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"When the laws of the heart have been broken, what can the laws of the society do?": Exploring the Fragility of Conjugal Intimacy and Marital Erosion in Bratya Basu's *Who?*

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Abstract

Theatre in India after independence, particularly in Bengal, is largely characterised by its engagement with social and political issues, and therefore, it remains a contested space marked by rupture and continuity. Alongside the erosion of the agitprop theatre, the emergence of global economic liberalisation and the new media scenario mark the Bengali theatrical spectrum since the 1990s as a space for radical experimentation with language, props, settings, and other forms of dramaturgy. It is in this rich labyrinth that the emergence of Bratya Basu makes a significant contribution to the evolution of Bengali theatre. Characterised by a self-reflexive and pastiche approach, Basu's works blend socio-political critique with a penetrating psychological exploration of human relationships in the modern urban Indian context. The paper attempts to explore how Basu presents the play, *Who?*, as a trenchant indictment of domestic intimacy, leading to conjugal erosion. A scathing critique of the inherent fallibility of human connection in a contemporary milieu marked by deceit, emotional abandonment, and the pervasive residue of patriarchy, Basu's play remains a narrative where dark humour, absurdity, nihilism, and psychological realism frequently and deliberately interplay. Basu's play is also a commentary on the hidden side of contemporary human relationships in a rapidly evolving world. By making a close reading of different characters and their experiences, the present paper attempts to explore how Basu's dramaturgy frames marital failure not merely as a result of individual ethical or emotional shortcomings, but as a direct symptom of larger social transformations, including existential instabilities. The present paper thus seeks to show Basu's *Who?* as a socio-political critique of an innate ethical fiasco placed within modern Indian urban domestic life.

Keywords: Bengali Theatre, Bratya Basu, Angst, Despair, Absurdity.

Introduction:

The post-independent Indian theatre, arising from the ordeals of colonialism and partition, represents a discursive continuum marked by rupture and continuity. Castigating revivalist or

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propagandist propensities, it largely engages with the issues of nation-building, cultural identity, and social reformations. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker rightly remarks that post-independent Indian theatre "appears to be an arena in which historical boundaries have become radically permeable" (Dharwadker, 2015, p. 2). This period also witnesses playwrights, who, drawing insights from native folk traditions, classical dramaturgy, and western modernism, engage with different emergent issues related to both the state and nation. Hence, instead of being a mere aesthetic enterprise, post-Independent Indian theatre functions as an insurgent space that seeks to negotiate identities, question the norms, and critique the silhouette of human relationships. In the 1950s and 60s, social realism, existential angst, and political allegory dominated through theatrical playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, and Badal Sircar, while the 1970s and 80s expanded the thematic possibility by reflecting the tumultuous political scenario of the Emergency in India and the growing complications of urban life. The playwrights of the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, besides exploring, to quote Gilbert and Tompkins, "interpellation, subject-formation, representation, and forms of resistance" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 9), begin to delve deep into the psychological conflicts of characters and the subtlety of human relationships, such as marital discord, psychological disintegration, and social fragmentation. Although India hardly witnesses a national theatre movement, with its cultural maturation, modern Indian theatre becomes "an all India phenomena" (Richmond, 1990. p. 387), though such a claim is highly contested by critics like Samik Bandopadhyay, who remark, "By any means I cannot think of any synthetic drama, to which all the people of entire country will respond equally" (p. 725). In Bengal too, theatre always remains a space of ideological conflation and contestation. Although Manujendra Kundu contends, "The history of Bengali theatre is also a history of the proscenium stage, the absence of the 'Body' and the presence of the intangible 'Mind'" (Kundu, 2010, p. 55), the post-independence Bengali theatre, marked by its incessant quest for reformation and newness, proceeds from purely historical and mythological dramas to present works based on social realism. The prologue to this shift can remarkably be seen in Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (1944) that deals with the issue of the Bengal Famine of 1943. In fact, Bengali theatre after India's independence mostly deals with issues such as class politics, social and political corruption, partition and its aftermath, and existential issues of the modern man, to mention a few. The predicament of modern Bengali theatre has rightly been pointed out by Asutosh Bhattacharyya (1958):

> The main interest of the recent Bengali dramas is confined to urban life with its new and pressing problems. The new dramatists are no longer interested in the undisturbed life of the villages, far away from the madding crowd. With the progress of industrial life at the cost of the agricultural, social and economic structures of village-life has crumbled and so the Bengali drama today reflects the pulsations of city-life with its various problems. (p. 82)

