

Subverting Colonial Portraiture: Utpal Dutt's Revisionary Dramatization of Political Violence, Anti-Imperialist Solidarity and Nationalist Resistance in *The Great Rebellion*

Oliva Roy

Department of English, Institute of Applied Sciences and Humanities

GLA University, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email: oliva.roy@gla.ac.in

Abstract Utpal Dutt's didactic socio-political play, *The Great Rebellion*, set against the backdrop of Sepoy Mutiny, India's first war of Independence, of 1857, offers a gripping saga of indigenous resistance to the domination and exploitation of Western Imperialism. It is a classic exemplar of Dutt's Theatre of Revolution that exuberantly constitutes radical anti-colonial ethos, colonial violence and nationalist resistance. The drama conveys the playwright's revolutionary propaganda against the emerging trends of imperialism and fascism, and capitalism in Indian society. Dutt explicitly portrays the pain and pathos the autochthonous people went through in the wake of the British colonial expansion in the Indian subcontinent. The play chronicles the chaotic socio-political conditions and political violence that led to the outbreak of an organized rebellion against the rule of the British East India Company in 1857. Dutt's counter-hegemonic discourse delineates a violent history of western hegemony and colonial repression that have bred and given rise to a strong, cultural, intellectual and dynamic force against British Empire's oppression. Furthermore, Dutt has attempted to destabilize the colonialist myths and challenged the implicit fallacies of Western dominant discourse by reviving colonial history from his own perspective, which is in itself a form of anti-colonial resistance. He has also employed a historical setting to foster a sense of national identity among his contemporary audience. This article aims to explore how Utpal Dutt's *The Great Rebellion* produce counter-hegemonic narrative to the authoritative ideologies of control and subjugation. A re-reading of Dutt's drama as a text of resistance will provide a better understanding of the dialectic of repression and resistance that shapes Utpal Dutt's dramatic World. The study adopted Frantz Fanon's principles of

violence and resistance with a view to establish strategies of anti-colonial resistance in the text.

Keywords Colonial hegemony; Resistance; Sepoy Mutiny; Protest Drama

Author **Oliva Roy** is Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Institute of Applied Sciences and Humanities, GLA University. Her research interests include: Gender Studies, Postcolonial Literature, Theatre Studies, Indian English Literature.

Introduction

Utpal Dutt, a phenomenal actor, director, writer-playwright and theatre-activist, used theatre as a potent tool for social change and development. He was known for writing didactic socio-political plays, to spread socio-political awareness among the oblivious masses of the Indian society and to educate them in the Marxist doctrines. He revolutionized the Indian theatre by breaking away from the conventional and traditional theatrical form. He was one of the most prominent and influential playwrights who worked voraciously to bring revolution on the Indian stage, especially the Bengali stage. The indefatigable Thespian contributed significantly towards the formation of modern Bengali theatre, as his plays voiced his intransigent protest against the authoritarian government and concurrently, showed his impressive experimentation with different dramatic techniques, theatrical devices and genres. In literary parlance, Utpal Dutt is acknowledged as a pioneering voice of the radical political theatre of India that sprouted in the aftermath of independence. He strongly believed that, “theatre must preach revolution; it must not expose the system but also call for the violent smashing of the state machine” (Dutt 1971). Dutt was of the opinion that theatre should not only expose the hypocrisy, bigotry, exploitation and anachronistic practices thriving in our society, but it should also lead to revolution. To attain this far-fetched dream, he started writing radical anti-establish plays depicting events drawn wholly or partly from recorded history. *The Great Rebellion* is Utpal Dutt’s one of the best-known protest plays, that chronicles a series of events leading up to the beginning of an organized rebellion against the rule of the British East India Company in 1857.

