural front to reach out to the largest number of people possible.¹⁶

In 2019 *Titu Mir* reappeared onstage. Director Joyraj Bhattacharya wrote in his short piece that Utpal Dutt's *Titu Mir* offers the perfect play to appeal to the public with both an honest emotional commitment to progressive politics and a sharpened sense of reason in understanding history. The time of this revival is significant because, by August 2019, when Theatre Formation Paribartak first performed, the right-wing government of India returned to power for the second consecutive term with even greater electoral success than their first, and Hindutva has nearly become pervasive in every aspect of Indian public life. The ensemble group has continued to perform in the city of Kolkata (Calcutta) as well as in smaller towns, even during the pandemic months whenever government measures allowed theatre performances in public. Before their performance on 26 December 2021, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata, the director dedicated the performance to the victorious farmers' movement which had concluded in November 2021 after a year-long struggle and to the struggling Adivasi people against a proposed industrial coal mine in the Deucha-Panchami region of West Bengal.

At this point in the discussion, it is important to briefly state the 'problematic' aspects of reviving *Titu Mir*. The Wahhabi association of Titu Mir, whose actual name was Mir Nisar Ali (1782–1831), has remained the rather difficult aspect in the history of the Barasat rebellion.¹⁷ The nature of Titu Mir's leadership and the famous battle in the bamboo fort built by the rebels in Narkelbaria began to be recognized as a peasant rebellion only from the 1960s.¹⁸ Dutt's playtext refers to a range of source materials cited in the historiography of the Barasat rebellion.¹⁹ His interpretation closely follows factual details available in the archive, but succeeds in infusing archival data with a sense of urgency. *Titu Mir* focuses on a narrative of revolutionary resistance to colonialism and exposes how peasant rebellions involving the rural Muslim dispossessed were marked by the British as an instance of Wahhabi religious fanaticism,²⁰ and how the Calcutta-based Hindu middle class succumbed to this British invention due to sustained propaganda in the print media against peasant rebels.²¹

Dutt's commitment to envisaging political theatre as part of the larger Marxist project of revolutionary change is an important clue to enter the world view of nineteenth-century peasant leaders in his plays. His theoretical investments in Antonio Gramsci's work allow for conceptualizing Titu Mir as an insurgent subaltern. The significance of this theoretical investment is in revising Marx's own note on the Barasat rebellion as a 'bloody fight between Moslem fanatics under Titu Mir and Hindus', which the British regiment put down.²² This critical revision of the historical context within which Marx was interpreting Titu Mir's Barasat rebellion reflects how the contemporary localizes an event like peasant insurgency. Marx was reacting to the ways in which an ostensibly localized event was transmitted as an event of Wahhabi fanaticism by the imperial apparatus of disseminating the local to the international. It was a reflection of the 'contemporary' in the nineteenth century, while Dutt engages with his 'contemporary' times of revisiting historical moments of peasant rebellion through the mutation of the socialist vision of justice and equality in the Asian contexts of China and Vietnam. The playtext articulates Titu Mir's effort to awaken

his people with his own awareness of the world – the sense of a just society that the Company denies. It is quite undeniable that the power sought by nineteenth-century peasant leaders like Titu Mir did not conform to the ideals of national secularism of post-colonial India, but their political activism depended on their modes of linking the local with the ‘outside’. Dutt localizes the contemporary through framing the political in terms of peasant consciousness and focuses on them to understand their own world view that is *different* from the colonial imagination of governance.

The 2019 production, in certain ways, condenses this idea of a *different* world view to pose its challenge to the Hindutva version of Indian history. The Hindutva interpretation of Indian nationalism wants to wipe away the difference between British colonialism and the Mughal Empire, brand Islam an ‘invading’ outsider, and mark every Muslim as a potential fanatic. Bringing *Titu Mir* back onstage with the intention of speaking differently about Indian history of peasant struggle against British imperialism consequently entails a measured approach that can speak against the rising communal tension between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary times. Anirban Bhattacharya, who plays the titular character, said in a video interview that it would have been better if *Titu Mir* had no such immediate relevance, but unfortunately it has become so relevant that performing the play is almost a necessity.²³ Theatre Formation Paribartak has declared that *Titu Mir* is an articulation of their Marxist interpretation of an ‘Islamic’ national hero and they had to forge an appropriate language of theatre that can address Dutt’s legacy of the cultural left as well as remind the audience of those Muslim anti-colonial revolutionaries who must not be expunged from India’s history of nationalist struggle (Fig. 1).



