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Performing the Unfinished: The Dramaturgy of Role and Liminality in Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*

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Abstract

Badal Sircar's Evam Indrajit presents the weariness of modern individual life not merely through themes of alienation, identity crisis, and meaninglessness, but through a dramatic structure that repeatedly places its characters in familiar, interchangeable roles. This study moves beyond a mere thematic reading to examine how the play's dramaturgy produces this condition of repetition and role-weariness. Erving Goffman's concept of everyday life as a performance provides a framework for reading the shifting identities of Indrajit, Amal, Vimal, Kamal, Manasi and the other figures who repeatedly perform social roles without arriving at a stable sense of self. Victor Turner's concept of liminality further illuminates their existence as a continuous state of being "betwixt and between," where movement from one role, stage or social expectation does not result in arrival but leads back to another cycle. The characters' inability to move beyond prescribed roles thus becomes both a thematic condition and a dramaturgical experience, making Evam Indrajit a play in which the form itself enacts the liminality and exhaustion of modern existence.

Keywords: Badal Sircar, *Evam Indrajit*, dramaturgy, liminality, Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, theatrical space, circular structure.

Introduction

Modernity significantly changed how people perceive human life, social relationships, and literary representation. Experiences of war, industrialisation, urbanisation, social displacement, and the increasing impersonality of modern life gradually disturbed belief in a stable, progressive social order. These changes also

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appear in drama, where playwrights moved away from conventional forms of plot, character, dialogue, and resolution. Such developments contributed to the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd. In India, however, absurdist drama developed within the specific social conditions of the post-Independence period. Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*, written and produced in the 1960s amid major social and intellectual changes in Bengal, holds an important place in the development of Indian absurdist theatre.

The title of Badal Sircar's Evam Indrajit remains unchanged even after Girish Karnad translated the play into English. A literal translation of the word "evam" produces results like 'And Indrajit', 'Thus Indrajit', 'In this manner Indrajit', and such a translation would pave the way for an interpretation that the author does not specifically centre his plot upon his titular character Indrajit, as an isolated protagonist whose individual life constitutes the exclusive subject of the play; rather, he creates a world of a generalised whole where Indrajit is one among a series of individuals whose identities are shaped, repeated, and sustained within a particular social structure. "Everyone! This is everyone! Amal, Vimal and Kamal" (Sircar 58). The experiences of Indrajit, Amal, Vimal, and Kamal reveal the repetitive roles available to the modern middle-class individual. The author, therefore, supports his claim that Indrajit plays his role, or may end up playing a role which society has already determined, or the role which is more precisely scripted for him as well as for the rest of the men in his surroundings. A man's indecisiveness is determined neither by his capabilities nor his inabilities; rather, it can stem from forced acceptance of norms defined by the outside world or from a prejudiced assignment of a specific role to which he must adapt.

> Everything goes round and round like a wheel. Still, it's not a proper wheel, it's a spiral. . . I catch something. And just when I understand it, it suddenly ends and I throw it away. Then again, I grab at something else. Still the hope for a sudden, unexpected, wonderful happening doesn't' t die. What a silly dream. The sleep ends—but not the hangover of the dream. (Sircar 48)

Literature Review

Critical studies of Evam Indrajit largely focus on absurdism, existentialism, identity crisis, modernity, and alienation. Tapu Biswas, in *"Evam Absurd: Badal Sircar and the Matrix of Absurdism,"* discusses Sircar's engagement with absurdist drama by relating the play to Martin Esslin, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus.

> Camus' absurdism responds to the basic question: what makes life worth living? Faced with the crimes of historical materialism, and lacking any recourse to a higher moral power, Christianity and Marxism are regarded as dangerous prophecies of a kingdom yet to come. Claiming that the ends justify the means, both ideologies sacrifice innocent lives, either in the hopes of salvation or a never-achieved classless utopia. (Davis 225)

In "Badal Sircar's Evam Indrajit: A Critical Perspective," Shukla reads the play as a representation of the loneliness, frustration, and existential predicament of the post-independence urban middle class. V. Kala's "De-Centering the Human Subject:

Existentialism and Posthumanism in *Evam Indrajit*" extends the discussion beyond existentialism by interpreting the play through a posthumanist framework. The play's unusual dramatic form, however, also calls attention to how its theatrical structure creates these concerns. The repetition of situations, circular movement, unconventional characterisation, and manipulation of theatrical space contribute to the play's sense of instability.