A Nation in Crisis

The Great Rebellion is one of the most influential revolutionary dramas penned by Utpal Dutt. Set against the backdrop of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the play addresses the discrimination, outright violent persecution and genocidal campaigns launched against the indigenous peoples of the land by the European settlers. Dutt

explicitly portrays the pain and pathos the autochthonous people went through in the wake of the British colonial expansion in the Indian subcontinent. Dutt's counter-hegemonic discourse candidly delineates the British exploitation of the Indian economy and their deliberate destruction of the indigenous handicraft industries of the country, which resulted in unscrupulous exploitation of the rural people in the hands of zamindars. The systematic exploitation of the imperial Government created a wave of resentment, discontent and revolutionary nationalism spread throughout the country, which ultimately culminated in the country's first major nationalistic revolt against the British Raj. The story of the play progresses through a series of episodic scenes, depicting the deplorable plight of the Indian weavers, and the growing discontent among them. The first scene of the play, set in the year 1840, serves as a prologue, that establishes the context, sets the tone for the play and prepares the audience for the forthcoming action and drama. The inhuman atrocities carried out by the British colonial forces have been realistically portrayed in the very first scene of the play. Imperial rule ruthlessly crippled India's handloom textile industry in order to acquire monopolistic control over Indian trade and production, seizing power by brute force and gratuitous violence. The exploitative policies of the British colonial government brought about a fundamental change in structure of the Indian economy, which profoundly affected the lives of the handloom weavers of rural India, turning them into destitute beggars. Karl Marx, in his article, "The British Rule in India" has described the destructive impact of colonialism on Indian cotton and handloom industry:

It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian hand-loom and destroyed the spinning-wheel. England began with driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindostan, and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons. From 1818 to 1836 the export of twist from Great Britain to India rose in the proportion of 1 to 5,200. In 1824 the export of British muslins to India hardly amounted to 1,000,000 yards, while in 1837 it surpassed 64,000,000 of yards. But at the same time the population of Dacca decreased from 150,000 inhabitants to 20,000. This decline of Indian towns celebrated for their fabrics was by no means the worst consequence. British steam and science uprooted, over the whole surface of Hindostan, the union between agriculture and manufacturing industry. (Marx 128)

Utpal Dutt's heart-wrenching play follows the story of a weaver family which is

struggling really hard to make ends meet, after the advent of British rule. Three generations of Budhan's family have sat at the handloom, spinning out fabric and now they are facing a grave economic crisis because of the discriminatory tariff and trade policies adopted by the British colonial government. In the first scene, set in 1840, the playwright expounds the persistent suffering and brutal subjugation of the indigenous communities after the arrival of the English colonial settlers.

Budhan Singh, a simple, honest and hardworking weaver, incurs the wrath of the Britishers by selling his hand-made cloth at a cheap rate. Determining the selling price of the hand-made products of an indigenous weaver does not come under the purview of the East India Company, especially since Bahadur Shah is the Emperor of India, alive and reigning on the throne of Delhi. Being a subject of the Emperor in Delhi, Budhan refuses to sell his hand-made products at a high price set by a foreign trading company. Unable to withstand the defiance of an independent-minded hard-working weaver, the Britishers administered the severe punishment of chopping off the thumbs of Budhan to prevent him from working again and to discourage others from committing the same offense. The following extract from the text throws light on the British imperialist exploitation of India and the growing discontent among the indigenous people against their rule:

Panjakush: The Englishmen burnt down the weavers' settlements. Dhaka had 1,50,000 citizens, now it has less than 30,000. I hear tigers prowl the suburbs now. The Englishmen are taking away cotton from this country, turning it into cloth on their own, and selling it back to us at huge profit. (Dutt 139)

The British imperialists, taking advantage of the weak rule of Bahadur Shah, used violence against their colonized subjects to serve their economic interests and to uphold, expand and consolidate their social and political control over the people of Indian subcontinent. They flooded the Indian markets with expensive machine-made clothes, and coerced the indigenous weavers to shut down their looms. Dutt provides here a devastating portrait of how the East India Company decimated the independent cotton and handloom industry of the country:

Budhan: The Company doesn't want us to sell broadcloth in the market.

....