The exposition of group theatres, especially *Bohurupee* by Sombhu Mitra and the Marxism-influenced Indian People's Theatre Association led by Utpal Dutt, puts an enormous emphasis on artistic principles, neorealism, and non-commercial theatre practices. Badal Sircar, a notable playwright famous for his Third Theatre, comes up with a non-proscenium theatre strategy analogous with the pan of the Indian Theatre of Roots, which seeks to combine different indigenous theatre forms such as Jatra, Tamasha, and Nautanki. It can be said that Bengali theatre after independence, thus, serves as a mighty exponent of socially committed themes, experimental forms, and a quest for a theatrical idiom that is both global and local. But the 1990s, characterised by economic liberalisation, the rise of radical Hindutva, and the advent of a new media scenario, witness the end of the Cold War and the descent of the agitprop theatre tradition. Hence, a complete disintegration of discursive certainties, the rise of popular media, and an ethical ambivalence of modern domestic life pervade the cultural spectrum of postcolonial Bengal, and theatre could not remain away from the truthful portrayal of the contemporary issues. It is within this rich tapestry that Bratya Basu, a Bengali playwright, actor,

filmmaker, and a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award (2021), emerges to offer a penetrating observation on the modern Indian psyche. His plays, offering significant fare for readers' cultural elegance, deal with such intricate issues of modern life that galvanise his readers' perceptions.

It remains undeniable that the theatrical corpus of Bratya Basu, questioning traditional formal and linguistic concordats, brings a postmodern intervention into the Bengali theatrical space. Beginning his career with *Ashaleen*, the first postmodern play in Bengali theatre, and advancing with plays such as *Winkle Twinkle*, *Hemlat: The Prince of Garanhata*, and *Ruddhasangeet*, to mention a few, Bratya Basu deals with the paradoxes and probabilities of modern theatre "as a marginalized art form to survive in a nonliberal world" (Dhawan & Kolodezh, 2024, p. 5). His theatre, an offshoot of the Kolkata-based Bengali group theatre known as 'Company Theatre,' intends to establish theatre as a regenerative observation on contemporaneousness as its language remains experimental and seditious. Dhawan and Kolodezh (2024) remark that Basu "stands out with his pastiche approach, mixing the personal, political, aesthetic, pulp and highbrow through a self-reflexive approach" (p. 4). His use of varied themes, ranging from a critique of globalisation, the tussle between modernity and indigenous culture, reinterpretation of myth, deconstruction of nationalist discourses, political dogmatism, religious extremism and contradictions, urban hypocrisy, and the fallibility of human relationships, to mention a few, makes his plays a critique that, eschewing traditional narratives, becomes a cauldron of local and global. In the works of Bratya Basu, these thematic variations, in fact, ensure a non-linear and disjointed structure that would reflect the disintegration of the modern human condition. What distinguishes Basu from his contemporary Bengali playwrights, namely, Sekhar Samaddar, Debesh Chattopadhyay, Arpita Ghosh, and Koushik Sen, is his linguistic transgression, which also justifies his seditious position as a dramatic artist. Essentially marked by a radical inclusion of colloquial idioms, crass diction, and counter-cultural words, Basu's plays affirm that the inclusion of such words is not just aesthetic but strategic and spells out the playwright's non-conformist position against any coalescence of cultural statement. In the translated works of Basu, the artistic obligation to keep these words, mostly drawn from Bengali and Hindi dialects, intact validates their minimalist vitality to the semantic structure of the plays and compels the translators to maintain the provincial imperative of the original works of Basu. Gurcharan Das calls such a propensity "a revolution in spoken English" (Naik, 1977, p. 192). This phenomenon, as pointed out by Das, marks an epistemic moment in which the unrefined and indigenous dictions redefine the polished realm of global literary transmission. Hence, Basu's works are concurrently a critique of the contemporary social milieu and an 'epistemological rupture,' to borrow the phrase by Gaston Bachelard, in the aesthetic space of Bengali theatrical linguistic conventions.

