



## Looking at Badal Sircar's *Basi Khabar* and Derek Walcott's *The Ghost Dance* from an ecocritical angle

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Received 15 May, 2015; Accepted 30 May, 2015 © The author(s) 2015. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

**ABSTRACT:-** The article looks at two play-texts – one by Badal Sircar and another by Derek Walcott from a certain angle. It draws this angle from the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, or ecological literary criticism. Through this kind of a reading, questions of the position of the land and its connection with the indigenous communities and the colonizers are raised. Another large concern – that of historiography, also comes to the surface. Could the two texts, in their own ways, also be considered as attempts to give an alternative perspective of history – from “below”, challenging the Western European notion of the same?

**Keywords:-** Badal Sircar, ecocriticism, ecology and literature, indigenous communities, land

### I. INTRODUCTION

As William Howarth puts it, while reading a text, ideally the ecocritic “judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action”<sup>1</sup>. Very briefly then, ecocriticism (or ecological literary criticism) would denote an emerging field of study which brings together disciplines, from the “sciences” as well as the “arts”, to understand issues relating to ecology and the environment, and formulate solutions to contemporary environmental problems. The focus is on the relationship between literature and ecology, how the relationship between human beings and their physical environment is reflected in literature, and how the individual identities of human beings are constructed/defined by their physical and cultural environments. Interestingly, the current theoretical-framework of ecocriticism is yet to concretize. There are multiple entry and exit points of various, often conflicting ideas and thoughts. The objectives, questions, principles, realizations of ecocritical theory are constantly getting re-fashioned, re-moulded, reworked according to the social, cultural, psychological or aesthetic demands of the newer ages. Badal (Sudhindra) Sircar (1925-2011), from West Bengal, India, and Derek Walcott (b. 1930), from St. Lucia, the Caribbean, both happen to be male, educated, urban and coming from relatively privileged backgrounds. Analyzing the thematic of the two texts, this article would attempt to look at the degree of the ecological concerns of the playwrights (in their individual positions), and whether similarities could be found between them – cutting across spatial, linguistic and cultural differences. Sircar's *Basi Khabar*<sup>2</sup> (or “Stale News”; 1978) talks about the Santhal Hool (rebellion) of 1855 against the British colonial and upper caste power-structure in the present-day Jharkhand, India, while Walcott's *The Ghost Dance*<sup>3</sup> (1989) depicts the tussle between the White Western European-origin Americans and the indigenous Lakota Indians, in Dakota, the United States of America. Often the situation becomes such that (as Val Plumwood tells us) the “cultured” and privileged human society negates the indigenous' visibility – clubbing them together with the “virgin”, “pristine” land, where the former could establish their authority. The article would attempt to see how the respective lands and their (often anthropogenic) transformation, across time, become important elements, in the two texts – how the indigenous folk consider the land as part of their existence, connected to the formation of their personal identities, and try their best to defend them; How the attempt to write land-history becomes important – from below/from the position of the marginalized; The kind of a position the land falls in, amid the clash of different knowledge-systems.

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## II. ANALYSIS

In *Basi Khabar*, before going on to talk about the concerned event – the Santhal rebellion, Sircar gives a picture of the contemporary, urban, middle-class setting. The people in this setting are still under a colonial hangover, taking the colonial form of education and other laws as “given”, blithely oblivious to the perspective of the oppressed Santhal community, which took part in that event – their historical activities: how they first cleared the hilly forests of Eastern India to form agricultural land, how that kind of land began as a base for the industrialized techno-scientific cities to develop. The colonizer’s linear, scientific, exclusionary “mainstream” history is what prevails in the contemporary urban Indian’s psyche. So does the irrational demarcation between the city and the villages – not the realization that one actually defines the other. Sircar himself mentions at the beginning of the main play, that he has relied on various news, information and perspectives/voices to depict the rebellion in the text.

