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A Critical Reading of Utpal Dutta's *Shakespearer Samajchetona* (Shakespeare's Societal Consciousness): How Ideological Affiliation Motivates Critical Response

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Abstract:

The present essay examines Utpal Dutta's *Shakespearer Samajchetona* (*Shakespeare's Societal Consciousness*) an important experiment in reading Shakespeare from Marxist viewpoint and ventures to investigate into the ideological motivations behind such readings. Special attention has been paid to the political upheavals that took place in Bengal at their time and which triggered a shift of focus from an appreciation of Shakespeare's transcendental humanism or the speculative treatment of the influence of Renaissance scepticism upon Shakespeare's plays to considerations of the socio-economic factors that Shakespeare's plays were implicated in. Dutta proceeds to argue that Shakespeare actually articulated anti-bourgeois sentiments and manifested a sympathetic feeling for the underdogs.

Keywords: Marxist literary criticism, Soviet Social Realism, European Marxism, British Cultural Materialism, Renaissance England.

Utpal Dutta's Shakespearean exegesis entitled *Shakespearer Samaj Chetona* (Shakespeare's societal consciousness) was published in the politically turbulent 1970s. It was evidently intended to be a radical riposte to the traditional bourgeoisie criticism of Shakespeare which by deifying Shakespeare as the immortal sovereign of the arcadia of art purposefully and indefatigably invested Shakespeare's creations with a transcendental glory and timeless significance. Such bourgeoisie criticism effectively ignored the social reality that manifested directly or indirectly in Shakespeare's works and gave them a political cast. Dutta does not spare even the orthodox Marxists like Alexander Smirnov, who succumb to the temptation of

projecting Shakespeare as the mouthpiece of the progressive bourgeoisie, on the assumption that Renaissance humanism which Shakespeare incarnated and endorsed was the cultural representation of the innate character of the bourgeois ideology. By citing with approbation Wyndham Lewis' observation that "Far from being a feudal poet, the Shakespeare that *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Tempest*, or even *Coriolanus* shows us is much more Bolshevik (using this little word popularly) than a figure of conservative romance" (qt. in Dutta, *Shakespeare's Samajchetona* 9), Dutta proceeds to show that Shakespeare far from advocating and disseminating the values of the elite section of contemporary English society, actually articulated anti-bourgeois sentiments and ventilated sympathetic feelings for the underdogs. Thus Utpal Dutta in establishing Shakespeare as a socially conscious artist in a polemical introductory chapter in his book launches a dual attack upon the bourgeois commentators and such 'Marxist' critics as Alexander Smirnov, Lunacharsky and Anisimov. Utpal Dutta's leftist affiliation obviously accounts for his anathema to the bourgeoisie critics. But what is significant and suggestive of the critic's ideological motivation is his reaction against the evaluation of Shakespeare by those Soviet critics who evidently espoused a materialist perspective. The reason for this has to be sought not only in the complex and conflict-ridden history of the Communist movement in India of Dutta's contemporary times, but also in the evolution of Utpal Dutta's political faith and opinion. It will be dealt with later in detail after Dutta's views on the materialist criticism of Shakespeare is considered closely.

In the first chapter of his work, Utpal Dutta seeks the answer to a question which he considers as fundamental to any materialist interpretation of Shakespeare. If the class conflict between a moribund feudalism and an ascendant bourgeoisie was the locomotive of the British history of Shakespeare's times, which of the warring parties did the dramatist stand for? Obviously such a formulation of a fundamental question and then the orientation of a whole critical discussion to answer that question are fallacious and reductive and this critical methodology will be scrutinized later. But what needs to be examined now is the answer that Marxist critics like Alexander Smirnov, Lunacharsky, Anisimov et al offer to such a question and Utpal Dutta's observations on their response. A. Smirnov, whom Dutta labels as the greatest Shakespearean scholar of Soviet Union has declared that:

The conclusion that Shakespeare was the ideologist of the bourgeoisie is inescapable. It is impossible, however, to designate him as such without reservations. The rapacity, greed, cruelty, egoism, and philistinism so typical of the English bourgeoisie—embodied in Shylock, Malvolio, and Iago are no less scathingly denounced. Shakespeare was the *humanist* ideologist

of the bourgeoisie, the exponent of the program advanced by them when, in the name of humanity, they first challenged the feudal order, but which they later disavowed (qt. in Dutta, *Shakespearer Samajchetona* 3).