Writing in an era when swift technological progressions and the rapid pace of globalisation reconfigure the ideals of human relationships that sometimes lead to alienation and existential precarity, Basu responds to different shades of human conditions in his plays, using the fundamentals of the absurd and grotesque. Basu's *Who?* is a touching exploration of marital collapse, psychological disintegration, and deconstruction of identity. Set in modern urban Kolkata, the play features three couples, namely, Srikanto-Lily, Sunil-Kurchi, and Arun-Bula, who weave a labyrinth of human relationships that suffers from the breakdown of empathy under cataclysm, collateral damage of intimacy, erosion of marital faith, betrayal, resentment, emotional neglect, unfulfilled marital expectations, lack of communication, deceit, gender vulnerability, and residue of patriarchy, leading to an intense collapse of domestic space. The marital failure is shown in Lily and Srikanto's relationship that finally culminates in Lily's suicide. Srikanto, a chief sales executive, remains away from home for a month due to office trips, which forms a relational emptiness that instigates Lily to fill elsewhere. Srikanto's self-obsessed perception establishes his priority of his career over his emotional closeness. If Srikanto's immediate reaction to Lily's pregnancy out of adultery is vicious, "I threw things around in anger" (Basu, 2024, p. 213), his parting from Lily for work shows his

intention to avoid conjugal responsibilities: "An old flame always appears villainous when the heart is swayed by new love" (214). His calling of Sunil as a "bastard" (213), "gentlemanly cock" (215), and "fucking doctor" (215) accentuates his deprecation for Sunil and a satirical perception for Lily, who becomes an object of his proprietorship: "She was so pretty. Fair and thin. Suffered a little from tension and anxiety…" (212).

The relationship between Sunil and Kurchi, filled with emotional vacuum, is an open reality presented at the beginning of the play, with Sunil staying at his brother-in-law's house in Baruipur as he has "some problems" (Basu, 2024, p. 212) with his wife. Addressing Sunil, Bula, Sunil's sister, remarks that Kurchi "learned the art of arrogance well from you" (218), which suggests the joint involvement of Sunil and Kurchi for the toxicity in their relationship. The financial undercurrents of their conjugal relationship also propound the disparity, as Bula derisively says, "Everyone knows that it was Kurchi's boutique that kept the lights on in your house" (p. 218). This shows Sunil's financial dependence on Kurchi, and Bula humiliates Sunil, saying, "You may have been a good student but you flopped as a doctor" (218). The straightforward derision from Bula labels Sunil as an unsuccessful person, while their marital failure is further deepened by Kurchi's illicit relationship with Manoj Haldar, a "family friend" (220), with whom she cohabits openly. Sunil's emotional desertion can be noticed when he asks, "When the laws of the heart have been broken, what can the laws of the society do?" (220) that also implies his resignation to the irretrievable harm done to their emotional bonds. The catastrophe of their conjugal life is thus a gradual erosion that is embedded in irreconcilability, unfulfilled expectations, and a deep emotional gulf. Bratya Basu's *Who?*, a play about marital disintegration and emotional exhaustion, presents a world where love becomes a strategy for manipulation, memory becomes fragile, and violence emerges from repression. This is perhaps best shown in the conversation between Sunil and his wife, Kurchi, at CCD, where Basu places Sunil's collapsed psyche against Kurchi's calculative indifference. Although Sunil joins the meeting to give their "case a final legal step" (225), the unbridgeable gulf between them turns the meeting into a battleground of personal blames and accusations. Kurchi's direct question to Sunil, "What did you want to talk about that required us to meet?" (223) and her firmness while saying, "That is what you think. I don't" (225) shows her emotional detachment, though Sunil still tries to embrace the leftovers of intimacy. If Kurchi's words emphasise Sunil's indolence and subservient nature responsible for the failure of their marriage, "you are very averse to hard work, Sunil" (p. 225), Sunil's response shows his indifference, emerging from mental weariness, "If I didn't like someone then I would fall asleep right in front of them" (225). Caught in a web of longing and melancholia, Sunil craves an illusory form of himself that never existed. Their conversation also shows an instance of financial settlement that signals their forthcoming divorce. Kurchi is ready to give their "joint account at Axis Bank" (225) and "Baranogor clinic" to Sunil's name**,** showing how emotional bonds are melted into financial compensation. The gesture of cessation, "How would you want things settled?" (225), is ironically destabilised by her female subject position that refutes any sentimentalism, "You will get everything that you are asking for. But not immediately" (227). The fallibility of their relationship is also noticed as Sunil deliberately brings up the name of Manoj, Kurchi's partner in adultery, to derogate her character. Nevertheless, Kurchi's strong response, "He has enough to not need anyone's help" (p. 226), foregrounds Kurchi's firmness to defend her fornicator before her husband. The play also showcases that the hostility and alienation Sunil receives are not only from Kurchi but also from the society and his profession. His failure in academia is highlighted in Kurchi's words, "You had an opportunity to teach at a private medical college, but you quit…" (225), to which Sunil expresses his self-imposed abandonment: "I can never change this habit of solitude that I have got used to" (226). The issue of marital failure, the fallibility of human relationships, and emotional cruelty is best shown when Kurchi finally asks Sunil, "Tell me, do you need me?" (226), and he replies, "No, I don't need you" (227).