FIG. 1 Entry of Titu Mir. Photograph courtesy Theatre Formation Paribartak.

Bamboo fort scenography: performance space and historical contradiction

Designing the play's scenography became the first step to devising this appropriate language of theatre. Joyraj Bhattacharya has stated that choosing to perform an Utpal Dutt play also meant internalizing Dutt's theatre practice, but not replicating the original production.²⁴ The directorial vision of the 2019 production needed to approach the text depending on the nature of the audience and embrace the challenges inherent in Dutt's playtext to make the production relevant. In doing so, they had to carefully think about using the proscenium stage space, which Dutt had utilized with 'infinite variations, with rostra, levels, screens, revolving discs used unconventionally, as well as forms and structures used on stage'.²⁵ In Theatre Formation Paribartak's production, the stage space is dominated by a huge bamboo structure, alluding to the celebrated bamboo fort, which also frames a conventional proscenium in the middle – creating an illusion of a stage within a stage. The performance uses the entire space of the theatre hall, with ladders placed at various strategic levels – creating a courtroom, a ferry pier, the house of a colonial soldier – and the very first row of audience seating is cordoned off with a rostrum for Titu Mir's rebel band to stand in a fighting stance in one scene. The audience, therefore, is surrounded by the performance space (Fig. 2).²⁶

The urgency in Dutt's play finds resonance in this design. The history of Titu Mir's rebellion becomes a past directly in conversation with the present. The layers of 'acting out' the historical past, which was also an 'action' in terms of a set of events that had



FIG. 2 Peasant rebels dancing after a successful military campaign. Photograph courtesy Theatre Formation Paribartak.

already taken place, become accessible to the audience when actors walk through the isles simulating a ferry pier, appear at the back and at the windows on side walls of the auditorium to perform a court scene, and give out sweets to the first couple of rows in the audience to celebrate victory in battle. The stage within the stage, however, at the same time continuously breaks down an immersive experience into a critical self-awareness of witnessing.

This production has relied on the tone of the text as *jatra* theatre. The style of dialogues kindles the memory of *jatra* but the format of dialogue follows modern proscenium theatre. To capture this duality the scenography makes use of different kinds of depth both vertically and horizontally. The stage within the stage is complemented by a large rostrum at the back, creating a sloping bridge between the front and back of the stage. The episodic structure of the play, following the form of *jatra*, moves along this symbolic bridge to the proscenium-like front of the stage. Joyraj Bhattacharya explained that they maintained the balance between *jatra* and theatre through live music and smooth transition with lights from one scene to the next, like *jatra*, but with instruments like banjo and piano that are not common in *jatra*, and a composition of set designs with elevations, which are often used in *jatra*. The overall intended impact is to create a fusion form, delivering on the essence of the playtext.²⁷ The strategic placing of bamboo staff, tin drums and wooden rostra necessitates that actors keep a balance while moving on the stage horizontally. Actors also had to keep strict balance while climbing up and down the larger structure. The mobility of the actors within the stage space is organized in such a way as to disrupt smooth movement, which gives an idea of the uneven surface of Titu Mir's history and the struggles of his rebel force. Through this utilization of space, the play attempts to present the clash between the Company's well-organized army and the positional guerrilla warfare of the rebel force. The scenography endeavours to enable a critical, dialectical understanding of the characters living in this historical world.

I have focused on two triadic sets of characters to first introduce the historical conditions and then to reflect on the contradictions that emerge from their interactions. The first triad consists of Crawford Pyron, the Company agent; local landlords (Krishna Roy, Debnath Roy and Manohar Roy), who were the principal landowners in the Barasat area; and Peter Alexander, magistrate of Barasat. Captain Brandon is also introduced in the same scene, but the historical conditions that produce the character of Captain Brandon and the historical contradictions that drive his character are different. The second triad consists of Titu Mir; Miskin Shah, a warrior ascetic or fakir who had been a cavalryman in previous battles against the British; and Janjali, a madwoman roaming around the villages attacking Company servants.