Utpal Dutta wonders how such a perceptive critic as Smirnov can represent Shakespeare as the propagator of bourgeoisie ideology, an interpreter of their agenda when the latter had created an array of villains like Iago, Claudius or Shylock to denigrate the bourgeoisie. Dutta contends that while many of Shakespeare's contemporaries cried up the new developments in trade and commerce, and celebrated the unprecedented geographical discoveries and expansion in the Western world during the Renaissance, Shakespeare seems to have been not at all impressed by what the new age was claimed to have achieved. What he could discern behind these much-trumpeted adventures and enterprises was the reckless plundering and insatiable rapacity of the rising bourgeoisie and he has painted the merchants, representatives and champions of the new age in colours of deepest black. The desperate attempt on the part of some Marxist critics to project Shakespeare as the mouthpiece of the rising bourgeoisie deliberately ignoring and overlooking all textual evidences, Dutta argues, was inspired by a scandalous misinterpretation of Marxism. As Marx had asserted that the economic base is the main determining factor, and that ideas and thoughts are merely reflections of the relations of production and the forces of production, these immature and sometimes misleading scholars had concluded that the human mind has no role to play in human history, and that religion, philosophy, customs and literature are all ineffectual and subservient to economics. The Soviet critics' like Smirnov's or Anisimov's perception is that as in the economic sphere the bourgeoisie was a progressive force in his times, Shakespeare enthusiastically aligned himself with this progressive section of the people. But in such a reductive economistic interpretation of Shakespeare Dutta finds a misreading of Marx, who in his oeuvre indicated that the economic factor may be the ultimate determinant, but never the sole determining element in human history. He refers to one of Engels' letters in order to establish his point. Engels in a letter to J. Bloch written in 1890 was quite emphatic about this point:

According to the materialist conception of history, the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—

political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle etc— forms of law— and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the combatants... political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form (qt. in Fox, *The Novel and the People* 44).

Engels here denies any mechanical one-to-one correspondence between base and superstructure for elements of the superstructure constantly react back upon and influence the economic base. By alluding to such statements made by the founders of Marxism, Utpal Dutta emphasizes the mutual interaction between base and superstructure as the fundamental tenet of dialectical materialism and asseverates that though in the formation of man, economics acts as the final determinant, human mind too has the power of influencing economics and that for this reason the importance of the human mind is undeniable in dialectical materialism. Dutta further adds that the creativity of the human mind, the conscious endeavor and enterprise of man is the theoretical basis of the workers' party. Immediately after such a glorification of the human element in the class struggle, Utpal Dutta refers to the necessity of Cultural Revolution in the socialist countries, and thus it becomes clear what ideological motivation has tied together all these arguments like an invisible thread. Mao Ze Dong, the pioneer of the Cultural Revolution in China, in his *On Contradiction* has similarly argued:

True, the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role. When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, then the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role (Mao, *On Contradiction* 92).

In his criticism of Stalin's book *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, Mao wrote:

From the beginning to the end of this book Stalin does not say a word about the superstructure. He gives no thought to man, he sees things, but not people...The Soviets are concerned only with the relations of production, they do not pay attention to the superstructure, they do not pay attention to the politics, they do not pay attention to the role of the people. Without a Communist movement, it is impossible to reach Communism (qt. in Mclellan, *Marxism* 253).

Mao considered that a revolution in the sphere of ideas brought about by an intense indoctrination of socialist attitudes could accelerate and facilitate economic development. Developments in the superstructure, in other words, could not only proceed parallel to, but they could also themselves condition, the development of the base.

The influence of Mao's views on art and literature upon the critical practice of Utpal Dutta is also quite evident in Dutta's interpretation of Shakespeare. Dutta has alluded with approbation to the dialectical critical methodology that Mao has recommended for a Marxist reinterpretation and reappraisal of the literature of the past. For Mao the standard of evaluation of the literary productions of the past is the attitude towards the mass that is embodied in such productions and history. Mao writes:

The proletariat should... distinguish among the literary and art works of past ages and determine its attitude towards them only after determining their attitude to the people and whether or not they had any progressive significance historically (Mao, *Talks at the Yenan Forum* 252).

