

Western Philosophy and *Chaka*: an Existential Reading of Selim Al Deen's Play

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Abstract

Chaka marks a clear break with the dramaturgy of the West, where Selim Al Deen invoked the "Dwaitadwaitobaadi" theory which incorporates different forms of literature to make itself a unique form. Chaka portrays the nausea and abjection of human existence. Baher the cart-puller and his companions are outcast from society, truth and also from God. They are free to choose their ways; and yet they go through an existential struggle. Existentialism and transcendence occurs when the individual undertakes a journey that adds meaning to his or her life. Baher the cart-puller and his companions similarly embark on a journey to give an identity to the corpse; which endows meaning to their life. This paper scrutinizes Selim Al Deen's Chaka to explore the reasons that marks it as an existential play; arguing on the basis of existential preconditions i.e. superfluity, contingency, man's alienation, suffering, helplessness, freedom and responsibility, despair as well as religious and spiritual detachment. It further attempts to inquire whether it would be justifiable to apply western philosophy to elucidate Chaka; since the author himself tries to reject western influence on Bengali literature.

Keywords: Human Existence, Identity, Despair, Religious detachment

Introduction

Selim Al Deen's *Chaka* brings to light the grim reality of existentialism; a philosophy that projects human life as meaningless. He portrays the condition of human being with an organized structure of images that defines and somewhat delineates the feelings of uncertainty and despair. Selim Al Deen presents a degraded as well as a very pessimistic view of the human existence in *Chaka*. The way he has presented the corpse is 'a philosophy put into images'. This paper analyses Selim Al Deen's *Chaka* with reference to existentialism, showing the nausea of human existence and its frustration over commonplace way of life.

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With the device of a conventional 'Kothanatya' (a kind of drama where plot develops like storytelling), here in *Chaka* the narrative assimilates the subplots through death or tragic consequences of failure as well and these subplots derived from different scenarios rationally. Through *Chaka*, Al Deen has created a multi-layered artwork which embeds the form of oriental; classical mythologies juxtaposed with ornamented folk narrative form. The story revolves around a dead body which the cart-pullers have to deliver to its destination. While going through this

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text, the readers are left with an awful sentiment about human existence; which has essentially initiated the application of the western philosophy of existentialism in *Chaka*.

Jean-Paul Sartre postulates that "existence precedes essence". Sartre pronounced that 'man is condemned to be free'; because, once thrown in to the world, he is responsible for everything he does. In existential belief it is assumed that life has no predefined purpose and we are free instead. If God were to create us, Sartre states, then He would have a purpose for our creation but there is no God and we must exercise our free will in order to decide our nature. This implies that the human being has no essence, no essential self and is no more than what he is. Superfluity, contingency, alienation, suffering, helplessness, freedom and responsibility, despair and spiritual detachment are some characteristics of existentialism. This paper will try to concentrate further on *Chaka* considering these characteristics of existentialism

From Sartre's point of view, an individual is always free in case of his/her choice (the only freedom s/he lacks is not to choose), and can always rejects his/her own characteristics and those of the world s/he lives in. The meaning of life is not something dependent on the human race by a higher power rather it is determined through our actions, choices and most importantly our commitment to the choices we make.

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Chaka is Selim All Deen's folk narrative form based on a very heart-rending drama. This composition takes the scenario of the mass upheaval of 1990's, the fall of the autocratic government and the triumph of democracy as its plot. In that upheaval, many young revolts sacrificed their lives, some dead bodies were not found and even some bodies did not receive the funeral being unidentified. Fortunately, very few of the dead bodies touched the grave ground by the grace of our marginalized people. During the mass upheaval of 1990's a dead body of such a miserable young man was sent to the countryside through a bullock cart; the cart started from 'Ganjo Alongjani' situated on the bank of the river 'Kakeshwari' on a warm morning of summer for a destination written not very clearly on a torn paper. The cart moves on, but the cart-puller does not get to the destination. The non-stop journey of that cart-puller & the search for the home of that dead young is the central theme of the work.