Aim and Objectives

The present study approaches Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* through the intersection of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and Victor W. Turner's concept of liminality in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Goffman understands everyday social interaction through the metaphor of theatrical performance: the front stage, where actors perform according to audience expectations, and the backstage, which is literally a place to relax or get ready and, metaphorically, where masks are removed. Thus, he offers a way to examine how individuals present themselves through socially recognised roles and alter their behaviour according to the situation. These notions are seen in *Evam Indrajit*, where the same characters repeatedly assume different identities and perform different social roles. Turner's concept of the liminal complements this perspective by highlighting what happens when individuals cannot comfortably remain within assigned roles or successfully move beyond them. The recurring transformations of the characters, their movement between student, lover, employee, husband, and other social positions, and Indrajit's repeated resistance to these prescribed identities can therefore be understood through the combined framework of a dramaturgical liminality. This study is further supported by a literary parallel in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII, where Jaques declares, "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players, (Shakespeare 2.7.146–47)" and presents human life through its successive stages and roles. Shakespeare's stage metaphor, Goffman's dramaturgy, and Turner's liminality thus meet in Evam Indrajit, allowing the play to be read not only as a representation of individuals performing social roles but also as a drama of individuals who remain unsettled as they move through those roles.

Discussion

The dramaturgical structure of *Evam Indrajit* allows the characters to move between different roles within the same performance. Sircar introduces this kind of role fluidity at the very beginning through the character called Auntie. The stage direction says, "She is called 'Auntie' here only for convenience. She could be 'mother', 'elder sister', anything" (Sircar 3). The description makes clear that the figure on stage is not restricted to a single identity. The role can change depending on the dramatic situation. Indrajit is initially introduced as a man of thirty-five, yet within the following dramatic sequence, he appears as a college student, while the same three figures who have previously appeared alongside him assume the roles of his professors. The stage directions further emphasise this process by drawing attention to the "appropriate

voices and gestures" (Sircar 7) adopted by Amal, Vimal, and Kamal, whose movements retain "a hint of Puppet show" (Sircar 7). The abrupt shift from adult Indrajit to student Indrajit, accompanied by the corresponding transformation of the other figures into professors, makes the interchangeability of dramatic roles visible to the audience.

The Writer also moves through several such positions during the course of the play. He is first associated with writing and constructing the play, but later enters the situations he creates. He becomes an invigilator for Amal, Vimal, and Kamal, and in the office sequence he appears first as Hareesh, a peon, and later as the boss. Auntie too reappears in a different familial position as Indrajit's mother. Amal, Vimal, and Kamal similarly move between different stages of life and different social roles. The play, therefore, does not maintain a fixed relationship between a particular theatrical figure and a particular role. Roles are repeatedly assigned, changed, and exchanged while the same figures remain part of the performance. Goffman's dramaturgical approach is useful here because it considers social interaction in terms of roles that individuals perform before others. Sircar makes this process of role performance visible, rather than letting the audience see each role as naturally belonging to a separate individual.

An even more complex example is Manasi, initially connected to the Writer's creative imagination and appearing as a figure who inspires him as he constructs the play. As the action develops, she assumes different relationships and functions. She appears with Indrajit as a sister and later as his beloved, takes the role of Miss Malhotra in the office setting, and then performs the domestic roles of Amal and Vimal's wives and Kamal's son's mother. Towards the end of the play, the same Manasi is identified as Indrajit's wife. The fluidity becomes even more striking when Indrajit's unnamed cousin, whom he wishes to marry, is also voluntarily named "Manasi" by the writer, although the character herself does not disclose that name. Manasi demonstrates the dramaturgical separation between performer and role: the theatrical figure remains recognisable, while the identity attached to her shifts with the situation. Manasi's repeated transformations foreground the performative nature of social identity, where the self presented to others is shaped by the particular social situation and the role it demands. "An individual's status is irreversibly changed, but the collective status of his subjects remains unchanged" (Turner 171).