Emerging in an era when the contemporary theatre of Bengal was mostly engaging with political apathy and aesthetic reiteration, Bratya Basu's remarkable contribution to theatre perhaps lies in his constant attempt to question the language of theatre and introduce a dramaturgy replete with linguistic plurality and psychological concentration. In *Who?*, though the relationship between Arun and Bula is less explosive, their exchange of words reveals the insubstantiality of marital relationships. Bula's belittling her husband, Arun, for reading detective fiction shows her serious lack of respect for him: "Your brain has rotted from incessantly reading those stupid hard boiled detective fiction" (Basu, 2024, p. 219), while Arun's escapist tendency to confront his wife's brutal remarks shows his lack of genuine commitment in their relationship. Thus, in the play, Srikanto's perennial absence and dismissive attitude for Lily, "All selfish, namby-pamby excuses" (215), change her into a patient of acute depression. Likewise, the marriage of Sunil and Kurchi falls apart due to their mutual indifference to each other. The chasm between Sunil's least ambitious nature and Kurchi's intention to "make something out of your life" (218) widens their temperamental differences, leading to adultery and disloyalty. In *Who?*, Basu has particularly shown that social expectations, reputations, and egoism are also instrumental for the breakdown of human relationships in marriage. The words from Rabi, Sunil's college friend and a police officer, produce a distinct idea about the dynamics of the failed relationship between Sunil and Kurchi. Rabi's estimation of Sunil presents the latter as incapable, secluded, and finally responsible for his own misfortunes. Serving as an epitome of external social expectations, Rabi openly questions Sunil's romantic and sexual prowess: "You don't have the kind of balls that one would need for anything romantic" (221). Rabi's use of derogatory and contemptuous comments for Sunil, such as "You castrated skittish asshole," "create a fucking scene," "you are being fucking cordial," "Fucking sissy," "small-minded man," "bloody son of a pig," and "fucking asshole" (222), exposes the passivity Sunil endures in his relationship with Kurchi. However, Sunil accepts his wife's adultery, which suggests his complete alienation from the relationship: "I heard Manoj and Kurchi's conversations every night while lying in bed" (p. 223). In her conversation with Bula, Kurchi admits that though Sunil is never abusive to her, he fails to realise "the meaning of an actual relationship" (p. 235). It is Kurchi's megalomania, or more precisely, egomania, that has possibly set her off to abandon her marital relationship completely: "Whatever little Sunil has accomplished today is because of me" (p. 236). Moreover, her unwillingness to go for a quick divorce symbolises a state of dilemma she undergoes.

Basu's careful selection of the title for his play here remains equally noteworthy. The title of the play, *Who?*, overtly shows an identity crisis, which remains a pertinent issue throughout the play. Written on an aspect of ontological ambivalence, the play pronounces the decay of subjective stability and often remains the characters' existential lament. If a complete absence of linear realism remains the hallmark of the play, Basu's experimentation with disjointed dramatic scenes, his use of frequent tonal alternation, and the introduction of different metatheatrical devices such as asides, direct address to the audiences, and self-referentiality, to mention a few, remain absolutely innovative and significant. The ending of the play adds a twist as it shows that Srikanto and Sunil are the same person: "It is like a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" (Basu, 2024, p. 242). In fact, Srikanto is the unburdened alter ego of the self-conflicted Sunil. Characterised by nihilist tenacity, Srikanto is presented as capable of committing heinous crimes. As Rabi directly asks Sunil, "You tried killing me?" (242), Sunil's silence shows a mutual history of viciousness, while Srikanto has already remarked, referring to Rabi, "The bastard has been taunting me since our college days" (244). Srikanto's misogynistic observations show debasements in human relationships, and his words are actually hitherto repressed thoughts of Sunil, who even wants to kill his sister Bula: "I fucking wanted to" (244). However, a sudden sense of conscience stops him, though he remains violent for his sister-in-law, Arun, calling him "that real pussy of yours, your sheepish coward husband" (244). Srikanto's vulgar words express his invectives for his sister: "Fuckers, you stay in your husband's house and live off of him…flirting with other young men and obsess