Utpal Dutta's reading of Shakespeare and his creations applies the principles of literary interpretation that Mao has formulated according to the theory of dialectical and historical materialism. The question that Dutta deemed as fundamental to the evaluation and interpretation of Shakespeare is which side Shakespeare took in the class struggle of his times. In the first chapter of his book Dutta poses this question:

Now the question arises, whom did Shakespeare support? The central conflict in his society was between moribund and decadent feudalism and rising capitalism. What was Shakespeare's ideological position in this conflict? (Dutta, *Shakespeare's Samajchetana* 2)

Dutta's answer to this question is that Shakespeare was neither inclined towards the decadent feudalism, nor did he endorse the acquisitiveness of the exploitative bourgeois, he rather embraced the cause of common people, the plebeians and has given powerful expression to the sufferings of the people and registered in his plays his protests and revulsion against the existing socio-political order. The question as well as the answer is formulated in terms of Mao's views on art and literature.

On recognizing in Dutta's critical opinion such resonance of Mao's voice and on further noticing Dutta directly accusing critics like the Anisimovs of changing their class, it is reasonable to assume that in the ideological clash between the Soviet bloc and China under the

strong and able leadership of Mao, Dutta obviously was inclined to the latter and that even in his criticism of Shakespeare he did not spare his ideological adversaries, whose politics to him was repugnantly "revisionist". Utpal Dutta repeatedly and stubbornly maintained that the revolutionary and progressive role played by the rising bourgeoisie in combating the feudal elements had been unjustly over-emphasized by certain Marxist critics. It would not be too far-fetched to speculate that Utpal Dutta's indignation at those 'Marxists' whom he castigates for having 'declassed' themselves and for having forgotten the lessons of Marx's *Capital*, originates from the heated political climate of the time, more specifically from the ideological infighting in which the Indian communists were embroiled in the sixth and seventh decades of the last century. The Communist Party of India finally split in 1964, with one faction representing the earlier 'right' and 'centrist' trends coming to be known as the CPI and the other group, representing the earlier 'left' trend, being known after sometime as the Communist Party (Marxist) or CPM. Apart from personal and functional differences, the split also took a largely doctrinal form. Bipan Chandra in his *India since Independence* has offered a succinct historical account of the ideological conflict between the two factions of Indian Communists:

According to the CPM, the Indian state was 'the organ of class rule of the bourgeoisie and landlords, led by the big bourgeoisie, who are increasingly collaborating with foreign finance capital'... In its International outlook, the CPM continued to regard Stalin as a great Marxist who was basically correct in his policies... it claimed to take an independent stand on Soviet-Chinese differences, but was closer to the Chinese in demanding an attack on Soviet 'Revisionism'. The CPI too wanted to 'complete the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal revolution', but it would do so by forming a national democratic front which would include progressive sections of Congress. Moreover, this front need not be led by the working class or the CPI.' What is evident from this account is that the CPI was keen on class-collaboration with the progressive national bourgeoisie, while the CPM was much more radical in their approach and did not believe that its goal of establishing a people's democratic state could be established through peaceful parliamentary means forming strategic alliance with the progressive section of the bourgeoisie (Chandra 261,262).

Utpal Dutta's political position was akin to that of CPM and his ideological allegiance to CPM, accounts for his strong disapproval of the progressive role of the bourgeoisie in human history, a role allegedly magnified and exaggerated by the CPI in India and the 'revisionist' Soviet leadership in the International context. A careful reading of the first chapter of Dutta's treatise will convince a close reader that here Shakespeare and his creations have been used by

Dutta as a space of an ideological tussle with his opponents. By referring to the authority of Marx and Engels and by using their meta-narrative upon the historical account of primitive accumulation by the rising bourgeoisie, the critic has interpreted Shakespeare in that light. In a way he has incorporated the empirical reality of Shakespeare's production into the theoretical framework of a Marxist discourse of human history. But the theoretical apparatus that the critic here has made use of is a particular version of Marxism, for by this time Marxism itself had come to be recognized as a text, an empirical reality available through many mutually antagonistic critical interpretations. Utpal Dutta critiqued certain interpretations of the grand discourse of Marxism, and by espousing some other interpretation of the same, approached Shakespeare and his creation. But both in his reading of Marx and Shakespeare, Dutta seems to have been inspired by what Althusser has called 'religious myth of reading' (Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 17) according to which the world is a Holy Scripture, a text that speaks truly to us. To look at a thing according to this theory of knowledge is to 'read' its essence and thus truly to know it. The logic of this reading as Althusser describes it in *Reading Capital* is as follows:

[It is] the logic of conception of knowledge in which all work of knowledge is reduced in principle to the recognition of the mere relation of *vision*; in which the whole nature of its object is reduced to the mere condition of *given* (Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital* 19).

Thus, in the kind of reading that Utpal Dutta practices in his book, one discovers a presupposition that the objects of literary analysis are simply given, are out there, in the world of Shakespeare's productions or in Marx's oeuvre and those critics who cannot see them may be, can be and are charged of 'oversight'.

