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Editor : Saikat Banerjee

**Editor:** Dr. Saikat Banerjee  
Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



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## **Socio- Political Discourse and Existential Crisis in Manoj Mitra's *The Tale of Hekim-shaheb***

**Md Iftikar Ahmed**

Research Scholar,

Department of English,

Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh.

Email- mdiftikar1146@gmail.com

**Abstract:** In the post-independent era, India has occupied a significant place in the world of globalization with rapid changes in socio- political, socio-economic and cultural field. Though we claim to advance in technology and modern education, but still there are some major issues that hinder the progress of India to the highest rank in the world like the conflict of power or powerless, casteism, gender discrimination and existential crisis. Manoj Mitra underscores all these contemporary issues in his historical play *The Tale of Hekim-saheb*. He artistically shows the conflict of two powerful Zamindars who leave no stone unturned to become more powerful and rich. Power makes them so blind that they don't give any importance to their 'taluk's'(subject) lives and are concerned only with collecting their taxes. Wali gives priority to his entertainment in majlis instead of curing the diseases of his people. This paper is an attempt to analyse the ideology of the owner class against the worker one which is evident in the play, where Dariyaganj and Palashpur's poor people lead their lives in abject poverty under the rule of their talukdar. They think of their talukdar's dominance upon them as their destined fate. In that society, most of the people suffer from existential problem and try hard to regain their lost identity among their own people. The situation of women is worse than men since they suffer due to gender discrimination. Gangomoni loses her inborn identity by the male dominant society. She is called by her husband's name. Thus, the play is a subtle portrayal of existential issues, gender discrimination and socio-political problems.

**Keywords:** Socio- Political, Power, Casteism, Gender discrimination, Ideology and Identity.



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Contemporary Indian drama in English translation has achieved worldwide popularity for its innovative thematic concerns and technical virtuositities. In the development of Indian drama, theatre plays an important role. It also acts as a powerful tool of communication and political socialization which is totally opposite of traditional theatre that serves only to entertain and amuse people. Since the 1980s, we see a realistic trend in the field of Indian drama which no longer limits itself to merely entertainment. We witness a plethora of stalwart Indian dramatists like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sirkar, Mahesh Dattani, Utpal Dutt, Mahasweta Devi etc. who wrote sensible dramas in English which gained international recognition. Following their lead, Manoj Mitra a prominent Bengali dramatist too made his entry in the field of Indian drama with his unique literary forte, thus, attracting a large group of theatre-going people. He emerged as a dramatist-cum- actor in the theatre occupying a prominent place and bestriding both 'the people's theatre' and 'the new theatre'. Most of his plays are historical, centred on the themes like power, violence, revolution, liberation, castism and existential crisis. In his plays, there are no straight altercations between the natives and the British, the manner in which Utpal Dutt's political plays are. He became famous for his important plays such as *The Palace of Shadows*, *Devi Sharpamasta*, *The Tale of Hekim-shaheb*, *Honey from a Broken Hive* and *Banchharam's Orchard*. Most of his plays are categorised as 'historical plays' where 'time' plays the role of the central character.

Manoj Mitra deals with the issues of socio-political discourse, power relations, resistance and repression. India got independence in 1947 from the British Government but still, there are liege and Zamindar who exploit the poor villagers by exercising their power and ideology in an undue manner. He does not portray the present contemporary issues directly but he depicts it by relating to history. Taking recourse to history, he tries to show the picture of the present owner class who govern the power circles and try their best to become more powerful and rich at the expense of oppressing lower class. Existential crisis is another problem which he presents in his play through the characters like Hekim Shaheb and Gangamoni. In *The Tale of Hekim-shaheb*, he depicts the pictures of two affluent Zamindars who are fighting to gain power. Wali belongs to Dariyagunj and



Pashupati comes from Palashpur. They are authorised to govern their respective countries but they use it as a way of only collecting taxes from the poor villagers. In Dariyagunj, Hekim stands as a symbol of humanity and hope for the poor villagers between two countries where he does not discriminate in providing his help and medicine to the needy. Dirty politics comes to light when Hekim comes to Wali with the purpose of raktagulab for making new medicine for his taluk who are suffering from unknown diseases. He replies to Hekim's question negatively as he kidnaps baiji for his glamour party where she needs raktagulab to attract others towards herself in the majlish. So he orders to provide her as many roses as she needs.