over your self-interests" (244). His language, embedded with chauvinist aggression, actually establishes male promiscuity and presents his cynical view of human relationships. Unleashing his own bitterness while comparing Kurchi's hedonist lifestyle with his own inertia, Srikanto expresses his villainous intent. His utter disgust with marriage can also be noted in his abhorrence of Kurchi as Sunil's wife: "Bloody sons of whores, you will play divorced to the outside world and keep doing these coochie-cooing on the inside...Her playing half a Sen while living as half a Haldar will soon be over" (241). It remains noteworthy that Basu's use of frequent cuss words in the narrative can be seen as a strategy to deconstruct the traditional binary between the polished literary idioms and conversational urban diction, emphasising linguistic heterogeneity that would reflect the consciousness of contemporary urban life. Hence, the inclusion of obscene words, parody, and satire not only regenerates Basu's dialogues but also shocks his readers' expectations usually associated with naturalistic traditions.

In the play, as Kurchi shows her apprehension of Sunil's inability to stay without her for a long period of time, Srikanto responds to it with his utmost revulsion for Kurchi: "She is keeping the path back to me open on one side, while living it up with Manoj on the other" (Basu, 2024, p. 245) and he adds more mordantly, "And that poor fucker doesn't even know that sooner or later Kurchi is going to kick him to the curb" (245). Considering all relationships based on compromise and driven by selfishness, Srikanto frees himself from any moral obligation. The relationship between Srikanto and Sunil, fraught with animosity and opposing visions, serves as a moral antithesis to the play. If Srikanto represents the disparaging aspects of a human being. If Srikanto is a misogynist, "Fuckers, men are womanizers! And what about women? Aren't they meneaters?" (246), Sunil's words show his admiration for Kurchi: "Kurchi was a wonderful woman" (244). In fact, it is Sunil's stoic and dormant nature that, instead of giving him comfort, increases his anguish by relentlessly confronting him with the reality: "Our relationship died gradually…Manoj and Kurchi fell in love with each other…I wasn't opposed to that either" (245). Sunil's words, in fact, seem to echo the words of Jean Paul Sartre on the notion of anguish, which "arises out of the negation of the calls made upon me by the world; it appears as soon as I disengage myself from the world in which I was committed" (Sartre, 2018, p. 79). Throughout the play, Sunil grapples with internal conflicts that may appear to be weary: "If women can be misandrists, men haters, then why can't men be misogynists?" (Basu, 2024, p. 246). Although Martin Esslin contends that in an absurd drama "the movement of objects alone carries the dramatic action, the language has become purely incidental, less important than the contribution of the property department" (Esslin, 1960, p. 12), Basu's play still adheres to the absurd drama insofar as it presents the grotesqueness through a language which is direct and critiques the stereotypes. Presenting a disjointed domestic space and three pairs of couples emotionally distant from each other, the language in *Who?* attempts to articulate a domestic space that is replete with nihilistic gestures, ironical comments, and a skeptic outlook.

Conclusion:

Bengali theatre after independence offers an important space for the complex presentation of marital breakdown and the innate fallibility of human relationships. The emergence of Bratya Basu, with his ardent observation of modern urban life and his unstinting portrayal of human follies and frailties, establishes that this decisive thematic issue resonates with his audiences and reflects the enduring complexities of human relationships in a quick and transformative world. His *Who?* pithily portrays the breakdown of marital relationships, situating the vicious power of deceit, lack of faith and security, and emotional abandonment as instrumental behind it. The tragic suicide of Lily, caught in a web of her husband's prolonged absence and her own desperate search for connection; Srikanto's possessive rage and cynical view of marriage; Sunil's emotional withdrawal and lack of connection to his marriage, allowing his wife, Kurchi,

to find Manoj as an adultery partner; Bula's lack of patience with her husband's seeming eccentricities; the misogynist attitude of male characters that declines any genuine emotional attachment with their female partners are not only a theatrical enumeration that shows marital collapse as a matter of personal failures but also connects the fallibility to larger social transformation, financial dominance, and existential instabilities. Basu's distinct theatrical voice, characterised by dark humour, absurdity, satire, and psychological realism, allows him to express these complex ideas with a deep impact, ensuring his place as an imperative voice, which "undercuts the rubric of a 'national' theatre" (Bhatia, 2013, p. xxxvi) for making theatre survive in a world replete with contraries.

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Bio-note

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