'Mr Company' in control: the colonial forces align

Pyron meets local landlords to discuss the increasing political threat of Titu Mir's organization among the poor peasants in the very first scene. Pyron is carrying a copy of the medieval Bengal text *Manasa Bijoy*,²⁸ marking him as typical orientalist

scholar-administrator of the Company Raj in India. The Bengali landlords find little value in such texts. Krishna Roy laughs at Pyron's concern about Titu Mir and finds him a Wahhabi infidel, a landless foolish peasant 'like a worthless son-in-law, guest for a few days'.²⁹ Roy assures Pyron that he has taken adequate measures, like imposing taxes on growing beards and moustaches, building mosques and cow slaughter. Roy ends his disdainful description with a flamboyant expression: 'we will bark and he will squeal'.³⁰ Pyron, brandishing his intelligence report, contradicts him and says,

PYRON: ... *Rajasaheb*, when Titu Mir tells peasants to grow beards or to throw his full Arabic name at us, he is actually teaching them the dignity of standing his ground straight and firm. You are not getting that. And I think you still don't know that thousands of Hindu peasants gathered in Haidarpur a few days back to listen to Titu Mir's speech.³¹

Pyron continues to explain why Titu Mir must be stopped before his rebellion takes stronger root among peasants.

The writing historicizes the play from the beginning. From the reference to models of horse-drawn carriages to the names of alcoholic drinks it sets the period sometime in the middle of the 1820s. Costumes match these references. These details signify, but do not refer to, the British East India Company's rise in stature as the most powerful commercial-political enterprise in South Asia. The Company had already established the Permanent Settlement system of revenue collection in Bengal, thereby creating a new class of absentee landlords who were more loyal to the Company than to the needs of their landed estates. This historicization, if we follow Brecht, clearly breaks the idea of 'timelessness' in the oppression of peasants but also highlights how gigantic commercial enterprises acquire local collaborators for maximum profit – thus alerting the audience to the history as well as to the possible future manifestations of the colonial capitalist system.

Pyron, or, 'Mr Company', as he will be addressed later by the captain, stands calm and collected, explaining the danger Titu Mir poses to the Company-landlord nexus. He walks once purposefully to the front only to brandish his intelligence report. Loknath Dey, the actor playing Pyron, shows the sense of authority through his controlled hand gestures, a crooked smile at times and composed delivery of dialogue. In contrast, Krishna Roy moves quickly, making hand gestures to belittle Titu Mir, which carry a faint caricature of effeminacy. It can be read along the colonial discourse of 'effeminate Bengali',³² but the gendered meanings walk dangerously close to equating effeminacy with menace.³³ Magistrate Peter Alexander also rarely moves from his seat. The characters representing colonial forces – the agent and the magistrate – seem to be in control of the space they inhabit, while Manohar Roy, a landlord from the Mughal era, who finds it difficult to match temperament with the new landlords, also mostly remains seated in his position and fidgets a little to assert his choice of drink (Fig. 3).



FIG. 3 The meeting of East India Company Officials and local Bengali landlords. Photograph courtesy Theatre Formation Paribartak.

This triad returns in the play a few more times with different combinations of other characters. In each encounter amongst this triad, the control of the Company becomes more obvious, the caricature of effeminate gestures signalling desperate menace becomes more prominent in Krishna Roy, and the complicity of the magistrate in the Company's structure of exploitation becomes more evident. In each appearance onstage Pyron is seen to be carrying a medieval text or an artefact of Bengal, which he is about to send off to London, unveiling the complex relationship between orientalism and colonialism. The finest showing of the Company's ruthlessness happens in the penultimate scene where Pyron orders Captain Brandon to sacrifice himself and his troops in Gokna village to ensure Captain Stuart's victory against Titu Mir in the final battle of the bamboo fort in Narkelbaria. The composure of Pyron's voice becomes diabolical as he informs Captain Brandon that the Company pays him handsomely to keep him ready for such sacrifice and exits while examining an archaeological artefact.

Martyrdom, madness and hysteria: Titu Mir's performance of destiny

Titu Mir enters the stage in the second scene, set on a ferry pier, disguised as a fakir. He interrupts a public lynching of Janjali, ordered by the local inspector, Ramram Chakrabarty, with the statement 'one who has never committed a sin, should cast the first stone'. The audience have already been familiarized with Titu Mir's biography – how his early youth was spent as hired muscle for the local landlord and later as a prizefighter in the arenas of Calcutta, how he found that life excruciating and left for

Mecca, how he met Syed Ahmed Barelwi in Mecca and became his disciple – through the performances of Sajan Gazi, a local balladeer and close friend of Titu Mir. His sudden appearance with a decisive statement shows his growing mythical stature among poor villagers – peasants, artisans, weavers, cobblers – both Hindu and Muslim.