Althusser's disciple, Pierre Macherey, in his *Theory of Literary Production*, applies the Althusserian epistemology to critical inquiry. Interpretative criticism, which assumes that the task of the critic is to deliver the text from its own silences by extracting a hidden, latent meaning from it, Macherey argues, is inherently contradictory. Tony Bennet in his *Formalism and Marxism* has offered a lucid commentary on the limitations and paradoxes of interpretative criticism. Bennet rightly observes that the more interpretative criticism:

seeks to enable the text to speak with its own voice, the more the voice of the critic obtrudes as the text is referred to an ideal or substitute text, elaborated by the critic in relation to which the 'original' text is to be corrected, revised and in general terms, tailored for consumption. Such a criticism, then, effects a certain productive activity. It so 'works' the text, usually by

smoothing out the contradictions within it, as to subject it to a particular ideologically coded reading. But, at the same time, it effaces its own productive activity in presenting that reading as but the 'truth' of the text itself (Bennet 86-87).

Bennet further clarifies:

that it is ultimately with the 'empiricist presuppositions of this form of criticism that Macherey and Eagleton take issue. The distinguishing feature of empiricism, Colin MacCabe has argued, consists 'in its characterization of the knowledge to be obtained as defined by the object of which it is knowledge'. Empiricism, that is, consists in the belief that the object of knowledge is supposed to be somehow 'given' as a state of affair, existing outside and independently of thought, which constitutes 'that which is to be known'. The process of knowledge is thus viewed as one through which, by a mixture of conceptual and empirical procedures, the 'is to be known' comes to be known, becomes the 'is known'. Interpretative criticism thus constructs the text as if it had a pre-given hidden or true meaning which it is the business of criticism to 'come to know', 'to mirror in thought' (Bennet 87).

What Bennet emphasizes here is a fallacy that interpretive criticism based on an empiricist methodology involves. In claiming to extract the latent meaning from the text, it actually 'works on' the text, smoothing out the contradictions and reconstructing the text in its own terms as a coherent and unified whole.

Utpal Dutta in *Shakespeare's Samajchetona* clearly practiced this kind of interpretative criticism, claiming to have understood the true import and significance of Shakespearean texts by applying the theoretical apparatus of Marxism. He tried vigorously and assiduously to impress this fact upon his readers that it has consistently remained his effort to throw light on what Shakespeare consciously intended to communicate. For him Shakespearean texts do contain a fixed meaning waiting to be discovered by an objective and dispassionate seeker. The text of Dutta's essay does not contain any critical self-reflection on the critic's part and does not carry any hint of an understanding that this kind of reading too produces the text from a particular ideological perspective.

When the idea that a literary work is an expression of an intention (whether individual or collective) which then serves as the meaning to be discovered in it, the essence of the work, is rejected, our very sense of the text is transformed. Pierre Macherey in his *A Theory of Literary Production* has critiqued the assumption that a literary work reflects the authorial intention. Terry Eagleton has summed up Macherey's radical interrogation of this kind of

empiricist criticism which assumes that the object of criticism is given, fixed and intended by the author:

Criticism and its object – the literary text— are to be radically distinguished: science is not the reduplication of an object but a form of knowledge of it which displaces it outside of itself, knows it as it cannot know itself. Criticism is not merely the elaboration of the text's self-knowledge; it establishes a decisive rupture between itself and the object, distancing itself from that object in order to produce a new knowledge of it. To know the text is not to listen to, and translate, a pre-existent discourse: it is to produce a new discourse which 'makes speak' the text's silences. Such an operation however is not to be misconceived as the hermeneutical recovery of a sense or structure hidden in the work, a sense which it possesses but conceals; it is rather to establish a new knowledge discontinuous with the work itself, disjunct from it as science is disjunct from ideology. Scientific criticism is in this sense the antagonist of empiricist critical 'knowledge', which ends effectively by abolishing itself, allowing itself to be reabsorbed into a literary object which it has left essentially unchanged. Criticism is not an 'instrument' or 'passage' to the truth of a text, but a transformative labour which makes its objects appear other than it is. Scientific criticism, then, produces a new object refusing the empiricist illusion of the text as a 'given' which offers itself spontaneously to the inspecting glance. Such empiricism merely *redoubles* the artefact: it succeeds in saying less in saying more (Eagleton, *Against the Grain* 10).