Panjakush: They don't want us to weave cloth. So, they've clamped a tariff of 10 percent on Indian cotton, 20 on silk and 30 on wool. Whereas English textiles pay only three and half percent. (Dutt 139)

Frazer, the agent of the East India Company, keeps insisting that India is traditionally an agricultural country and, therefore, there is no need for artisans like Budhan Singh. Panjakush refutes his idiotic claim by asserting:

Panjakush: Agricultural, is it? You think this cloth grows in the fields? You think the Cashmere shawl and the Dhaka muslin are found in paddy-fields? You are destroying the manufacturers of this country, reducing it to absolute dependence on agriculture. You are trying to set its history back by a few centuries, to destroy its civilization. (Dutt 142)

The European settlers inflicted agony and misery of unprecedented levels upon the innocent indigenous people of the country. The gravity of the situation becomes evident when Panjakush's land is being put up for auction by the East India Company. He is the grandson of Emperor Bahadur Shah, and still he failed to save his land from the clutches of the colonizers. It bears evidence to the appalling fact that taking advantage of the weak rule of Emperor Bahadur Shah, the European traders drastically diminished the control held by the Mughals and assumed sovereignty over India. And with this abrupt powershift, the long process of colonial exploitation, political repression and brutal subjugation of Indigenous peoples began.

Resistance to Political Power

Utpal Dutt's anti-establishment plays not only provide insight into social-realities, but also instigate the oppressed commoners to muster up the courage to rise up and revolt against the entrenched social and economic injustice. The prime purpose of Utpal Dutt's revolutionary theatre was to recreate the valiant struggles fought in the past on modern stage before an audience and shed light on the fortitude and resilience of the gallant revolutionaries who selflessly sacrificed the comforts of life fighting for a better world, in which the freedom, justice and dignity of every individual was respected. As Dutt has proclaimed, "Our 'program' is to bring the stories of the gallant revolutionary struggles of another people to our own people so that they too will be inspired to fight" (Dutt 1967). Dutt's play, *The Great Rebellion* follows this concept of revolutionary theatre. The playwright presents a dramatized version of the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, a glorious struggle against imperialism, and brings to the fore the unflinching determination and courage of the valiant sepoys who laid down their lives on the alter of their motherland. The play

extols the glorious role played by the native sepoys in the war of independence. The playwright has craftily forged a glorious image of the leading characters of the play, Risaldar Heera Singh, whose indomitable spirit and unflagging resilience grabs the attention of the audience. The leading characters of the play assert their individuality vehemently through anti-colonial resistance. Besides the struggle for national liberation, resistance to discriminatory social norms and gender biases also reverberates throughout the play.

Despite threats of violence, Budhan Singh, an efficient, free-spirited weaver, refuses to obey the direct orders of East India company and protests vociferously against the horrendous injustice inflicted on the hapless poor weavers of colonial Bengal. As the acclaimed French postmodernist, Michel Foucault has claimed: “Where there is power, there is a resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.’ Resistance is a reaction to power, and in this context, Budhan’s refusal to increase the price of his hand-woven cloth can be labelled as a vehement resistance against the growing power of the imperial forces. He refuses to concede defeat before the destructive politics of the East India Company, and resolves to fight for justice:

Frazer: The Company orders you to raise your price to five rupees a yard.

Budhan: As the gods are my judge, even the Emperor cannot order me to change the price of my own stuff. Why don’t you bring the price of English cloth down instead – to one rupee a yard?

Frazer: We have to ship our goods across the ocean. We cannot cut our prices down. So, you have to raise yours.

Budhan: That is not possible.

Frazer: But this is suicide. We hold a monopoly over the whole of Hindustan. What will you do – a lonely helpless weaver?