Regarding the nineteenth-century event of the Santhal rebellion, the space concerned is Damin-i-koh – a forested hilly area in the present-day Jharkhand, India. Sircar uses human props and body-language, to depict natural processes, such as how a seed grows into a tree, how the community first hunts wild animals upon settling, and so on. He calls upon historical facts to foreground the overlooked, forgotten event and the unsung heroes (like Sidho, Kanho or Bhairo) associated with it, more and more. The power-structure which dominates the Santhal community at that time and space, comprises agents of the colonizers, plus the privileged upper-class landlords. The oppressed community is tired of bonded-labour, misleading and financial cheating by the power-structure, and the latter’s disdainful and violent attitude. Hence, they rebel. Since Damin-i-koh was first made into tillable land by the Santhals and they consequently settled there, it soon became a part of their personal identity. It became a definition of who they were, featuring in their version of history, myths, songs, art and so on. That continued for generations. Naturally, their soul would be wounded if historical events lead to the seizure and transformation of that land and the surroundings, by heavier foreign power: the colonizers. Later, by their Indian loyalists, as well. Just because these indigenous people were not conventionally “educated” and were afraid, they could not stop the power-transfer and the consequent exploitation of their soil:

“*Bipul parimane dhan, sarse o anyanya tailabij chalan jeto Murshidabade, Kolkatay, England-e*” (Massive amounts of wheat, mustard-seed and other kinds of oilseeds used to get transported to Murshidabad, Calcutta and England).

They put up with years of mental and physical torture and exploitation, until there came a time, when they couldn’t. At one point in the text, this multilayered line reverberates:

“*Manush prithibir sarbasrestha jeeb*” (“Humans are the earth’s greatest living being”)

Side by side, there is a cacophony of voices which shout, “*Manush Manush*” (“Humans Humans”) and “*Prithibi Prithibi*” (“Earth Earth”) – as if asking the reader/audience to spot the sarcasm. Sircar also brings forth instances of what the community regards as “knowledge”, as opposed to the Western European one: In the Satkathiya village, there was tremendous oppression of the Santhal community, under the rule of Mahesh Daroga. Sidho, a community member, then informed that in the context of the rebellion, a God has given instructions in his dreams. According to the Santhal rituals, the messengers of the community then went out to spread that news, carrying a Sal tree branch in their hands. Images of violence are brought up in the text, relating to what the Santhals met with, after they rebelled: The destruction of Santhal village after village, the Nawab of Murshidabad sending soldiers and weapons to kill the indigenous people:

“... *Panchasta hatio pathalo Saotal ar tader stri-chhelemeyeder payer talay pishe marte, tader kureghar bhenge matite mishiye dite*” (He also sent fifty elephants to crush the Santhals, their wives and children, beneath the former’s feet, and to turn their huts to dust).

Sircar also echoes pro-colonial philosophies of well-known figures of the then Bengal, then juxtaposes them with cries of the rebellious Santhals:

“Rammohan [Roy]: *Neelchaser dwara krisakder maha upakar sadhita haitechhe.*’ [The farmers have benefitted from harvesting indigo]

Chorus [representing the Santhal community]: *‘Hoo-oo-oo-l’ ...*

Bankimchandra [Chattopadhyay]: (Turning towards the Chorus) *‘Ingrej Bangladesh-ke arajakatar hasta haite udhhar kariyachhe!’* [The English have delivered Bengal from the hands of anarchy]

Chorus: (Raising their fingers) *‘Hoo-oo-oo-l’ ...*”

*The Ghost Dance* also depicts an event which took place in the nineteenth century in Dakota, the United States. Here, the tussle of the land is between the indigenous Lakota community and the White Western European immigrants. Like in the case of the Santhals, the land happens to be precious and a defining factor for the Lakotas. They express their existence in their local natural environmental terms. The non-human creatures being a friend to them (as in the case of Walcott's *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*, as well).

"... a lark sang to him from the ladder of the sun:  
'Your own people will kill you.' So the lark sang.  
He is very afraid of the Indian Agency.  
of Major McLaughlin and his Indian police."

Also,

"KICKING BEAR: 'How can I eat? You know our starvation.  
You know that McLaughlin cut down on our rations.  
It is autumn now. As it is with those leaves,  
so it will be with all the Indian nations...  
The herds of buffalo will blow like black smoke.  
The buffalo are already becoming ghosts...  
if you say you love us, then suffer with us...'"