The bullock cart gets to a riverside of the village Nabeenpur in the second evening where the cart-puller and his companions complete the funeral of that dead body. This very simple description is portrayed with magnificent grandeur within a two-day plot by Selim Al Deen with the inclusion of numerous stories as it is a "Kothanatya" which employs colorful stories, stories of various feelings. Here, the never ending stories of life, sense and expression of inhumanity and humanity assume the universal shape through the rotation of the wheel.

From the very beginning of his career the dramatist Selim Al Deen tried to avoid Western influence on the form of drama to innovate a distinct form appropriate to Bengali drama. In spite of this, we see the influence of western drama in few of his early dramas like '*Muntasir*', '*Jondis O Bibidho*', '*Shongbad Kartoon*'. His early work, he used to say, was rather influenced by Sartre and Camus. But within a very short time, he discards the western influence and starts to take

elements from Bangali society, their way of life and *Chaka* is an example of this evolution. Though *Chaka* is written in the later stage of his career, we cannot avoid the influence of a Western philosophy that is existentialism in *Chaka* if we carefully read it.

According to Existentialism, the meaninglessness and absurdity of life leads to Nausea. Whenever a person realizes the fact that there is no reason for living, at that point s/he gets involved to absurd things. From this concept, the two important existentialist preoccupations—superfluity and contingency occur that we find in *Chaka* as well. The relation the corpse develops with the cart-puller; Shukur Chand and old man come to meet the final consequence by the funeral of the corpse. They all give an identity to the corpse. Here, in the last scene the narrator significantly creates the intended shape of human relationship. In the beginning of the journey nobody knows their destination and consequently it can be considered as an illogical journey. They are heading towards Dilshohagir Bil but on the way, they take the unknown corpse with them without even knowing its minimum identity.

Ôbqvbcyi bivqcyi nvwbdivjx wK †nv†mbvjx wcs †gvt AvRvdi Gfv†e bvg wVKvbv miKvix †jLvi ,†Y wØavwš^Z n†q l†VÓ (Thus the name and whereabouts appear to be ambiguous with the failure of being certain whether it reads Noyanpur or Nobaypur; Hanifali or Hossainali; Ping, Mong Azafor etc. as kept in government record.) (Al Deen 28). So, when they start their journey without knowing the address, it gives us the feeling that it can be an unsuccessful one.

One interesting thing of this "Kathanataya" is that the narrator here tries to relate the audience with the story by addressing them. In spite of this connection, the characters are alienated and we feel a kind of nothingness everywhere. They are searching for something but they do not find it. The author here uses the images of bird, snake, bee and also bull but all these somehow intensify the sad atmosphere, this sadness is strengthened when we see the indifference of the wedding ceremony in a house. Baher cart-puller and his companions are alienated not only from society but also from truth, purpose and even from God. When they reach Nayaanpur, no one claims the body. Then the cart-pullers are left in an awkward predicament. They suffer a lot. They do not get a place to rest and also a place where they can cook their meal. They are homeless and they are outcast from the society. That is why Baher screams by saying Ô†nv l l †Lv†v nvgv†Ki gyw³ bvBÓ †gviv †bwZ†q ci†gv Dcyo n†gv c†_i ayjqv Zey gyw³ bvB* GB cx†ii _v†bvi Miæi gyw³ bvBÓ (Al Deen 32). Human beings cannot feel at home in a world where chaos, death, and suffering are present. In *Chaka* we see that it is such a kind of society where 'dattya'(devil) and 'mohajon'(feudal master) are similar. When they reach Nabeenpur, they want a piece of land to bury the corpse. But the people do not want to tolerate this kind of 'misdeed' (to bury one place's corpse to another place) and that is why they tell them to leave their village. Baher's screaming ÔAvcbv†Ki wK `qv bvBÓ (Don't you have mercy?) (Al Deen 37) does not reach their ear.

