

Crime and Causality: Contextualising the lumpenproletariat within Capitalist Societies as Observed in Bertolt Brecht's 'The Good Woman of Schezwan' and Badal Sircar's 'Hattamalar Oparey'

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Abstract: *Marx and Engels considered the lumpenproletariat or the underclass, consisting of the unemployed, petty thieves, criminals and prostitutes "social scum" or the "declassé" group, devoid of class consciousness. According to them, this group emerges as a reactionary force as opposed to revolutionary, exploiting society to serve its own ends and in turn is exploited by the bourgeoisie as tools of destruction. Alternately, Algerian psychiatrist and Marxist philosopher Frantz Fanon, hails the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat as integral to a proletarian revolution if well organized under a fitting leadership. What Fanon primarily emphasizes is the exploitative mechanism through which the bourgeoisie, in pursuit of its profit-maximising imperial project, creates a mass of unemployed people, who, in turn, constitute the lumpenproletariat. When Bertolt Brecht writes 'The Good Person of Szechwan', he adopts the vision of Fanon; through the protagonist Shen Te, a prostitute, he demonstrates how exploitation operates within the capitalist system, compromising the inherent goodness in individuals, creating the depraved lumpenproletariat. Likewise, Badal Sircar, one of the most conspicuous Marxist playwrights of Bengal and the creator of the 'third theatre' significantly influenced by the Brechtian epic theatre, has explicated on the issue of the lumpenproletariat in his play 'Hattamalar Oparey'. Through the protagonists, Kena and Becha, a pair of thieves who stray into a land of classless and moneyless communal living, Sircar's play aligns with the Fanonian critique of the declassé as a direct product of capitalist exploitation, becoming the strongest case in favour of this paper's argument. I shall attempt a comparative study of the two plays employing an interdisciplinary critical approach to affirm how Fanon's argument informs them. Besides, I shall also demonstrate, through Marxist critique, how both of these plays reflect the social reality steeped in economic exploitation while also drawing parallels between the protagonists of the aforementioned plays in an effort to connect the global material conditions of the working class situated in seemingly different spatial realities.*

Keywords: lumpenproletariat, Marxist, Fanon, bourgeoisie, proletariat, exploitation, epic theatre, third theatre

1. Introduction

"I'd like to be good, of course, but how am I to pay my rent? ...I too should like not to exploit anyone, not to rob the helpless. But how? How? Even when I break only a few of the commandments, I can hardly survive....How can I be good when everything is so expensive?" (Brecht, TGPS 10) – the protagonist, Shen Te, of Brecht's 'The Good Woman of Schezwan' looks for answers in the very prologue of the play as the "illustrious ones" promptly reply that they "mustn't meddle with economics!" (Brecht, TGPS 11) Thus, alluding to the dire consequences of a free market economy, Brecht sets the tone for one of his seminal works in the field of epic theatre. As one of the most important Marxist writers, Brecht's oeuvre remains relevant till date and especially now as the world finds itself reeling with the ramifications of impending late-stage capitalism. In 'The Good Woman of Schezwan', Brecht investigates the issue of morality within the framework of a capitalist society, harping on the idea of depravity being a direct and intended upshot of capitalism. On a similar navigation of morality and crime rests the foundation of one of Badal Sircar's prominent third-theatre plays, "Hattamalar Oparey" which takes two petty thieves on a bewildering journey through a land of communal living, described by several critics as a "communist utopia". Sircar's third theatre was significantly influenced by Brechtian avant-garde theatre, apart from the considerable influences from Jerzy Grotowski's 'poor theatre' and Antonin Artaud's "theatre of cruelty", which has been widely discussed from structural perspectives within the realm of criticism. This essay seeks to navigate the striking similarities in the

ideological underpinnings of their political thought as observed in two of their aforementioned plays. Both of these plays are informed by Marxist thought as is most of their body of work but the focal point of these particular plays is the lumpenproletariat (or the "declassé") and their predicament. What this essay primarily attempts to do is to deconstruct how these plays emerge as critiques of capitalism in the context of the causality associated with the 'declassé' by drawing on the theoretical renditions of Marxist tradition while also simultaneously placing it within the global context.