The way a character is introduced reveals Badal Sircar's unusual dramaturgical method. When the Writer asks the fourth person his name, he replies that he is Nirmal. The Writer does not accept the name and says, "Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal? No, it can't be. You must have another name. You have to have. Tell me truly, what's your name?" (Sircar 4). Through this insistence, the name Indrajit is revealed. The moment does not function simply as the introduction of another character. The audience witnesses the formation of a theatrical identity rather than being given a fully established character at the moment of entry. The writer's expectation that the fourth figure should have a name different from Amal, Vimal, and Kamal underscores the importance of differentiation on stage. Indrajit acquires his distinct identity through

the dramatic interaction itself. Goffman states, "We have been using the term 'performance' to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (13).

The writer's response to Manasi's suggestion that he could write about the people around him brings the question of dramatic material into the play. He says that "There is no beauty in the people around me, no splendour, no substance. Only the undramatic material Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit" (Sircar 6). The statement is significant because the writer judges these people's ordinary lives by their suitability for theatrical representation. Their everyday existence does not seem to him to possess enough dramatic value to be placed before an audience. The irony is that the people whom the writer dismisses become the central figures of the play itself.

Indrajit states, "True, literature should be realistic. But to say it should be a naked reflection of life" (Sircar 9). It introduces a different understanding of literary representation by bringing the realities of everyday existence into the discussion of what literature should represent. This statement belongs to a different dramatic situation from the writer's earlier dismissal of Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit as undramatic material. Sircar places different attitudes towards literary representation within the play: one voice questions the dramatic value of ordinary life, while another insists on the connection between literature and lived reality. The stage consequently becomes a space where different understandings of life and its representation are performed before the audience.

The exchange in which Amal, Vimal, and Kamal ask the Writer whether he has finished writing the play raises a different issue concerning the relationship between the dramatic work and its reception. The writer says that he has written only a short poem, to which they respond, "If we understand it, tear it up. If we don't, send it to a literary journal" (Sircar 12). The irony sharpens because the people who form part of the writer's dramatic material comment on the value and comprehensibility of the work being written about them. Goffman's idea of dramatic realisation holds greater interest in this play, which is ultimately social and self-conscious.

Indrajit's dissatisfaction with his surroundings relates to Goffman's distinction between the front stage and the backstage. His statement, "Sometimes I just want to run away" (Sircar 10), expresses his exhaustion with a life in which he is expected to occupy certain fixed positions. He imagines another world: "There must be a world outside geography. It's not here. But it'll be somewhere far away, outside, beyond" (Sircar 10). The idea of an "outside" can be read metaphorically as a backstage space, where he might be free from the roles and expectations that structure his present life. Indrajit is tired of the rigidity of student life and wants to move beyond the identity already prepared for him. Yet this possibility gradually disappears from his imagination. Later, he admits, "But now I feel that there is no world beyond our geography. At least not in this country" (Sircar 38). His shift from believing in an "outside" to doubting whether it exists changes the significance of his earlier desire

to escape. The backstage that he imagines as a space beyond social restrictions may not actually be available to him. His geographical search consequently becomes a metaphorical search for a space beyond social performance, but the later realisation suggests that he cannot easily step outside the structures that have shaped his identity. The play ultimately leaves him confronting the possibility that no space exists beyond those expectations.

Indrajit's conversation with Manasi makes his resistance to established social roles more direct. When Manasi accepts the idea represented by the "rope," Indrajit asks, "What's the point of worshipping the rope that binds you?" (Sircar 21), and identifies the rope with a rule that she has willingly accepted. "Perhaps tear it into shreds. Bring down all these walls which surround us" (Sircar 21). His response shows his unwillingness to accept a social arrangement simply because it has already been established. This becomes particularly significant in his relationship with Manasi, who is presented as his cousin and therefore occupies a familial position that prevents their marriage within the accepted social structure. Indrajit's desire to "tear" the rope can therefore be understood as a desire to break the role that structure assigns him. His response also gives the conversation a distinctly modernist tension that the individual wants to define his own relationship rather than simply accept an identity and conduct prescribed by social convention.