Alienation or estrangement, which is demonstrated by the relationship of the corpse or the cart pullers with the society is one of the main views of existentialism. Not only the cart-pullers but also the dead body suffer a lot. It starts to rot and ants start to take the flesh of the dead body as their meal. So, human condition is very much awful here. The cart-puller and his companions

become helpless but as a relation grows up between the corpse and the cart puller, they cannot ignore it. Though the cart-puller says, *ÔwK†mi †VKv c†o†Q Avgvi| †L†ci gvj †d†j w`†q P†j hveÔ* (Why should I bother?) (Al Deen 18), he is the one who cries after covering the corpse with the earth. He feels sorry for the misbehavior that the people do with the corpse because he considers it as one of the companions of his journey whom he will not see anymore. Though all of them become helpless, they cannot escape the situation.

Ôiv†ni... eyS†Z cv†i AvR †fv†i hv N†U †M†Q Zv†K Ges Av†kcv†k hv NU†e wKQzB †div†bv hv†ve bv| B†”Q Ki†jB Avi Mvwo _vgv†bv hvq bv †_†ci jvkwU †d†j †i†L hvlqv hvq bv Mjv †Q†o wPjgvix ex`†ii †mB Mvbl Mvlqv hvq bvÔ* (Baher comes to realize that the incident happened this morning and the events that will happen around are irresistible. He cannot stop the cart now; nor leave the corpse; and can no more sing that song of Chilmari port with an open voice.) (Al Deen 18).

In the existentialist belief human beings are not controlled by a pre-existing omnipotent being, such as God. If God were to create us then He would have a purpose for our creation but there is no God and we must exercise our free will. Here in *Chaka*, we see that the cart pullers do not find the address of the corpse. Getting the address or destination actually symbolizes reaching to God. So, this non-existence of destination shows the religious and spiritual detachment. Again the doctor is called "Ishshor" (God) (Al Deen 11). He is called Ishshor not because of having godly qualities. The composer very beautifully describes the doctor. He discovers the map of conservative Asia and other feudal countries both in his behavior and the leucodarmic pinkish spot on his black face. The reason of such realization lies in the religious conservativeness, terrorism and the recent misanthropist attitude of such countries. And also if Shawtal boy Dhorom identifies the corpse with the Shawtal God, it shows his humanism or our duty to a dead body. And it also can symbolize that God does not exist, He is dead now.

In existentialism, existence is both freedom and despair; in a world without apparent meaning or direction, the individual is radically free to act. Most individuals are afraid to confront the responsibility entailed by radical freedom; In terms of Sartre, bad faith and inauthenticity allow individuals to consider themselves as an essence, a fixed entity; they playact in life. In contrast, the existential individual refuses illusions. Death looms as a boundary situation, defining the limits of existence. The recognition of such limits and the responsibility for one's actions lead to an existential despair that can overwhelm the individual. However, Sartre considers despair a painful but necessary stop on the road to freedom. Since existence is prior to essence, the existential individual at every moment confronts the nothingness of existence. Transcendence occurs when the individual undertakes a project that will give meaning to his or her life. In *Chaka* the cart puller and his companions have made the choice of returning the corpse to its village, without proper instruction or guidance, decides to give an identity. That is why when the young boy says to cover the dead body with earth; Baher says *ÔGZ Kó GZ c_ Zv†i ayjq Pvcv w`†q hv†ev? giv e†j †KD bv †m?Ô* (are we going to return burying this corpse after such an agony, such long an way? Isn't he any one for he is dead?) (Al Deen 31). As death defines the limit of existence, here we also see that all the characters are conscious about death and always in a state of despair or anxiety. “যদি তার নাম হয় হোসেনালী তবে সে এখন আর হোসেনালী নয়