Macherey in *Theory of Literary Production* distinguished between the traditional conception of literary criticism as an art and a more radical representation of literary criticism as a science. Macherey's formulation deserves to be quoted at length:

either literary criticism is an art, completely determined by the pre-existence of a domain, the literary works and finally reunited with them in the discovery of their truth, and as such it has no autonomous existence; or, it is a certain form of knowledge, and has an object, which is not a given but a product of literary criticism. To this object literary criticism applies a certain effort of transformation. Literary criticism is neither the imitation, nor the facsimile of the object; it maintains a certain separation or distance between knowledge and its object. If knowledge is expressed in discourse, and is applied to discourse, this discourse must by its nature be different from the object, which it animated in order to talk about it. This distance or gap, large enough to accommodate an authentic discursiveness is the determining characteristic of the relationship between literature and criticism. What can be said of the work can never be

confused with what the work itself is saying, because two distinct kinds of discourse which differ in both form and content are being superimposed. Thus, between the writer and the critic, an irreducible difference must be posited right from the beginning: not the difference between two points of view on the same object, but the exclusion separating two forms of discourse that have nothing in common. The work that the author wrote is not precisely the work that is explicated by the critic. Let us say, provisionally, that the critic employing a new language brings out a difference within the work by demonstrating that it is other than it is (Macherey 7).

If Utpal Dutta's Shakespeare criticism is considered and evaluated in the light of such a radical conceptualization of criticism as a science, it becomes apparent that the critic instead of positing an irreducible distance between the writer and himself pretends to bridge such a distance or to reproduce what the writer himself has tried to communicate. The critic here tries to, or pretends to install himself on the site of the literary work in order to display the meanings there. At the very outset of his critical work, Utpal Dutta makes it clear that the fundamental premise upon which he has based his thesis is that Shakespeare had his own views and opinions about the contemporary social and political reality and through his plays he had expressed his views. Using this presupposition as his point of departure, he strives to establish and substantiate his argument throughout his book, with adequate reference to Shakespearean texts, interpreting and evaluating these textual references from a Marxist perspective. Criticism by this act labours to justify a foregone conclusion, rather than moving towards it. Criticism here pretends to find a passage to the heart of the text and hence implicitly admits to work as a supplement to the text. Two major implications of such a critical practice are, first that the text is a reflection of its author's intention and it has a unified meaning which may sometimes remain hidden and second that the task of the critic is to reproduce this meaning and so enable the reader to grasp the true significance of the text. The overarching figure of the author which is a product of bourgeoisie individualism is not only present in Utpal Dutta's Marxist criticism of Shakespeare, but it also works as a fundamental proposition of the thesis, even as the critical enterprise here proceeds to consolidate the myth of the author as creator. Moreover the critic's insistence on the greatness of Shakespeare in depicting the social realities of his time is an indirect reaffirmation of the Romantic glorification of the genius of Shakespeare. What is evident from Dutta's handling of Shakespeare is that he has not been able to purge his critical perspective of the illusion of the sovereignty and autonomy of the authorial subject that the bourgeois aesthetic ideology strives to perpetuate. While Marxist discourse emphasizes the

social construction of subjectivity, Utpal Dutta's Shakespeare criticism relies on a conception of individual consciousness and agency that directly contradicts Marxist discourse. Therefore, to put it in simple terms, while Utpal Dutta challenges the content of the bourgeoisie criticism of Shakespeare, he uses the forms, conventions and methodology of bourgeoisie criticism, for in order to establish the validity of his interpretation, he refers to the authority of Shakespeare, professing to discover the authentic meaning of the Shakespearean oeuvre, and subtly hides the transformative operation that his critical intervention performs on the Shakespearean texts. Literary criticism in the approach of Dutta, in spite of its materialist orientation does not admit its relative position, but claims to be a disinterested, objective reproduction of what the literary texts actually mean.