In his text, Walcott recreates the events which ended with the death of the Lakota chief, Sitting Bull, and here we also find an urban White American woman, Catherine Weldon, leaving her own class and taking part in this collective struggle of the indigenous community against the White oppressors. However, before Catherine takes up this noble cause, we find that she is not altogether comfortable with this spatial displacement to Dakota from Boston. She expresses her present fractured botanic familiarity as well, in the text:

"I should go back to Boston, to streetlights and carriages,  
long white gloves and concerts...  
I'm stuck out here on the farm, alone."

As it is the Lakotas have been driven away from most of the parts of their original land and put into reservations, with controlled ration and other amenities. The Whites further wish to usurp the remaining land allotted to the former, with Major McLaughlin (head of the Indian Agency of that reservation) working on a deal to cheat the Lakotas out of their land. For a long time the innocent and "ignorant" Lakotas continue to be actively and passively oppressed by the Whites. Then there is a limit. Side by side, the issue of conversion to Christianity of some of the Lakota people is also highlighted by Walcott. The Whites thrust their religion to the indigenous people in order to "educate" them – very craftily convincing the latter how irrelevant their own community-knowledge was, that the latter had no agency, and how better/advanced human beings they would become by unlearning their traditional beliefs, and embracing that of the Whites. The Whites think that they have every right to capture the "virgin", "pristine" landscape before them – clubbing the indigenous people as part of the "non-human", non-threatening, "tame-able" inhabitants. In a particular juncture of the text, the reader witnesses the ironic situation: Who is calling whom "animal", and who is acting like one!

"DONNELLY [A high-ranking White officer, towards the indigenous people]: 'Aye! Fought those naked, dog-eatin' haythen, the Messy Breeches, the Look-Alike-As, the Sew-Your-Patches... On me own cross... like this from the lance of a Sioux at Little Big Horn.  
We didn't marry them either. We fought them.  
Not fondle their squaws, smellin' of buffalo grease.'

BRANDON [Engaged to Lucy, an indigenous woman converted to Christianity]: "And, for that remark, Donnelly, you're fightin' me...  
It's a personal insult to my fiancée..."

However, not all the Lakota community members were convinced by the White "teachings", though. They invoke the power of their own traditional knowledge-system and hope for a better future. The Ghost Dance poses as a source of protection for the community – the Lakota people would be invisible and immune to the bullets of the Whites – whatever torture the Whites have committed to their community and their land would go away – new flora and fauna will emerge, the land will be replenished again and the Whites would be driven

away by the higher force of the Lakota community. In fact, there is a segment in the play, where an indigenous woman could not bear being converted to Christianity, felt like a traitor to her original community and eventually commits suicide – as a salvation to her “sin”:

“EAGLE [The Indian preacher]: ‘... My daughter hang herself... Lucy. You remember Lucy. Swift running Deer. My daughter, Major McLaughlin. She hang herself...’”

Catherine also talks about how it was amid a natural setting, by a creek, that she last saw Lucy, who “wanted to go back”. Does Lucy imply then, that by taking her own life, she went back to nature and to her community teachings? Does she imply that she finally found peace after truly mingling with her natural environment, à la Rabindranath’s Abhijit in *Muktadhara*?

Even though the White Army and the Indian agents end up mass-killing of the indigenous people, the end of the play dwells on hope. That the Ghost Dance would resurrect them and the land would be restored to its pre-contact (with the White immigrants) state.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Both Badal Sircar and Derek Walcott attempt here, to give an alternative version of history, through these two texts – a history which is erased/overlooked/negated by traditional White Western European notion of history and historiography. Talking about the respective indigenous people’s revolts “from below” also demands foregrounding of their respective natural environments, as the indigenous people’s lives are intrinsically connected to the former. They respect and preserve the land that they are born in, striking a harmonious relationship with the other non-human natural beings. In both the texts, the “cultured” urban, “educated” community usurps the land and exploits it – at which point, the playwrights make us see all that one should not do towards one’s environment. The two events depicted in the texts (around the same time-frame) attest the fact that similar harm is done to the environment and the indigenous communities living close to it, by industrially enlightened urban communities – in various parts of the world. The environmental awareness of Walcott and Sircar cuts across all the cultural, geographical and linguistic differences, connecting them like never before. Their local eco-consciousness would contribute to the global one, making the planet a better place to live in, in the future. Here’s hoping that the Capraian eco-literacy spreads more and more in days to come.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

Many thanks to Dr. Samantak Das, who is supervising my current research on ecocriticism.

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