The significance of the character of Janjali within the fiction in progress is centred around a mix of vulnerability and vengeance. She had been a mistress of a local landlord, but then had been cast away from a life of luxury after her youthful beauty had worn out. In her penury she roamed the area, eventually becoming a ‘madwoman’ who attacked landlords’ hired muscle or the European indigo merchants. When she is caught after one such attack, and ordered to be lynched, Titu Mir rescues her, gently telling her not to belittle herself as *janjal* or rubbish, and gives her the name Haseena after his own sister. As villagers recognize him, he calmly threatens the inspector that his rebels have surrounded the area. Titu Mir emerges as a gentle but powerful protector of the poor, who tries to avoid gratuitous violence, and relies on guerrilla warfare to confront the Company–landlord nexus.

The character of Miskin Shah acts as the personification of Titu Mir’s destiny. The character declares the same as he enters in the middle of the fifth scene. Shah accuses Titu Mir of avoiding his destiny of martyrdom, while Titu Mir cries out that he is an ordinary poor man without the resilience to become a martyr for his people. Shah relentlessly pursues him with references to martyrs in Christian and Islamic religious traditions and Janjali intervenes with her lust for vengeance. Titu Mir falls on his knees and says,

TITU MIR: I do not have the courage to die on the crucifix in excruciating pain. I am not Jesus, I am not a martyr of Karbala.

MISKIN SHAH: Is that why you are painstakingly searching for reasons not to fight? That you are not ready, that it is not the right time, that you do not have enough weapons?

JANJALI: We will seize our weapons from them, we will make our weapons! Oh, see, my finger has sliced open, how sharp this knife is! Look, I am writing with blood – your sister Haseena, Champa, Aminullah, twenty-two people of Sarfarazpur – oh, but I cannot write. If I could, I would write – vengeance, vengeance!
(*Titu Mir listens with wonder*)

MISKIN SHAH: When are you going to embrace martyrdom? When? Tell me! Why are you breaking your tryst with destiny?
(*Suddenly Titu Mir roars and grabs the end of Miskin Shah’s robe*)

TITU MIR: My Master is my witness, never say again that Titu Mir is not a human any more, he is the incarnation of violence from hell!³⁴

Anirban Bhattacharya, playing Titu Mir, shows Titu Mir’s pleading with Miskin Shah and his final resolution to embrace martyrdom through becoming weary of the weight

of his destiny. There is a critical balance in his use of bodily gestures to signal the shedding of Titu Mir's earlier persona of gentle protector and acceptance of 'messianic violence'.³⁵ He doubles his long robe, baring his legs from the knee to give a sartorial-symbolic gesture of militancy, ties it to his waist and holds his bamboo staff like a weapon. He walks up to the front of the stage. Then he declares that he will become hell's incarnation of violence. The character of Titu Mir, through this gesture, becomes a larger-than-life revolutionary by abandoning his human vulnerabilities. But his shoulders are hunched, his knees are imperceptibly bent, showing his intensive struggle in *becoming* larger than life. This physical acting of weariness becomes the *gestus* of Titu Mir's character. After each battle, each guerrilla action, his robe gathers more bloodstains and his walk becomes more hunched. But he straightens up before every military action, maintaining the critical balance in demonstrating Titu Mir's inner struggle.

In my reading of the performance, Titu Mir's submission to the ideology of martyrdom reflects surrender to a divine madness. The rationale for this surrender disrupts causality as the principal framework of reason. Dialogues, as evident from the excerpt, are equally high-pitched in emotion and replete with Christian and Islamic theological references to martyrdom. The way Pyron deploys violence with a calculation of risk and sacrifice, which can be called law-making and law-preserving violence, following Benjamin, is distinctively different from the way Titu Mir embraces messianic violence. Messianic violence and martyrdom disrupt the instrumental logic of revolution – political violence as means for a set of achievable goals. Dutt makes an effort to cushion the ferocity of Titu Mir's transformation by allowing him to say that he would keep his friend Miskin Shah and sister Janjali close to his heart as his conscience, that the poor do not want revolutionary violence but are forced to commit it. However, even the logic of retaliatory revolutionary violence only partially explains Titu Mir's messianic violence. The other part can only be seen as a manifestation of hysteria: I am drawing on Elin Diamond's insights regarding hysteria's meaning within feminist discourse as 'a disruption of traditional epistemological methods of seeing/knowing'.³⁶