The figure of the author looms large in the critical observations made by Dutta on Shakespeare's works. In spite of subscribing to the Marxist view of literature as a reflection of the social reality or the class struggle in history, Dutta cannot rid himself of the bourgeoisie notions of a transcendent genius, of an author as the creator who though not autonomous or isolated from the community, is an active subject and consciously endorses the interests of one party in the class struggle of his time and denounces the other, and his work reflects such a choice, acquiring unity and coherence of meaning and form from such an authorial choice or intention. So the work is finally determined by the author's conscious choice or intention and not by the socio-political conflicts of the times. The class conflicts of the age find an aesthetic resolution in the author's creative consciousness or in his social conscience which cannot endorse what he evidently discovers as unjust or unfair and sympathizes with the poor and exploited. Dutta does not explore the roots of Shakespeare's social consciousness or account for his inclination towards the underprivileged section of the society. Nor does he allow himself to think that a literary work instead of representing two parties involved in the class-warfare of the times as white and black, good and evil, may embody the conflict of interests in its form and instead of containing a single meaning, may become a site for the clash of multiple meanings and ideologies. Lenin in his essay on Tolstoy characterizes Tolstoy's writings as representative of the Russian aristocracy through a noble individual with literary genius. Eagleton criticizes such a view for it relies too much on the definition of Tolstoy as a great individual genius, and this according to him, is a gap in Lenin's materialism. Similar objections may be raised against Utpal Dutta's representation of Shakespeare as a literary genius, a great poet who mirrored the class conflicts of his time and expressed his position through his plays. Such a glorification of Shakespeare as a socially conscious, great playwright and poet is the

other side of the coin to the Romantic elevation of the bard to the level of transcendent genius. Alex Callinicos in his "Marxism and Literary Criticism" writes:

Great works of art (Marx is unabashed in his value-judgments) can provide profound insights in to specific historical situations; they also because of the relatively unalienated character of artistic labour, offer intimation of how work will become a means of self-fulfillment in a classless communist society. That such achievements are possible despite the *overt intentions of the author* is indicated by Marx and Engels' immense admiration for Balzac, whom the latter called 'a far greater master of realism than Zola'. Balzac's greatness lies in how he 'was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices' - his nostalgia for the ancien regime— and portray 'the progressive inroads of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles'. We see here emerging what Frank Kermode has called 'the discrepancy theory', according to which 'texts can under Marxist analysis reveal a meaning not intended by the author'. Though... greatly influential on Althusserian criticism, this idea remained in Marx's and Engels' writings merely an intriguing suggestion. One reason why it is not developed further is perhaps that an obvious strategy for eliciting the discrepancy between author-intention and meaning is to study the traces it might have left in the formal construction of the text. But, as S.S.Prawer observes, 'Marx does not often deal with questions of form' (Callinicos 96).

Such inattention to form that characterizes the classical Marxism's encounter and negotiations with literature also accounts for Utpal Dutta's obsessive preoccupation with the authorial intent which is allegedly expressed through the content of Shakespearean plays.

Utpal Dutta's book not only records the critic's observations on and analyses of Shakespearean works but it significantly gives us an account of how a Marxist critic has read Marx. In his reading of Marx too, Utpal Dutta seems to have been inspired by a religious myth of reading and appears to give us the impression of having read Marx 'correctly'. Here too the bourgeoisie myth of the author keeps haunting the critic. In his essay 'What is an author', Foucault argues that we can speak of 'authors' of traditions, disciplines and theories. In this context he mentions the importance of both Marx and Freud as 'founders of discursivity'. (Foucault, 'What is an Author?' 154) For Foucault, what is unique about these types of "authors" is that they do not just produce particular texts but 'the possibilities and the rules of formation of other texts' (Foucault, 'What is an Author?' 154). Yet, to initiate a tradition in this way does not imply that each founder lays out beforehand the intricacies of a later text

within that tradition; rather each engenders ‘an endless possibility of discourse’ (Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ 154). Thus initiators of discursivity according to Foucault, make ‘possible not only certain number of analogies’ (Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ 154), but also certain number of differences. They have created a possibility for something other than their discourse, yet something belonging to what they founded. The enactment of such discursivities is then always at once intimately associated with the originating author (a presence linked to authorial intention and contextual co-ordinates) but also radically different. Moreover, such differential enactments within these traditions are initiated via a continuous hermeneutic rearticulation of the initiator’s originary words and texts. The very ‘return to the origin’ makes possible the continually open discursive potentialities of later enactments.

Apart from subscribing to the myth of the ‘author’ and authorial intent, Utpal Dutta’s Shakespeare criticism shows another important concern of traditional bourgeois criticism, namely the distinction between appearance and reality or between the surface and the depth of the literary text. Utpal Dutta argues that ‘the great plays of Shakespeare are almost always pregnant with deeper import and significance. Though these plays are not allegorical they operate on two levels and in the analysis of the playwright’s societal consciousness, the critic must reach the second level of meaning. For if one remains confined to the exciting external events, he will not be able to reach the poet’s message.’ (Dutta, *Shakespearer Samajchetona* 350).

