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**TECHNIQUES OF PORTRAYING FAMINES IN PLAYS, EARLIER AND MODERN
CONTEXTS: EVALUATING BADAL SIRCAR**

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ABSTRACT

Famine is something which is perceived as calamity, disaster, bringing series of troubles, loss, damages. While staging, there were different descriptions done through different techniques. In some cases, blank chairs were used as symbols to project the ones who were physically absent from the scenes. On the other hand, speeches were the means through which audiences were related to the depictions of famines in the plays. Badal Sircar used minimal props for staging famine like scenarios.

Key words: techniques, famine, plays, early, modern, contexts, Badal Sircar

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to create a structured format on aligning techniques to portray famines, as reflected in the plays. Techniques of portraying famines in plays, earlier and modern contexts is diverse and wide ranging. The paper narrows down the search to Badal Sircar's technique for portraying famines. Basic sense unleashes famine as something to be afraid of, as it brings with it, severe losses and damages in property. Portrayals of famine in drama are directed towards the domains of social, cultural, and political (Biswas, 2023). People concerned are shown to be anxious of the consequences. From the genre of classical tragedies to modern experimental theatre, famines have proved a backdrop and also narrative devices, critiquing power structures. These structures reveal human vulnerability, exploring collective trauma towards a natural calamity. Badal Sircar, a pioneer of Indian theatre, after post-independence, showed minimal, unconventional staging to express socio-economic distress on famine, which had unique dramatic techniques.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Why famine in portrayed in drama?

Famine is staged for showing collective trauma towards social reality revolving around famine. As a matter of specification, famine reflects systemic failure to control water supply in the towns, cities and villages. Immediate impact is existential crisis without proper clean and safe drinking water. Critique of the incapability shows inequalities, governance problems, which was there in colonial/post-colonial contexts. Mukhopadhyay, (2023) argued that exposure to such crisis makes the people experience dilemma on fulfilling the needs and living in the society with dignity. When staged, famine is something, which goes beyond actual description. At that time, famine is a metaphor inducing hunger, sociopolitical negligence, human alienation, contradicting the strands of morality.

2.2 Traditional and Early modern techniques

In classical and early modern dramas like Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, and realist theatres, natural calamities like famine were reported instead of being shown. This is one of the techniques of narrative expositions, where chorus or narrators take the charge of showing the effects created by famine on the society. Evidence lies in situations, where Greek choruses described plague, war-induced hunger. Sometimes, symbolism was also used for showing famine like situations. For

example, Dharwadker, (2025) cited about dead brown leaves becoming the symbol of moral decay or displeasure. Mention can also be made of “empty fields” and “withering crops”, which characters speak of. Here, actions of characters remain internal or psychological.

Realistic presentation can also be reflected from the plays composed in 19th and early 20th century. During this time, the sets were detailed and literally represented in terms of famine landscapes. Articulation of hardships from the famines is done through dialogues. Didactic visualization was emphasized for projecting poverty and physical sufferings. This projection was done through the techniques and methods of linear plot, representational settings. According to this, Naskar, (2025) stated that audiences were considered as passive witnesses to the natural calamities in the way they are presented.

2.3 Modern and post-modern techniques

Modern theatre moved away from representational fidelity towards presentational and experiential strategies. One of the techniques is epic Theatre established by Brecht. According to this technique, famine is linked to something which is not only felt but confronted through intellectual maturity. Representation techniques were interruptions, direct address, placards, and non-illusory staging. With diversified addresses, audiences’ visualization capacities were expanded. Aim was to add strangeness to the known things. Roy, (2024) was of the view that stimulating critical reflection, instead of catharsis was also the intention to expose the people to actual picture of famine.

Absurd and experimental staging was seen in postmodern times. According to this staging type, famine was fragmented, non-chronological, and metaphorical. Evidence lies in showing empty chairs to represent someone who is physically absent from the play. Mood, rhythm, and existential issues are prioritized over the narratives. Other techniques are voiceovers, projected text, environmental soundscapes, which evokes desolation from the perspectives of characters. Along with this, Biswas, (2023) argued that non-naturalistic spaces are created for describing bare stage, and symbolic props, which evoke famine like situations on stage.