Hysteria as a set of unreadable symbols, as a spectacular bodily display of repressed agency, and as an overturning of the gender code of social order, offers an interesting reading of the way the fading light, with patches of shadow on the face and body of militant Titu Mir, shows the rupture within his character. If, in the European context, hysteria is considered 'the eruption of the lower, the animal, signifying a *sexuality* that is anti-social, even criminal, and – worst of all – inexplicable',³⁷ then the colonial context of gender codes encompasses the political within the sexual. Such a reading also allows for decoding the effeminate, inscrutable 'native' as the insurgent subaltern with a purpose and political vision beyond the causality of political action. The Brechtian implication, following Dutt's own reading of Brecht and Diamond's discussion of the usefulness of Brechtian ideas for feminist theory, could be the possibility of a *different* world than the replica of the Barasat rebellion as it had happened, a world in which a *different* kind of historical transformation *might have happened* than did happen.³⁸



FIG. 4 Titu Mir and Janjali. Photograph courtesy Theatre Formation Paribartak.

The historical conditions that produce the character of Janjali/Haseena reflect another aspect of hysteria. Janjali's madness defies the logic of revolutionary violence as the 'necessary violence to achieve the just society'. In a crucial point of plot development, Janjali is revealed to be the secret birth mother of landlord Debnath Roy. Her characteristic vengefulness comes in contradiction to her motherly affection when the rebel force enters battle with Debnath Roy. As Debnath Roy is killed by Titu Mir, Janjali is thrown back to the state of 'twisted, warped mind'. The audience sees her first transformation into lucidity through a change in costume, and her return to madness is marked by her entry, after Debnath Roy is killed, in the very first costume. She seeks revenge in the beginning as a 'madwoman', she thirsts for the blood of the lecherous enemy even in a state of lucidity, and when that revenge is finally claimed by the killing of her own son she returns to her state of madness. What constitutes her 'madness' remains an enigma within the play because it is not clear righting which wrongs would put an end to her suffering (Fig. 4).

Love and alienation in interracial romance

Dutt's critique of the collusion between colonialism and patriarchy finds the most apt representation in the doomed interracial romance between Champa and Captain Brandon. Early in the play, Champa, a rural working-class young woman, is abducted by the inspector's men and gifted to Captain Brandon as a sex slave. The twist in this relationship comes with Brandon's gifts of expensive clothes, jewellery and money to

Champa and his promise to keep her with love and respect. The character of Brandon, when he is first introduced in the meeting called by Pyron, defies the stereotype of lustful Company soldier. Brandon respects women to the extent of valuing consent in his romantic relations and he seems quite willing to marry a 'native' woman for love if his colonial European society would allow it. For Champa, an honourable escape from the daily drudgery in her impoverished father's household becomes possible because of Brandon's affection, as well as his offer of a life of luxury. When her father, Ashwini, comes to get her back, she refuses. Pyron's response to her refusal gives a glimpse of the foundational misogyny in the order of colonialism itself. Let me quote from the play:

- CHAMPA: (*with force*) I like this. I have come alive here. I am happy here. My corpse was there in your rubbish heap of starvation. You will not allow me to touch your feet, otherwise I would have done that. Please don't take the trouble of coming here again. (*Brandon bows*). Have you seen that?
(*exit*)
- PYRON: What? She didn't agree, did she? They are like that. In my experience there is a prostitute in every woman.
...
- ASHWINI: What have you done to Champa? What magic spell have you cast on her?
- PYRON: We have done it with money.
- BRANDON: No! That's not true. I have won her with love. Don't you believe that?³⁹

Pyron's utterance that there is a prostitute in every woman surely sounds problematic. However, it is important to remember that in the world of 'Mr Company', consent is another commodity that can be bought and sold. His misogyny is circumscribed by the capitalist logic of profit and loss, alienated from human emotions that connect labour with product or service. Brandon's affirmation of the power of love is contrasted with Pyron's alienation. It can certainly be read as a feminist 'gestic' moment to underline a woman's refusal to abide by her patriarchal social norms and a man's declaration of the power of love over money. The revolutionary potential of interracial romance begins to take shape through Champa and Brandon (Fig. 5).