2. Discussion

Marx, in his *Capital* posits that the mass of unemployed people generated within a capitalist economy or as he calls them, the Industrial Reserve Army, is not accidental but integral to capital accumulation which sustains the capitalist system. The means of production can be divided into constant capital which, while transferring value, does not generate surplus value and variable capital from within which labour generates the surplus value or profits, according to Marxian economics. In order to maximise profits by lowering the cost of production, the owner resorts to an increasing use of technology or capital per unit labour, which in Marxist terminology is referred to as an increase in the "organic composition of capital". It directly results in the creation of an unemployed mass of "redundant" labour or surplus labour, which thus emerges as a natural consequence of the capitalist system. This is what Marx characterises as the Industrial Reserve Army. The industrial reserve army "had two functions in the process of capital accumulation - to ensure

that labour reserves in excess of the demand for labour required for capital accumulation were generated; and subsequently to guarantee that additional labour which enter the workforce do so without substantially altering the wage level i.e. to avoid wage increases beyond what Marx called "the tolerance limits." (Collins 51)

Marx argues, thus, that this reserve army of labour is "the pivot upon which the law of demand and supply of labour works. It confines the field of action to this law within the limits absolutely convenient to the activity of exploitation and to the domination of capital." (Marx, Capital 598) The lowest tier of this industrial reserve army and thus, the proletariat, is what Marx calls the *lumpenproletariat* or the *declassé* or the *underclass*, "which in all big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, men without hearth or home." (Marx, TCSF 17) He actively dismisses their revolutionary potential, because he believed that they were devoid of class consciousness, based on which he and Engels argue,

"...the "dangerous class", [lumpenproletariat] the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue" (TCM 20), therefore highlighting the idea that this group emerges as a reactionary force as opposed to revolutionary, exploiting society to serve its own ends and in turn is exploited by the bourgeoisie as tools of destruction. Algerian psychiatrist and Marxist philosopher differs with Marx on the very issue of the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat, but we shall delve into that set of ideas in the latter half of the essay. The idea that they both align with is that the lumpenproletariat is the outcome of capitalistic exploitation of the labour force leading to unemployment as formerly elaborated. Brecht and Sarkar echo this very idea in their plays, *The Good Woman of Schetzwan* and *Hattamalar Oparey* respectively.

The very opening of this essay highlights Brecht's preoccupation with the systemic degradation of morality in a free-market, capitalist economy; Shen Te, the protagonist, lives from hand to mouth working as a prostitute, an occupation that falls under the scope of the lumpenproletariat since Marx and Engels considered it immoral and corrupt, characteristic of this 'dangerous class'. However, Brecht, through *The Good Woman of Schetzwan*, renders a sharp critique of this view of depravity being typical to exclusively the lumpenproletariat; he propounds the issue of depravity as incidental to the exploitation of the proletariat within an economic system of bourgeoisie dominance. On having received a substantial amount of money from the "hands of God", Shen Te does transgress class boundaries by buying a tobacco shop to run by herself, thus elevating herself from the class position of a lumpenproletariat, but finds herself in repeated moral conundrum regardless. From Shen Te's moral conundrum as such arises the greed-ridden, exploitative alter-ego, Shui Ta who performs the evil actions that are widely believed to be intrinsic to the survival of the working class in a capitalist economy. This split-self of the protagonist is a

classic demonstration of "false consciousness" as Engels writes, which leads Shen Te to transform into the depraved Shui Ta in order to weed out competition from other members of the working class, as she fails to acknowledge themselves as all being the subjects of the same exploitative machinery oiled by the bourgeoisie ideological and repressive state apparatuses (Althusser 14). The creation of a split-character in itself is integral to the plays greatness as one of the most important works in the realm of epic theatre, emerging as a physical manifestation of dialectical materialism, allowing the audience to rise above empathy and immediately engage with the political discourse embedded within the play (Brecht, OT 58-60). Sircar's *Hattamalar Oparey*, whose protagonist happen to be two thieves, Kena (which in English translates to "buy") and Becha (which translates to "sell"), foreshadows the possibility of dialectical discourse finding artistic exploration. The pair of thieves as the physical manifestation of two kinds of consciousness arising from their material reality is exhibited best when they disagree on looting a library which holds the community's valuables to be taken on rent as they navigate through the land of communal living. While Becha, fascinated by the classless and moneyless land where everything that is produced is communally shared, begins abiding by its 'strange' laws, Kena grapples with his disbelief in the existence of a land as such where he lives in no fear or exploitation. While Becha embodies hope in a communist future followed by a revolution, Kena embodies the anxieties associated with the material reality of the working class which has relegated him to the position of the declassed individual as they engage in a fierce argument over whether they should rob the library stacked with valuables like they used to at their native land of Hattamala or give into their belief in a life free from exploitation in this land beyond (Sarkar 400, 401). The artistic implementation of dialectical materialism is encoded in several conversations throughout the play; a distinct one among them reads thus:

"Kena: Can we really live without work?"