Here the critic has referred to two levels of meaning and has distinguished between the surface and the depth, the exterior and interior of Shakespearean plays, indicating the latter as more important than the former. This kind of reading subscribes to an empiricist ideology for it presupposes the meaning of a text as pre-given and latent in the text itself and assumes that the critic’s task is merely to discover the meaning, penetrating deeper into the text. Macherey has offered a trenchant analysis of this empiricist ideology of interiority. He writes:

If the work encloses the warm intimacy of its secrets, composes its elements into a totality which is sufficient, completed and centred, then all criticism is immanent (Macherey, *A Theory* 108).

Machery has further critiqued the antithesis between appearance and reality, surface and depth of a literary text for according to him it involves an interpretive fallacy positing the actual meaning of the text as already given, residing deep inside the text, waiting to be discovered by the critic’s penetrating gaze. Criticism in this view becomes a passive reflection

of the text's message, not an active construction of the meaning in its own terms and remains subservient to the text. Macherey writes:

...this idea of hidden truth or meaning remains unproductive and misleading ... to consider the work in terms of opposition between appearance and reality is to invert the normative fallacy, only to fall into the interpretive fallacy: to replace the apparent line of the text by a true line which would find itself placed behind the first ... but this new dimension only repeats the previous one; this depth is the product of a doubling which is ideologically fertile but theoretically sterile, since it places the work in perspective but tells us nothing of its determinations (Macherey, *Theory* 111)

Utpal Dutta in his Shakespeare criticism has fallen into the interpretive fallacy by postulating a difference between the surface and the depth of the plays and claiming that the meaning and message that the playwright intended to convey to his audience is latent in the plays themselves, never seeking to expose the factors that ultimately determine the formation of the plays. Moreover in claiming to have grasped what Shakespeare originally intended to communicate, the pre-given facts and secrets of the plays lying beneath the surface of the plays' actions, Dutta has committed himself to an empiricist methodology which ignores the role of theory in actively organizing and critically reorganizing the data provided by the experiences of the empirical reality of the text. Dutta has embraced a reflectionist model of knowledge, which assumes that the objects of knowledge pre-exist the knower and are independent of the act of knowing. Such an epistemological position does not take into account the fact that the theoretical perspective from which an object is approached, moulds and transforms the objects of knowledge and conditions the act of knowing. Dutta's reading does not conform to the Marxist theory of knowledge which maintains that the concepts, statements, and inferences by which man expresses his knowledge of the external world are not only a reflection of the world but also the product of our activity; consequently there is something in knowledge that depends on the subject of knowing. Dutta in his Shakespeare criticism has overlooked the crucial role that his own theoretical position plays in producing the knowledge of Shakespearean texts and has claimed such knowledge as an accurate reflection of the texts he has studied, or the objects of knowledge.

According to Utpal Dutta societal consciousness in Shakespeare's times was equal to a religious consciousness and that is why the poet was bound to resort to some theory of religion

in order to register his disapproval of and reaction against the existing socio-political order. He writes:

Shakespeare is the most important spokesman for the agony and suffering of the people of his times and his indignation at such suffering was expressed resorting to certain elements and ideas of a utopian, pure Christianity. The ideas that Shakespeare resorted to in order to give expression to his reaction against the avarice, consumerism, commercialism and the tyranny of the kings, were the idea of renunciation, abhorrence for gold and money, the inferiority and depravity of the kings and the rich and so on (Dutta, *Shakespearer Samajchetona* 348).

Dutta has devoted an entire chapter to Jesus and has frequently referred to Christ's teachings in analyzing Shakespearean creations. For in Christ's preaching against the rich, love for the poor he has recognized a proletarian sympathy which he has associated with the principles of primitive communism. Dutta rejects the orthodox Marxist's anathema to religion and a mechanical application of atheism which is not ready to recognize any form of theism as progressive. He complains that Marx's statement, 'Religion is the opium of the masses' has been improperly and unduly highlighted and overemphasized, wrenching it from its context and not paying adequate attention to what Marx actually intended to convey in the passage from which the statement is extracted. Dutta quotes the full passage of Marx in order to make Marx's views on religion clear to his readers. Marx writes:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people (Dutta, *Shakespearer Samajchetona* 61).