Budhan: You may call this a protest on behalf of all those weavers who died of hunger. You may say their blood has dyed my yarn. You may call it a final demonstration. (Dutt 139)

Budhan’s noncompliance enraged the Britishers, who orders his thumb to be cut off. His thumb along with his only means of livelihood gets slaughtered, despite vehement protests from natives. This outrageous and atrocious act of violence incited Panjakush to lash out at the Britishers in an explosive outburst of anger:

Panjakush: You will get your answer, a terrifying bloody answer. And you

will wonder then why such an outbreak should burst over this country. Many thousand corpses will bar your path to salvation. Only remember – you started it all. (Dutt 143)

Panjakush made it crystal clear in his statement that the enslaved people of this land will soon take up arms against their tyrant oppressor to avenge the many wrongs inflicted upon them and their families by a barbarous foe. The acclaimed decolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon has argued that violence has always been a part of anti-colonial resistance movements and that a violent response is the only effective means to redress the entrenched systems of colonial oppression that denied them human dignity:

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters. To wreck the colonial world is henceforward a mental picture of action which is very clear, very easy to understand and which may be assumed by each one of the individuals which constitute the colonized people. To break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished lines of communication will be set up between the two zones. The destruction of the colonial world is no more and no less that the abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth or its expulsion from the country. (FANON 39)

The savage punishment meted out for insubordination, instigated the oppressed indigenous people to rise up and revolt against the dominance and exploitation of the imperial forces. Budhan Singh's noncompliance eventually led to the outbreak of an organized rebellion in 1857.

The first scene of the play ends with Budhan's son, Bishen fleeing the scene to protect his life. He turns up seventeen years later as Risaldar Heera Singh, a valiant revolutionary and a fierce patriot. Through all these years, he nurtured the seething fire of vengeance and plotted to avenge the grave injustice inflicted upon his family. Dutt has used the ploy of hidden identity to make a connection between the prologue and the main story of the play. Heera Singh's identity is revealed in the penultimate scene of the play, right before his execution, to create an intense

dramatic effect.

Scene two recounts the large-scale expansion of British rule in India, and brings attention to the social scourge of Sati Pratha worryingly persistent in Pre-independent India. The third scene prepares the audience for an upcoming insurgency, by bringing to the fore, the growing resentment and discontent among the native sepoys. The narrative skips ahead sixteen years, to 1856, when the Indian sepoys in the employ of the East India Company were preparing for an armed insurrection against the British authorities. Discontent and resentment were already growing among the sepoys of British Indian infantry, fueled by low wage, poor terms of service and pensions and increased cultural and racial insensitivity from British officers. The greased cartridge of the new Enfield rifle provided the final spark that set the country ablaze. A rumor went afloat among the native troops that the paper cartridges of these rifles were soaked in pig and cow fat. Both Hindu and Muslim sepoys refused to use these rifles, because they believed that it was an evil scheme hatched by the Britishers to render them impure, forcing them to break their sacred code and adopt Christianity. Their patience finally gave out and on 10th May, 1857, the rebel sepoys at Meerut broke out in open revolt, shot their British officers and flocked to Delhi to awaken the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar II from his slumber. Bishen, serving as a risaldar of the cavalry troop in Meerut, under the assumed name of Heera Singh and his son, Kalu, a British army Sapper, Lachman Singh, took up the leadership of the revolt against British authorities and forms of hierarchy.

The fourth scene opens in the Emperor's courtyard in Delhi, where people are drugging themselves into a stupor. The heart-rending cries of Hindustan do not reach their ears because they are busy listening to classical music. They are riding elephants and sharpening their swords while the entire country is writhing in endless pain and misery. The residents of this palace have secluded themselves in dark chambers and have filled their ears with songs against the clamor of their own countrymen. The inhabitants of this palace have turned the place into a dark enclosed fortress where night never ends. A fundamental change in the political governance of India, in the form of transition of power, was inevitable. And the indigenous merchants, taking advantage of the uncertain conditions, professed their allegiance to the British monarch. While moneylenders, like Tularam became the loyal subjects of the British Empire, the Mughal grand viziers were plotting to sell the Mughal Throne to the East India Company. A serious political crisis, financial instability and social turmoil are brewing in the state, because of the incompetence and indolence of the titular emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. The