হেসেনালীর লাশ” (if the name of the dead person is Hossain Ali, then he is no more Hossain Ali; rather the corpse of Hossain Ali.) (Al Deen 13). This anxiety or despair or atmosphere is intensified with the description of Chondrobora snake and death of the bird. Critics of existentialism have frequently taken angst to represent the ultimate pointlessness of life, and used it as an example of the pessimistic nature of existentialism. Characters are aware of different choices they can make but are hesitant and anxious. An existential struggle that is in the making is meaningful in everyday life. There is a split among them on their concern for decisions and actions. Baher says to Dhorom, “j GB †Zvi wPZvciv fzMgv†bi cÂvk UvKv* hv jvk nUv*” (take this fifty taka by the name of the god. Go and take the corpse away.) (Al Deen 30). Again, when Dhorom goes to take the corpse, he says: “Avq Avq †`wL bvcv†Ki ev”Pv g` †L†q jvk Qzwe” (don’t dare to touch the corpse. You are drunk and degenerated.) (Al Deen 19). Though Baher takes the corpse to return it to its village, he also scolds Dhorom all the way and again does not want to cover the dead body with earth. “KL†bv KL†bv M†i ewY©Z c†_i PvKvi aŸwb wgvq bv” (the ever ending sounding of the fuel described in fable never dissolves.) (Al Deen 7).

This event actually symbolizes the monotonous and boring life. Albert Camus, an existentialist writer, believed that boredom or journey, which is essentially the breakdown of routine or habit, caused people to think seriously about the eternal journey which also happens in case of cart-puller and his companion. Language as an ineffective means of communication, fails to communicate in some places in *Chaka*. “bqvbcyi bevqcyi nvwbdivx wK †nv†mbvix wcs †gvs AvRvdi Gfv†e bvg wVKvbv miKvix †jLvi ,†Y wØavwš^Z n†q l†V” (Thus the name and whereabouts appear to be ambiguous with the failure of being certain whether it reads Noyaanpuror or Nobaypur; Hanifali or Hossainali; Ping Mong Azafor as kept in government record.) (Al Deen 28). Here language actually does not help the cart—pullers to get the village address of the corpse. Dropping of punctuation marks is an indication that language has lost its function as a means of communication. Questions have turned into statements not really requiring an answer. Many of the assertions made by the characters are weak, incomplete or broken. In one episode, when a person on the way asks about their destination, the cart puller says, ÔDB w`†K’ (In that direction) (Al Deen 39) without pointing finger which actually does not mean anything or fails to communicate.

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According to Selim Al Deen, the division among art forms like poetry, story, and novel is the contribution of west and that is why, he wants to create a form for Bangla drama. Now a question can be asked here whether it would be justifiable to apply a Western philosophy to elucidate *Chaka* as the author himself tries to reject Western influence on Bangla literature. But what does Roland Barthes say regarding this?

In his essay, "The Death of the Author", Barthes mentioned that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. Barthes criticizes the method of reading and criticism that relies on aspects of the author’s identity-his or her political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity, psychology, or other biographical or personal attributes-to distil meaning from author’s work. In this type of criticism, the experiences and biases of the author serve as a definitive

explanation of the text. For Barthes, this method of reading may be apparently tidy and convenient but is actually sloppy and flawed. Barthes asserts that the Author is dead because to give a text an Author and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it is to impose a limit on that text. To him, the author does not create meaning in the text: one cannot explain a text about the person who wrote it. Barthes attributes authorship to the reader who forms meaning and understanding. So, it is actually a reader's response saying *Chaka* as an existential play maintaining the existential preoccupations.

Conclusion

Chaka evokes universe where human civilization is reduced to debris. It stresses the risk, the frustration of human reality and admits that the human being is thrown into the world, the world in which pain, sickness, contempt, malaise and death dominate. The story of *Chaka* revolves around a dead body which the cart-puller and his companions have to return to its village. This simple story actually questions the solitude of human existence. Through *Chaka* Selim Al Deen envisions a world where man is seen to be an impoverished creature, preoccupied with his own suffering and deprived of the basic realities of life. The frivolity of human existence, the alienation of the individual from an extremely hostile society, freedom and responsibility as well as the religious and spiritual detachment of the mass are some of the major components that contribute to make *Chaka* an existential drama.

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