Doctor: True, we cannot. We work and we produce our own goods. Through such work, people can access so many things – food, clothes, houses, books pens! We work together to produce these goods so that we can share them equally among ourselves as per our needs!

Kena: Bullshit! If it were so, would we thief? Would we go to jail? Would we have to tolerate beatings from mobs?

Doctor: But think of this – through two months of work in a year, we can produce enough of those goods necessary for our sustenance. Through the next ten months, we can be producing those that we desire.

Becha: If it were so, why do people like us die of hunger?

Doctor: That is the fundamental question. Why do they? That shouldn't be happening.

Kena: Those rich bastards are consuming all of it!" (Sarkar 407)

While dialectical materialism presents itself vividly through this exchange of dialogue, the ideas expressed in the

conversation informs the thought that the relations of production within the capitalist economy create the underclass who are forced to resort to occupations Marx refers to as “immoral” or “depraved”.

While Marx harboured significant disdain for the ‘underclass’, considering them devoid of class consciousness, Brecht and Sarkar’s stand on the *declassé* is divorced from his moralization. They position the *declassé* as the modern day ‘homo sacer’ stripped of their political identity, down to bare life, who can be punished, tortured or killed without impunity (Agamben 45-48) by the bourgeoisie state as a spectacle in order to shock the working class into discipline that would aid its profiteering motives. In “The Good Woman of Schezwan”, Shen Te emerges as the ‘homo sacer’ or the sacred man whose life remains largely disposable, depicted by whoever she considered her very own taking her kindness for granted, as long as she is bereft of capital and yet, chooses the path of honesty. Brecht implies that the only way that an individual in a capitalist society believes that they can employ to transgress from the entity of a bare life to the upper wrungs of a political being was to resort to depravity as dictated by their false consciousness manufactured and injected systematically by the ruling class. The plight of the kind Shen Te becomes a dreadful spectacle for the rest, including Shui Ta, thus diverting the proletarian masses from the cause of working-class solidarity to self-preservation. Likewise, Badal Sarkar depicts this spectacle of plight through an elaborate sequence of an angry mob going on a goose chase behind Kena and Becha, as they nearly drown in a river. As the witnesses watch them drown, the disposability of their lives become stark through the former’s statements: “...this is how thieves die!” (379) Not a single witness goes about to look for them; instead the assumption of the death of thieves renders them a tad comfortable, while elevating the moral high ground of every individual in the mob as they weed the “enemy” out, thus gearing them towards self-preservation, thwarting the possibility of them attaining class consciousness.

Thus, the two plays, Brecht’s “The Good Woman of Schezwan” and Sarkar’s “Hattamalar Oparey”, both revolutionary in nature, stem from a similar standpoint within the scope of Marxist theory. Both stray away from the traditional Marxist discourse regarding the lumpen as a hindrance to revolution and rework Marxist thought in a way that aligns with later Marxist thinkers like Frantz Fanon who recognized that “it is in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead.” (87) In the chapter, Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weaknesses, Fanon writes, “the lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces...”, an idea which finds its expression in Shen-Te’s inadvertent defiance of the Gods who represent the institution of the ruling class for tearing her into two and ultimately abandoning her giving way to the epilogue addressing the audience, calling for economic and social change. In fact, this very idea finds a voice equally well in the denouncement of their lives as thieves in Hattamala by Kena and Becha, the moment their material conditions improve. Thus, Fanon’s idea of depravity as a direct psychological consequence of one’s material conditions underscores both of these plays situated in different spatial and temporal realities.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to understand how the two plays that this essay revolves around ultimately critique the eventual aftermath of pervasively internalized “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2) which enables severe exploitation while also coercively relegating a number of proletarians into “deathworlds” in order to sustain this exploitative system (Mbembe 16). Thus, The Good Woman of Schezwan and Hattamalar Oparey emerge as mouthpieces in favour of the worst off in an oppressive system, as they stand tall and timeless as subversive voices against systemic marginalization operating within capitalist societies.

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