obvious moral degradation of the society has been starkly depicted by Dutt in this scene. Even a petty moneylender like, Tularam, who wasn't even allowed to enter the royal chamber, now boldly asserts that he has bought aristocracy, noble birth and his privileges against hard cash. Peerage titles became commodities to be sold to highest bidder, under the rule of the last Mughal Emperor. The utter ineptness of a weak and flailing Indian emperor becomes strikingly apparent when an Englishman, Frazer refuses to follow the strict Mughal court etiquettes. When the young Price reminded him of the severe consequence of breaching royal protocol, Frazer threatened to usurp the royal throne, after beheading the King's heirs. Frazer came to deliver a letter from the Governor General of Calcutta, directing the King to vacate the royal palace and shift to a new palace near Qutub Minar. The mighty Indian emperor was so scared of losing his throne and kingdom, that he didn't even raise his voice against such an ignominious proposition made by the Britishers.

Right at this moment, Risaldar Heera Singh makes a ceremonial entry and declared stoutly as a valiant warrior for freedom, that his rebel troops have annihilated the entire British army of Bareilly. And now the sepoy at Bahadur Shah Zafar's court to beseech him to lead their rebellion. Heera Singh is a foil to the feeble and politically inept Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. While the King is too afraid to take a stand and has decided to bow down to his enemies, Risaldar Heera Singh marches as a pure and high-spirited person with unflinching courage. He confronted his enemies with great valour. When Frazer threatened to have him arrested and imprisoned for his audacity, arrogance and insubordination, Heera Singh takes up his rifle and shoots him, without an iota of hesitation. His steer grit and firm determination to stand up to his enemies were expressed in his bold assertion:

Heera: We know you all. Behind your smiles and courtly manners hide traitors. Yes, we are scum, and cannot flatter in sweet Persian, but we shall not sell our sovereign to the English. (Dutt 179)

Heera Singh demonstrates strong management and leadership skills, when he implores the emperor to see the light of the day and to get familiar with his latent abilities and competence. The feeble Mughal Emperor finally finds his own voice and swore an oath of allegiance to Indian freedom warriors. In this scene, Dutt has brought to the fore, Heera Singh's deep conviction, unflinching courage, humility and strong leadership skills. Throughout the scene, Heera Singh refers to him and his people as "sons of peasants, blacksmiths and weavers," "poor sepoy" and

“scum.” But at the same time, he is a man of strong convictions and great integrity.

The next scene delineates the deplorable condition of the Indian soldiers who rose in revolt against the oppressive rule of the British East India Company. The sepoys are experiencing a profound humanitarian crisis and the Mughal prince is showing complete apathy to the grave crisis. They are facing acute food and medical shortages. While the Mughal Nobles are gorging on lavish meals, the poor sepoys are forced to eat boiled grass. The soldiers are shedding their blood in the war against the Britishers, while the rich merchants are selling the common man’s daily essential commodities in the black market. Dutt has poignantly portrayed the gaping chasm between the royals and the poor indigenous people of the country, between the predatory merchants and the poor sepoys. The conflict with the Mughal merchants created local shortages of resources. The poor sepoys failed to obtain needed medical care or enough food to feed the troops.

Heera Dutt’s empathetic leadership skills have been glorified in the next scene, when he refuses to accept food in the presence of the Indian Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, since his valiant soldiers who are sacrificing their lives for the nation, are being provided with only stale food. This kind gesture on his part speaks volumes about his character. To put it in Bakht Khan’s words, “Heera Singh was not only wounded in battle, but is perturbed by the sight of his soldiers in the throes of hunger” (Dutt 201). He was so moved by the plight of his sepoys that he demands a warrant to plunder the houses of the rich banyas to recover the wealth stashed away illegally in their vaults, because these backstabbers have conspired with the European colonizers to quell the mass uprising. He demanded stricter punishment for all those people who are stockpiling tons of gold in their private vaults, while the poor sepoys are facing an acute shortage of food grains. With unflinching courage, he publicly declared a war on the rich for betraying the people of this country. He claimed that an unholy nexus was brewing between the rich banyas and the European colonizers to suppress the great rebellion which was rapidly gaining momentum across the country. And to thwart their evil schemes, he besought the Emperor to issue an order that all the citizens of Delhi will be provided with firearms.