From snippets of dialogue in different scenes, the audience can piece together the historical conditions that produce a character like Captain Brandon. Hailing from a rural parish in England, he became a professional soldier to earn a living. He was with the British forces that defeated Napoleon at Waterloo and then came to the colonies to avoid becoming a factory worker after demobilization. He could respect his 'colonial other' from his selfhood as a racial superior, reliant on the British colonial logic of the 'civilizing mission'. But his alienation due to his servitude to the Company – an entity that evaluates human beings in terms of profit and loss – began to transform his human relations. After his successive military defeats at the hands of Titu Mir's



FIG. 5 Champa and Brandon. Photograph courtesy Theatre Formation Paribartak.

guerrilla band, Brandon orders the mass rape of Bengali women in the village of Gokna to avenge the hanging of his soldiers by the rebels. The feminist 'gestic' moment thus dissolves into an alignment between colonialism, patriarchal forces and militarized violence, thwarting the earlier revolutionary potential of love. Hearing his order, Champa asks,

CHAMPA: Where is that earlier Brandon? Brandon who loved, cared, respected?
(starts crying)

BRANDON: Shut up! (shakes himself) Do not speak of that time. Don't remind me I was a man.

CHAMPA: If I had the strength – if I had a weapon – I would have killed you right here.

BRANDON: You do not have that strength ... I was a civilized man. I was a devoted reader of Walter Scott ... I used to play the piano ... Carrying constantly the gun and the sword has made my hands dry twigs. At the service of the Company. A civilized man is now the merchant's mercenary.⁴⁰

In the performance space, Brandon's descent through the path of alienation is shown through his adoption of overtly sexualized gestures and alcoholic inebriation. His alienation reaches its logical end when he kills Champa, suspecting her as a spy of the rebel forces. Titu Mir's angry response to Brandon's self-reflection after Brandon is captured by the rebel forces underlines Dutt's critique of the collusion between colonialism and patriarchy.

BRANDON: (*lost in his own thoughts*) Yes, I was not like this. I could not even think of dishonouring a woman.

TITU MIR: (*roars*) Pretence! Deceit! A mask for your banditry! Just like Pyron, an elderly man, a scholar who reads old texts – and conspires clandestinely to loot an entire nation's food, freedom, honour, honesty.

BRANDON: Why did this happen? How could I change in this way?

TITU MIR: Brandon, is it really possible that you will be hired muscle for the Company and still remain a good man? Is such fraud possible in Allah's creation?⁴¹

If we try to answer Titu Mir's questions, we need to be aware that the politics of race, supported through the colonial capitalist structure of exploitation, is always closely connected with the politics of sexuality. As the 'dangerous margins' of the colony became part of the known through travel, migration and labour, explaining the spatial difference of colony through temporal difference became an important part of the race question. The feminization of the colonial space, intricacies in the intimate relations between European colonialists and 'native' women, and the rules of governance that shifted from Creole conjugality to strict racial segregation defined the nature of the relationship between gender inequalities, colonial racism and imperial authority.

Conclusion: a post-colonial feminist 'gestic' critique

The characters of Champa and Janjali emerge as victims of the historical contradictions between colonial violence and revolutionary violence. However, neither religious nor racial affiliation offers an adequate framework to 'unmake' the patriarchy inherent in the colonial capitalist project that produced this contradiction. This historical contradiction becomes meaningful when race, religion and gender are aligned with class from the post-colonial feminist perspective.⁴² Consequently, a feminist gestic critical reflection on *Titu Mir* can take shape only through complex alignments of

class and gender in relation to their colonial manifestations. However, class as an analytical framework is disturbingly uneven for Europe and its colonies. It is imperative to make sense of class through its implications. I would suggest that such a reading is possible only when the alienation effect as an inevitable implication of class relations is taken into account within the performance of the play,⁴³ as well as in terms of its impact on the audience.

Within the play, Titu Mir asserts at different moments that his rebellion is not only against the rapacious Company but also against its rich collaborators – the landed gentry. He finds allies from unlikely quarters, like Manohar Roy – the landlord from the Mughal era who comes to Titu Mir to align his forces. Manohar Roy states that the Company will take away his lands sooner or later and he finds it better to align with the rebel forces than with the British. Titu Mir's rebellion thus becomes, first and foremost, an anti-colonial struggle, but retains a distinctive character of class war through the participation of poor Hindu peasants and rich Hindu landlords on his side. In the final moments of the play, a dying Titu Mir gives out a call to future generations to fight against the enemy with greater resilience and astuteness.

Amidst the audience appreciation, however, Pyron appears onstage, narrating in brief staccato sentences with his characteristic control over his emotions that Titu Mir's severed head was displayed on a pike in Calcutta after the Company artillery demolished the bamboo fort. It becomes an exemplary demonstration of the Brechtian alienation effect, where the audience's empathy with Titu Mir and his followers is broken with an unembellished statement of historical fact. The return to alienation, for the audience, perhaps achieves the intended effect of thinking about the viewing experience in the context of our contemporary times, which bears the legacy of the historical context referred to in the play.