Analyzing this passage Dutta concludes that Marx indeed acknowledged the revolutionary role that religion played at a certain period in human history by giving vent to the grievance and anguish of persecuted humanity. Dutta further argues that often protest against the iniquities and injustices of an exploitative socio-political system assumes the shape

of a utopian and idealistic doctrine and before the emergence of the philosophy of scientific socialism, till the seventeenth century Christianity has provided necessary impetus for such protests and even armed rebellion. In support of his argument Dutta has referred to the observations made by Marxist thinkers like Engels, Kautsky and Lenin, all of whom have recognized affinity between the subversive potential that Christianity had at an early phase of its development and the revolutionary role that Marxism assigns to the Proletariat in modern times. Engels has observed, 'There are some remarkable similarities between the history of early Christianity and the labour movement of the present times' (qt. in Dutta, *Shakespearer Samajchetona* 62). Engels has also recognized that 'like every great revolutionary movement Christianity is also the creation of the masses'. Kautsky has identified in the class hatred for the rich the most important component in the development of Christianity. Dutta further cites a passage from Lenin where this Marxist thinker has acknowledged it as a historical fact that at one point of human history religious doctrines fuelled and incited democratic and proletarian mass movement. Lenin writes:

Whatever may be the cause behind the genesis of the idea of God, there was a time in history when democratic and proletarian mass movement assumed the form of religion, assumed the form of a conflict of religious doctrine with another (qt. in Dutta, *Shakespearer Samajchetona* 62).

If religion is used by exploiting classes as an 'opium dose' to make working people accept their teachings and the authority of the clergy, then *ipso facto*, it is inextricably intertwined with the class struggle. These passages make it clear that the founders of Marxism did not believe they brought religion into the class struggle; they found it there. They were convinced, in fact, that the major conflicts in the history of religion were themselves forms of the class struggle. They saw, for example, in the origins of Christianity the role of the mass revolts that marked the decay of the Roman world.

A close scrutiny of Dutta's views on religion reveals two aspects of his materialist thought. One, he was not ready to reject religion merely as an ideological apparatus of the ruling class, an instrument that only perpetuates the exploitation of man. He was opposed to orthodox Marxists' repudiation of theism as reactionary and actually pleaded for a historical reinterpretation of the role that religion played in class struggle. For him the question of validity or truth value of a religious doctrine is less important than the pragmatic question whether it has helped or hindered the class struggle. Since for Dutta class struggle and end of exploitation

of the majority by the privileged minority is of paramount importance, he eschews all theoretical meditations on the tenets of Christianity and glorifies all forms of protests and movements against exploitative socio-political machinery. From this it is clear that Dutta's thinking was oriented towards praxis and the practical application of theory and not towards abstract intellectual exercises or philosophical reflections. A parallel of Dutta's pragmatic view on religion and his insistence on giving priority to class struggle over and above all other considerations is found in the thought of Lenin. Lenin emphasized the fact that opposition to religion must always be subordinated to the long-range interests of the Proletariat and he believed that workers and peasants and intellectuals who are religious and believe in socialism must not be estranged because of their religious beliefs. For this Marxist revolutionary religious debates were less important than the class struggle and abolition of class society and therefore in spite of promoting a scientific outlook he considers role of religion from a pragmatic point of view. Lenin writes:

Unity in the truly revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for the creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of opinion among the Proletarians about a paradise in heaven. That is why we do not and must not proclaim our atheism in our programme; that is why we do not and must not forbid Proletarians who still cherish certain relics of the old superstitions to approach our party (Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol.XI 662).

Secondly, Dutta, unlike some Marxist critics like Alexander Anikst, does not seek to represent Shakespeare as a confirmed atheist, but attempts to study the playwright placing him in the particular historical context he belonged to and considering the fact that influence of religion was all pervasive in the sixteenth century, argues that Shakespeare too resorted to some religious ideas in order to give expression to his radical views. Criticizing Anikst's view that 'it is indubitably established that religion has no role in the writings of Shakespeare', Dutta asserts that 'in the age of Shakespeare, religion was so all-pervasive and its authority was so invincible that every radical view was bound to be expressed in religious guise' (Dutta, *Shakespeare Samajchetona* 60).

An evaluation of Utpal Dutta as a materialist critic of Shakespeare therefore should take into consideration the elaborate pains that the critic has taken to understand the age of Shakespeare critically, not anachronistically. He has tried to understand the ideological crises of Shakespeare and his contemporaries against the historical context they belonged to. Being a confessed propagandist in his dramatic practice, in his critical exercises too Dutta remained

loyal to his objective which was to actively engage and participate in the social, cultural, intellectual struggle against Capitalism. This perhaps accounts for his relentless effort to establish the proletarian sympathy of Shakespeare and making his treatise on Shakespeare revolve around the pivotal question, 'Which side Shakespeare took in the class struggle of his times'? The answer as well as the question proves Dutta's unflinching commitment to the theory and praxis of historical materialism.

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