Dutt’s sincere attempts to portray Heera Singh as a Modern Day Robin Hood, serve his ulterior motives. Being an avowed Marxist, Dutt has used the entire episode a cue for his contemporary audience, to make them realize the great peril they are in and to persuade them to extend support to the then leftist leaders who envisioned an egalitarian society. In this specific context, Heera Singh became the mouthpiece of Dutt’s Propaganda Movement. Heera Singh, the valiant warrior

emerged as a savior for the hapless people of country, fighting for their rights against powerful forces. He was hailed as a hero of the common man by his countrymen. His dauntless courage and skilled leadership so inspired his men, that they composed a doggerel in his honor:

Mirza ran from battle, letting his trousers drop,
Till he met Heera, he didn't dare stop. (Dutt 203)

Heera Singh's growing popularity was considered a direct threat to their financial well-being, the rich elites devised a wicked scheme to repress his dissenting voice. The selfish nobles implore the prince, Mirza Mughal to take revenge on Heera Singh for his audacity. He summons him to his tent and tricks him into writing a letter to the traitor Rajab Ali, who has joined hands with the Britishers. Mirza Mughal orders his sepoys to take away Heera Singh's sword and arrest him on charges of treason. Heera couldn't believe that Mirza could stoop so low and sell his own country to serve his petty interest and ego. Asanullah offers him an easy way out, to end his life by drinking poison, so that he wouldn't have to face a trial. But as a principled ethical warrior, he refuses to go down that easily. He decides to face the punishment for his supposed treason. He didn't let anything malign his long-earned reputation. He even refuses to acknowledge his wife and sons, because he didn't want them to live with the stigma that they are the husband and offspring of a traitor. He wanted them to live with the impression that their husband and father is someone fighting like a hero for his country. To save the last shred of dignity, he demanded to be shot like a brave soldier. But his last request gets declined, and he was hanged till death like a traitor. The play concludes with the Britishers capturing the fort of Delhi, with the Emperor Bahadur Shah Jafar being taken as a prisoner.

Resistance Staged by Women

To shed light on the crucial role played by women in Indian nationalist movement, Dutt has featured the struggles and exploits of two stout-hearted women protagonists, Waziran and Kasturi, who epitomized sheer valour, selflessness and patriotism with their actions. Waziran is a prostitute, a "dirty whore," a "fallen woman," who proudly declares herself to be "a holy warrior" and a "dedicated danseuse." She has taken a vow to sacrifice her life for her motherland. For the sake of her countrymen, she has taken up arms with the hope of contributing to the liberation struggle. Being a prostitute, she suffers harassment and humiliation at the hands of patriarchs. However, she is a paragon of resistance and fortitude, who is

not afraid to speak her mind in a society controlled by controlled by the patriarchal values and creed. She vehemently defends her participation in the country's first Independence movement:

Nawab: A woman in the middle of the battle is a load of trouble.

Waziran: Bastard, you think this war is your personal affair? Peasants weavers, fishermen, blacksmiths – all have joined the war along with their wives. When the Nawab of Malagarh came out in support of the rebellion, his begums fought alongside. When the chief of the Gujar Tribe, Shah Mull, fell in battle, the Gujar housewives took the field. Housewives are fighting in the streets of Lucknow, Kanpur, Gwalior and Agra.... (Dutt 183)

Despite being a “fallen woman,” Waziran becomes a great source of inspiration for thousands of women. She shatters the age-old patriarchal notions regarding female submissiveness and subservience, and becomes an influential revolutionary figure. She is a valiant warrior, a rebellious woman with a dynamic personality, who bravely refutes the chauvinistic taunts of her fellow warriors. She fiercely rebuts the moral denunciation meted out against her by stating: “What do you mean ‘woman’? What do you mean ‘whore’? I am a holy warrior. Moulvi Fazl Huq has initiated me with regular vows and oaths” (Dutt 182).