2.4 Badal Sircar

Badal Sircar (1925–2012) achieved accolades and glory as a major figure in the domain of Indian theatre. Importance can be cited off Third Theatre movement, which made him famous. People know him for shifts in proscenium realism to open-space, and actor-audience organic participation. He, while staging plays, engaged with social crisis, instead of considering it as a single theme. Scarcity and marginality is something which evokes with the descriptions of famine in the plays. Narrations on famine gain power from minimalist aesthetics, where props are minimum. Absence of props evokes presence of something, which is not there at the moment. Mukhopadhyay, (2023) argued that audience is provided with the scope to imagine something, which is active instead of being guided.

Collective performance is reflected by ensembling embodiment of protagonists who represent issues instead of the ones who are in isolation. Famine is associated with something, experience of which is collective, and not individual in terms of sufferings. With the staging, audiences are brought to close proximity with the actors. There are spaces, which are created as open forums for the spectators to achieve the role of witnesses and participants. Dissolving is done for the boundaries, where stage and real-life blends. Dharwadker, (2025) stated that emotional immediacy is the immediate impact, which is created.

2.5. Non-linear, fragmented narrative

Sircar avoided linear storytelling technique. Famine descriptions evoked vignette, chant, repetitions of famine. Physicality is another of the techniques, which was induced through vocal aspects. Actors used body and voice to symbolize for the ones who were absent, suffered from hunger, and struggled without detailed descriptions and narratives in terms of sets. Silence and movements gain power, as signifiers, which deprives them of essential aspects. Politically, the techniques of famine representation as engaging as they oppose and question socio-economic structures, directed towards suffering. Based on these, Naskar, (2025) argued that famine gained descriptions as symbols of systemic injustice as compared to natural disaster.

2.6 Comparisons in techniques

In terms of representation, earlier dramas were mimetic in depicting famines. When it came to modern times, representation was minimalistic. Narratives were linear in earlier times. But in

modern times, themes were developed for analyzing the narratives. For the audience, earlier times were passive, but in the modern times, Badal Sircar turned attention to activism, induced among the participants. Earlier dramas used symbols, which were metaphoric. In modern dramas, there were descriptions, which were embodied through performance. Earlier, there were elaborate sets, which represented calamities like famine. Whereas in modern dramas, spaces were bare, fluid and open, which audiences interpreted. Roy, (2024) argued that earlier dramas conveyed messages which were directed towards moral conducts, and in modern times, plays of Badal Sircar created messages on which audiences had to reflect to the actions and their consequences.

2.7 Examples

Greek tragedies and scripts of Sircar's plays like *Evam Indrajit* or *Ballabpurer Roopkotha*, projected famine as something, which lacks proper narration and actions. Biswas, (2023) pointed out that there was also dearth of proper representations suggesting static and participatory acts.

2.8 Critical evaluation on Sircar's views

Badal Sircar's techniques considers famine as a crisis, which is visual and emotional. Emotionally, the statements are open ended, which induces imagine for the audience to engage with the narration and descriptions. Narrations are politically urgent, creating call to action for reflecting on the social structures and their functioning towards emphasizing collectivism from the perspectives of subject and audience. Based on these aspects, Mukhopadhyay, (2023) argued that famine becomes a spectacle, which is to be cherished by participating and experiencing by confronting the crisis.

3. METHODOLOGY

Deductive approach seems relevant in the context. This deduction is from past literatures, which used different methodology for detecting the ways in which famine has been portrayed in the plays of Badal Sircar. Essential data is collected from secondary sources like books, journals, articles, reports, government websites, archives and others. Thematic, narrative analysis is effective for analyzing the collected data. This analysis method is apt as it expands the scope, arena, and dynamics of the techniques used for dramatic projections.

4. CONCLUSION

From the reviewed aspects, it can be concluded that theatrical portrayals of famine evolve from descriptions on realism, which can be critiqued, as immersive. Earlier plays symbolized famine, but modern play writers like Badal Sircar decentralized narratives, foregrounding embodiment, and engaging the audience as co-witnessers. These shifts and transitions reflect broader transformations to experimentations. These transitions have evolved from *representation* to *social engagements*.

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