The alienation effect brings me back to the meticulously etched alienation process of Captain Brandon – a character who begins with audience sympathy but ends in horrific disgrace. It may be interesting to remember that Dutt had initially maintained Brandon's character as an honourable soldier to the end, but changed the script after the preview of the production.⁴⁴ Allowing a colonial British soldier to remain respectful of 'native' women and even to die while in a blissful interracial romantic relationship, after veritably rescuing her from poverty, would have contradicted the audience's expectation. It may be an interesting rabbit hole to follow if Brandon had remained a faithful lover and interracial romance had realized its revolutionary potential within feminist gestic criticism. However, given the playtext as it is and given its history of anticipated audience disapproval, it may be equally interesting to probe why the audience might have disapproved.

The representation of lustful British soldiers or indigo merchants in Bengali theatre has been prevalent since Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (1860). Changing the stereotype completely would have surely contradicted a particular viewing practice, and attempting that in a *jatra* theatre like *Titu Mir* might have defeated the political purpose of taking a play about peasant rebellion to a greater number of audiences in the rural hinterland. In addition to that, the suspicion of men in military uniforms as possible sexual assaulters lingered after the intensely politically violent period in

Bengal in the early 1970s. It may not be idle speculation that the severity of sexual violence against women during the Second World War, by American and British regiments stationed in Calcutta, remained in popular memory when the play was first staged in 1978.⁴⁵

Champa's tragic end, following the mass rape of village women by Company forces, exposes militarized sexual violence against women and the alienated patriarchal structures enmeshed in interracial romance. While Champa's death indicates gendered vulnerabilities associated with violence itself, Janjali's madness points at futility in revolutionary violence manifested through Titu Mir's insistence on merciless destruction of the enemy. Did Janjali become 'mad' because she could never acknowledge her own son? Or because she was thrown into destitution? Or because her son became her enemy? Or because of her son's killing by the rebels? Or because of a summation of all these reasons? Janjali's hysteric lullaby, after Debnath Roy is killed, is an entrenched critique of the collusion between colonialism and patriarchy. It becomes a moment of post-colonial feminist 'gestic' critique because her relapse into madness confirms the feminist reading of hysteria as a disruption, even in the discourse of revolutionary violence. Showing the entire process of Captain Brandon's alienation and turning into a monster, Champa's refusal of her father's call to return home for Brandon's love, and later her willingness to kill Brandon for his atrocity, equally become a post-colonial feminist 'gestic' critique of 'unmaking' colonialism's collusion with patriarchy. Champa and Janjali's integral roles in the way Titu Mir's character is developed in the play make the historical conditions that produce the figure of the insurgent subaltern gender-inclusive, and post-colonial feminism finds a reliable ally in feminist gestic critique of theatre studies.

NOTES

- 1 Atis Dasgupta, 'Titu Meer's Rebellion: A Profile', *Social Scientist*, 11, 10 (1983), pp. 39–48.
- 2 Utpal Dutt, *Titu Mir*, in *Utpal Dutta Natok Samagra, Vol. VI* (Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh, 2017), pp. 295–362, here p. 310.
- 3 *Habshi* is derived from 'Abyssinian'. Abyssinians in India have historically been referred to as *Habshi*.
- 4 Utpal Dutt, *Titu Mir*, p. 329.
- 5 Asghor Ali Engineer, *Communal Riots after Independence* (Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2009); Paul R. Brass, *The Production of Hindu–Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005); Prathama Banerjee, 'Are Communal Riots a New Thing in India? Yes, and it Started with the British', *ThePrint*, 3 March 2020, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/are-communal-riots-a-new-thing-in-india-yes-and-it-started-with-the-british/374458> (accessed 17 February 2022).
- 6 See www.facebook.com/Titumir.collective/posts/160238771980605 (accessed 17 February 2022).
- 7 Dinabandhu Mitra (1830–73) was a Bengali playwright who worked as an administrative official in the postal department and later on the railways. His best-known play, *Neel Darpan* (1860), is a scathing criticism of exploitative indigo plantations in Bengal, also depicting the Indigo Revolt of 1856. Utpal Dutt (1929–93) was one of the most significant playwrights and theatre-makers of post-colonial India. Dutt envisaged political theatre as part of the Marxist movement for his entire career. His works remain testament to his artistic imagination in forging 'people's theatre' through a politicized mass of audience.
- 8 Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 3–42.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