Dutt's ulterior motive for casting a prostitute, a fallen woman who is neither a sacrificial mother or a good wife, in the role of a freedom fighter was that he wanted to refute the nineteenth-century dominant Bourgeoisie discourse, one of the major prongs of which was to discover and scrutinize the ‘domestic life’ of the women. 19th century literature has depicted women as devoted wives, selfless and sacrificial mothers. Strong, independent women who boldly defy the sexist cultural norms that demean them, rarely feature in 19th century literary canon. As Anita Nair has argued, “Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms were rewarded with happily ever after. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a good man's arms, be it Elizabeth Bennett (*Pride and Prejudice*) or Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*). Alternatively, they are left to rue their lot with a contrived courage as with Scarlett O'Hara (*Gone with the Wind*) or have to take their lives like Anna Karenina or Karuthamma (*Chemmeen*) or Emma Bovary (*Madame Bovary*). Dutt fiercely denounced the long-standing misogynistic tradition in Indian literature, by casting a prostitute in the lead role. Nandi Bhatia has commented in this context,

...To account for the role of the women in this historical moment, Dutt brings into focus the nexus of gender and nationalism. However, he complicates this nexus by casting one of his female protagonists, Waziran, in the role of a prostitute, who has Lachman as her lover and sleeps with the Englishmen at night.

Dutt's emphasis on the figure of the prostitute is significant, especially in the context of nineteenth-century nationalist discourse, which focused on the good wife and mother as the inspirational figure. By putting into question the status and role of women in the nineteenth century and giving women such as Waziran a voice to speak on their own behalf, Dutt ruptures this discourse. Hence, Waziran becomes a central figure who harangues the soldiers over their caste and religious parochialism, and makes them aware of their own hand in expediting the British strategy to keep them divided over issues of religion and caste to prevent unified nationalistic action. In [End Page 178] serving as an inspiration to the soldiers, Dutt creates in Waziran neither the "respectable" mother or wife, nor a woman who is socially victimized, but one who voluntarily chooses to sleep with the enemy so she can aid her own people. In acknowledging the importance of her role, Dutt defies the patriarchal bourgeois attitude that sees only the "respectable" woman as the inspirational figure. And again, contrary to the stereotypical identity of women's roles in the domestic space, Dutt pulls his female protagonist out of the realm of the domestic and places her as an equal among the soldiers. (Bhatia 178-79)

Kasturi, Bishen Singh's long-lost wife, occupies the central role in the subplot of the drama. She bears a striking resemblance to Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Like *Mother Courage*, Kasturi too makes a living out of warfare. In order to sustain herself, she sells the goods and valuables collected from the corpses of dead soldiers lying on the battle field. In the latter half of the play, she emerges as a calm, courageous and resolute figure, who valiantly defies the Patriarchal notion of motherhood. Dutt portrays her not as a submissive, weak, inspirational mother figure, rather as a strong, independent woman, who has grown disillusioned with the politics and harsh conditions of war. When she first appeared on stage, her capitalistic motives and emotional detachment were poignantly brought to the fore by the playwright:

Parantap: But this is a sin. If you trade with martyrs' honour, you'll go to hell.

Kasturi: Buzz off! Hell, my foot. Tell me, while I am still in this world, what sonofabitch guarantees me two meals a day? I want you all to die, so I'll have

a fresh supply of merchandise. (Dutt 196)

The conversation between Parantap and Kasturi highlights her sheer apathy towards the soldiers who sacrificed their lives fighting a holy war. However, it was soon revealed that Kasturi's insensitive remarks actually stemmed from her growing feeling of discontent. She lost her family because of political persecution. She has been patiently waiting for seventeen long years to be reunited with her family. And the moment finally arrives when her husband, Heera Singh is about to be executed. She was again left broken-hearted. Her husband was a victim of political conspiracy. But sadly even his peers, his friends and his countrymen, for whom he embraced death in every battle, turned their back on him because of the accusations labelled against him. Appalled at the boorish behavior of the sepoy, she contends:

There were so many of you here, each had a gun, but no one raised it. Such is the fear of the princes in you, a fear which is many centuries old. There are two battles raging at the same time-between us and the English, and between us and the princes. If you don't see that, you see nothing. The enemy is before you and behind you. While you fight for freedom the enemy behind stabs you in the back. (Dutt 213)

Through the two lead female protagonists, Kasturi and Waziran, Dutt defies the nationalist construction of women as pure, sacrificial and honorable. Waziran and Kasturi reject the traditional patriarchal notion that women should be confined to the domestic sphere. Dutt's female protagonists are neither pure, nor ideal or chaste women. Waziran is a prostitute and Kasturi is an aged woman, who makes a living out of warfare. They brought to the limelight the crucial role played by subaltern women, who were relegated to the peripheries of dominant narratives, in Indian nationalist movement.

Utpal Dutt's radical play, *The Great Rebellion* revolves around a major historical insurgency against colonial forces, in the history of India, and has deftly brought to the fore the colonial schemes of domination, the political and economic subjugation of the landless peasants and laborers, and the valiant resistance waged by the suppressed groups of the Indian society. Highlighting the great significance of historical plays, Dutt writes:

I have tried in the theatre and the Yatra, to select stories of revolutionaries of the immediate past and show the continuity of struggle ... I have written

and produced “Kallol,” “Rifle” (about the Bengal revolutionaries of the early thirties and I drew the story forward to 1947 to show that the collaborators of 1930 had become congress ministers in 1947), “jallianwalabagh” (about the Punjab revolutionaries), “Storm Clouds” (Baisakhi Megh-also about Bengal rebels), “Kirpan” (about the Ghadr party in the Punjab and the mutiny of the 23rd Indian Cavalry), “The Forest Awakes” (about Udham Singh in London and the assassination of Sir Michael O’Dwyer), “The Greased Cartridge” (“Tota” [or Great Rebellion], about the struggle of Delhi in 1857) and a few others, and I have watched at first hand the response of the proletarian audiences to these patriotic battles of the past. In the villages, the working masses often burst into slogans against their present-day enemy, when they watch their ancestors sing their way to the gallows. (Dutt 62-63)

The Great Rebellion is also a part of this larger enterprise, that sheds light on the inhumane oppression and subjugation of the subaltern groups of ordinary people and their uncompromising resistance to colonial forces.

Works Cited

- Bandhyopadhyay, Samik. “Utpal Dutt: An Interview by Samik Bandhyopadhyay.” *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors*, 1989, pp. 15-18.
- Banerjee, Himani. *Representation and Class Politics in the Theatre of Utpal Dutt*. Occasional Paper No. 106, Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1988.
- Banerji, Arnab. “Rehearsals for a Revolution: The Political Theater of Utpal Dutt.” *Southeastern Review of Asian Studies*, 2012, pp. 222-30.
- Bharucha, Rustom. “Politics and Satire in India: The Theater of Utpal Dutt.” *Theater*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1979, pp. 76-84.
- Bhatia, Nandi. *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Michigan: U of Michigan P, 2004.
- Chakraborty, Abin. *Staging the Subaltern-The Politics of Postcolonial Subalternity in the Plays of Utpal Dutt Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani*. PhD Dissertation, University of Calcutta, 2014.
- Chatterjee, Sudipto. “Utpal Dutt 1929-1993.” *TDR (Cambridge, Mass.)*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1994, pp. 29-31.
- Dutt, Utpal. “Innovation and Experimentation in Theatre.” *Sangeet Natak*, no. 99, 1991, pp. 19-23.
- . *Three Plays: Hunting the Sun, The Great Rebellion, Nightmare City*. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2009.
- . *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2009.

- Gunawardana, A. J., and Utpal Dutt. "Theatre as a Weapon. An Interview with Utpal Dutt." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1971, pp. 225–237. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1144643. Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.
- Karl, Marx, and Ledbetter James. "The British Rule in India." *Orientalism: A Reader*, edited by A. L. Macfie. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2019, pp. 16-18.
- Mondal, Naren. *Exploring Political Allegories in the Plays of Utpal Dutt*. PhD Dissertation, Visva Bharti University, 2018.