Indrajit's statement, "The day I get a job, I'll marry you" (Sircar 24), introduces another side of his relationship with social convention. The statement follows a familiar social sequence in which a man is expected to establish himself professionally before entering marriage. His desire to break one restriction, therefore, does not place him completely outside the social order; instead, he begins preparing for another socially accepted position. This becomes clearer in his later realisation about Manasi's repeated appearance. "Manasis come and go. One can get married to only one of them. The others come and go. Manasi's sister Manasi. Manasi's friend Manasi. Manasi's daughter Manasi" (Sircar 52). The repetition suggests that the individual woman may change, but the pattern of relationships continues to reproduce itself. The names and identities change, yet marriage, family, and social relationships remain the available structures through which Indrajit understands his life.

> Marriage is perhaps the most important foundation in human society. In Hinduism, the foundation for marriage is friendship, which is the understanding and the commitment between spouses. Arrange marriage tradition is still considered as the societal norm in India, and is regarded as an event for life. The relationship based on a strong bonding with each other helps the couple to maintain other social relationships in and outside their extended multigenerational family and help spouses to have good physical and mental health in their future life. This influence on their longevity and promotes healthy aging. Marriage, in Hinduism, also considered as the relationship of souls which extends beyond a single life through incarnations. (Bhattacharyya 135)

Indrajit, therefore, does not finally arrive at the complete freedom he imagines. He moves between resistance and accommodation, questioning the rules that bind him while also preparing himself to occupy another accepted social role. His earlier search for an "outside" consequently becomes more complicated: the possibility of escaping the performance appears attractive, but the repeated Manasis suggests that the social pattern itself keeps returning in different forms.

The idea of life as a series of performed roles, which is central to Goffman's dramaturgical understanding of social behaviour, finds an interesting literary parallel in Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage" speech in *As You Like It*. Shakespeare presents human life as a sequence of stages in which "all the men and women are merely players" enter and leave the stage, taking up different parts, beginning with infancy and moving through childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age until the final condition of "sans everything." "Problem behaviours in adolescence are related to a range of risk and protective factors" (Wills et al. 87). *Evam Indrajit* similarly presents human existence through a series of changing roles rather than as a continuous development of a fixed individual identity. The characters repeatedly move from one social position to another, and the stage directions make these changes part of the theatrical structure. What differs in Sircar is that the stages are closely connected to the repetitive pattern of modern middle-class life. Education, employment, marriage, family responsibility, and retirement become the roles through which the individual is expected to move. The theatrical stage, therefore, becomes a representation of the social stage on which the individual repeatedly performs according to the expectations attached to each life stage.

Indrajit's experience as a student can be read alongside Shakespeare's description of the "schoolboy" who moves unwillingly towards school. Indrajit, too, expresses his weariness with student life, showing that even this apparently temporary stage carries expectations he wants to escape. His movement towards adulthood does not, however, free him from the stage; it only places him in another role. The play also gives a humorous variation of Shakespeare's lover stage when Kamal declares that "the real Romeo here is Amal" (Sircar 14). The reference to Romeo places Amal within the familiar role of the young lover. In another instance, the characters ask the Writer to make Indrajit the hero and themselves the soldiers. The language of the play consequently moves from the lover to the heroic and military role, recalling the movement through Shakespeare's different stages of man. These references are not merely decorative Shakespearean echoes. They contribute to the dramaturgical structure of *Evam Indrajit* by showing that the characters repeatedly enter roles already attached to social and literary meanings. The individual, therefore, appears both as a person and as someone performing a recognisable part.

The movement towards employment makes this pattern even more visible. When Amal, Vimal, and Kamal approach the stage of completing their education, the question of employment immediately becomes unavoidable. The anxiety expressed in the statement that whether one passes or fails, one has to look for a job because the father is going to retire, shows how one stage of life prepares the individual for

another. The anxiety is not limited to the examination itself; it arises from the expectation that the student must soon become an earning member of the family. The physical and psychological transition is also shown when the character says he cannot swallow his food because the results are approaching. The body itself becomes affected by the pressure of moving from one social stage to another. In Shakespeare, the individual passes through the seven stages and finally leaves the stage; in *Evam Indrajit*, the movement is less a single progression towards an ending than a repeated social cycle in which the same roles return through different individuals. In Goffman's words, "It will be convenient to label as 'front' that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (22).