- 10 The field of study of gender and imperial formations is an important aspect of feminist history. See, for example, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003); Anne Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Thinking through Colonial Ontologies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 11 Utpal Dutt, 'Jopenda Jopen Ja' and 'Brecht O Marxbad', in *Utpal Dutta Godyo Sangraha, Vol. I* (Kolkata: KP Bagchi, 1998), pp. 125–236, here pp. 283–348.
- 12 Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 54.
- 13 Interview with Utpal Dutt, first published in *Bangladesh*, December 1977.
- 14 For Dutt's views on *jatra* and its connection with theatre see his *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar and Sons, 1995).
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 16 Conversations with Bishnupriya Dutt, co-creator of this revival, who also played a principal character.
- 17 Wahhabi Islam is a conservative orthodox sect and its association with militarized activism in the recent past has been rendered almost a 'terror' threat. However, the history of Arabian followers of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab (1703–92), who put greater emphasis on consulting directly the Quran and the Hadith in the everyday religious life of Muslims, and the ways in which Wahhabism spread in South Asia following Syed Ahmed Bareilwi (1786–1831) is much more complex than a simplistic history of Islamic fanaticism. Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- 18 Suprakash Roy, *Bharate Krishak Bidroha O Ganatantrik Sangram* (Kolkata: Radical Impression, 2012; first published 1966).
- 19 Colvin's Report to the Judicial Department in 1832 and the Dampier Report, which was Proceedings of the Judicial Department, 1847. W. W Hunter's *The Indian Mussalmans* (1876) and O'Kinealy's *The Wahabis in India* (1870). *Utpal Dutta Natok Samagra, Vol. VI*, pp. 299–304.
- 20 The Great Wahhabi Case (1869–71) in India, Julia Stephens has argued, almost invented the figure of the Wahhabi religious fanatic in the 1860s and 1870s to establish British authoritarian governance in the colonies. This 'phantom Wahhabi', Stephens explains, was in part real, as conservative Islamic religious reform was prevalent in India from the North-West Frontier to Bengal from the 1820s, but not entirely so. Islamic religious reform was met with repressive measures, especially in Bengal by Hindu landlords, turning it into more a contradiction between the poor peasantry and landlords. Julia Stephens, 'The Phantom Wahhabi: Liberalism and the Muslim Fanatic in Mid-Victorian India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 47, 1 (2013), pp. 22–52.
- 21 Biharilal Sarkar's biography of Titu Mir (1897) and Kumudnath Mallik's history of Nadia district (*Nadia-Kahini* (1911)) branded the Barasat rebellion an anti-Hindu communal riot. Even Bhupendranath Dutta, an early socialist activist and thinker, described Titu Mir's rebellion as an instance of Islamic religious fanaticism irredeemable as a peasant rebellion.
- 22 Karl Marx, *Notes on Indian History (664–1858)* (Moscow: Foreign Language Press, 1947), p. 129.
- 23 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGouWn1fjCU (accessed 17 February 2022).
- 24 Interview with Joyraj Bhattacharya, 16 August 2022, Kolkata.
- 25 Samik Bandyopadhyay, 'Theatre: From Metropolis to Wasteland' in Hiranmay Karlekar, ed., *Independent India: The First Fifty Years* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 417–428, here p. 420.
- 26 The artist Hiran Mitra designed the scenography.
- 27 Interview with Joyraj Bhattacharya.
- 28 A fifteenth-century Bengali text written by Bipradas.
- 29 Dutt, *Titu Mir*, p. 310.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 311.

- 32 Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
- 33 Joyraj Bhattacharya has argued that such a characterization depended on the subtext of the character as a lover of coquettish dances popular among the absentee landlords typical of the period.
- 34 Dutt, *Titu Mir*, pp. 335–6.
- 35 Walter Benjamin, *Towards a Critique of Violence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).
- 36 Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 5.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 9, emphasis mine.
- 38 Dutt, 'Brecht O Marxbad', pp. 306–11.
- 39 Dutt, *Titu Mir*, p. 337.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 355.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 359.
- 42 Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Richa Nagar, 'Mapping Feminisms and Difference', in L. A. Staeheli, E. Kofman and L. J. Peake, eds., *Mapping Women, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 31–48; Ania Loomba and Ritty Lukose, eds., *South Asian Feminism* (Delhi: Zubaan, 2011).
- 43 Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, pp. 45–7; Janelle Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 8–12.
- 44 Conversation with Bishnupriya Dutt.
- 45 Yasmin Khan, *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 175–200.

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