Amal, Vimal, and Kamal are described as "the intellectuals," "the educated minority", and "the élite" (Sircar 6), yet their position remains uncertain. Their intellect cannot guarantee survival; their degrees are questioned as proof of education, and their awareness of being different from others does not give them a definite social identity. They are educated but unsettled, differentiated but not securely placed. Victor Turner's idea of the liminal can very well explain this condition.

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (95)

Indrajit shares this uncertainty, which becomes visible when the three leave and he follows them with "anguish in his eyes" and "exhaustion in his movements" (Sircar 6). His unsettled state is thus expressed through both speech and stage movement.

Indrajit connects this condition with knowledge itself: "If I hadn't tasted the fruit of knowledge, I could have gone on living in this paradise of your blessed society of rules. Now I can only batter my head against the wall" (Sircar 23). Knowledge separates him from unquestioning acceptance of social rules, but it does not give him another place to settle. He later remembers that if he had married immediately after his studies, "without thinking about it" (Sircar 39), everything might have been different. Their earlier conversations in the park, their plans, and arguments belonged to a time when "we didn't know then, didn't think" (Sircar 39). Once that unthinking acceptance disappears, Indrajit cannot return to it, while the alternative he seeks remains out of reach. His position becomes precisely the state Turner describes: between an earlier condition and a new one.

The writer's questions about Indrajit's life further disturb the expected sequence of social stages. For birth, education, work, and marriage, he gives a particular place: Calcutta. When asked about death, he says, "Not dead yet" (Sircar 5), but after the Writer asks whether he is sure, he pauses and replies, "No, I'm not sure" (Sircar 5). The questions attempt to place him within fixed stages, but the answers refuse that orderly progression. The long pause before his final response is equally significant on

stage, as he performs his uncertainty rather than merely stating it. Indrajit remains between defined stages, unable to give even the final stage of his life a definite position.

Auntie praises the Writer and other learned people as “bright pieces of gems” (Sircar 34) because they have good degrees and jobs, while the Writer responds, “Pieces. Scraps. I had seen that part, but I had not seen the gems aspect of it” (Sircar 34). The word “part” suggests both a portion of life and a role performed within it. The play places its characters within comparable social stages: student, lover, employee, husband, and finally the person who gives way to another generation. The stages, therefore, keep returning through different individuals. What changes is the person performing the role, while the social part remains. Turner’s idea would best fit this argument,

> The neophyte in liminality must be a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status. . . Partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. They have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society. (103)

The final exchange between Indrajit and the Writer brings this condition into a single image. Indrajit claims that he is, but the writer associates Nirmal with promotion, building a house, and developing a business scheme. Indrajit then calls himself just an ordinary man, yet even this identity does not settle his position. When he asks, “Then how shall we live?”, the Writer answers, “For us there is only the road. We shall walk” (Sircar 59). The road becomes the clearest image of the liminal condition: there is movement, but no definite arrival. The Writer, Indrajit, and Manasi must continue their respective actions even when their purposes are uncertain. Their existence is finally compared with the “cursed spirits of Sisyphus” (Sircar 59), condemned to repeat the same movement. Turner’s betwixt and between thus takes the form of a life that keeps moving through social roles without reaching a position in which the individual can finally feel settled.

The circular structure of *Evam Indrajit* finally gives a larger shape to the liminal condition of its characters. The writer himself observes, “In this play, there isn’t much difference between the beginning and the end. It’s a circular play” (Sircar 52). Indrajit gives this idea a more concrete image when he says life is a large wheel going round and round. And we go round and round with it. The stages that appear to move the characters forward therefore lead them back into the same pattern. The writer’s description, “From home to school. From school to college. From college to the world. The world is an office” (Sircar 30), reduces the apparently different stages of life to a continuous movement into another institutional space. The characters’ individual movement through education, employment, relationships, and social responsibilities does not produce a final state of arrival; they continue to occupy positions within the

same larger structure. This circular movement therefore intensifies the liminality already present in the characters as they move from one position to another without reaching a stable point beyond the structure itself. The play begins and ends within the same cycle, leaving Indrajit and the others suspended between movement and repetition.

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