He exercises his power over the poor villagers and gives undue importance to his mirth and merriment with Baiji who comes to his country as a spy of Pashupati. He does not bother about his own taluk's poor condition and is indifferent to the fact whether they live or die but the only thing that forces him to think about their lives is his taxes. The writer, through the example of Wali, portrays the realistic picture of contemporary political leaders. Wali suggests Hakim to prepare medicine with another rose instead of raktagulab and promises to keep it a secret. His advice for Hakim reflects his selfish and mercenary attitude.

In the contemporary society, there are frequent incidents of communal violence sparked by the political leaders for the sake of their vote-bank. They do not care a fig as to how many people lose their lives in the riots. Similarly, Wali, who earns taxes from the poor villagers, does not hesitate to put their lives in danger for the sake of Baiji who will glorify his majlis. He directs Hakim to concentrate on his work and take care of seven villages of his taluk over which he has given authority to him. Now, it becomes his duty to look after them because he does not want to lose anyone of them. He again instructs Hekim to save the lives of the poor villagers, an instance showing Wali's lack of care and concern for the precious lives of his taluk and his selfish motive of losing his taxes in the wake of their death. "Wali. Son, cure them first. Concentrate on your work. I've placed the healthcare responsibilities of seven villages of my taluk in your hands. Now it's up to you to attend to the patients and see to it that we don't lose the taxes" (Mitra- 57).





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In the present political era, there are a lot of incidents present in the annals of India where political leaders play their tramp card to incite the citizens. In a country where communal violence are on the rise among the people on the basis of religious extremism, no one from the sector of the political world, comes to resolve the issues; instead, they make derogatory remarks against the present government and try to become famous in view of the upcoming election. On the other hand, the ruling party hesitates to take any action to resolve the matter because if they allow the police to use their power to curb the violence, it is likely that they will lose a vast majority of vote bank. The government does not dare to take action because both the groups have given them their valuable votes to form the government. So if they begin a crackdown on them it may be possible that they will lose their support in the upcoming election. Thus, in the government's eyes, the most important thing is their love for chair and not the lives of the citizens as evident in the play through the Zamindars of Wali and Pashupati who are driven by their greed for unjust taxes imposed upon the poor people but not with the lives and needs of their taluk. Though the dramatist does not mention the contemporary politics directly but gives allusions towards it through the images of Wali and Pashupati who, in the play, are very much similar to modern contemporary leaders. He expressed in an interview to Samir Bandyopadhyay:

Galpa Hekimshaheb too was not a historical play, but had to be taken back into history, for the simple reason that I could not afford to make the statements that I sought to make about the contemporary reality, in plain, direct terms. It's a secret that I'm sharing with you. It's a candid confession I'm making (Mitra- 263).

During the conversation between Wali and Hekim, there is a Maulvi who instructs Wali to take care of his taluk which shows a note of resistance in his statement against Wali. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault opines that men should know that power is oppression, because power does not only generate repression and censorship but also helps to develop new behaviour in the society. He was of the opinion that "where there is power, there is resistance," (Foucault-95). Similarly, in the present play, while Wali and Pashupati possess the power by ruling the poor villagers, it somehow helps to generate resistance from the part of Maulvi, Hekim and the poor



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taluk. Maulvi advises Wali to keep the roads and stables clean. Wali is asked to exercise proper management to get rid of the flies and mosquitoes and provide his people at least two square meals and also supply proper drinking water. Following this line of action, he sees that half of the diseases will be cured.

On the other hand, in Palashpur, Pashupati uses his power like Wali does, but he is very tense for his taluk who suffers due to lack of medicine because he has no doctor like Hakim Saheb. In Palashpur, hundreds of people die incurring him big loss with regard to taxes. He tells his attendants about the order of English lord to the Zamindars to take care of their subjects' education and health, maintain law and order, and construct good roads which is their prime responsibility. The English lord wanted their tax anyhow which was a symbol of their power and dominance over them. Thus, Pashupati becomes violent and orders his taluk to bring him the revenue anyhow. Here, we observe the exploitation by powerful people who hold the higher rank in the society. So a note of resistance is raised once again by Hekim Saheb. In Palashpur, Hekim shows concern to serve the diseases of the poor and instructs them to build a water tank and stop paying taxes. This idea of Hekim becomes the seed that helps to germinate resistance among them. Pashupati takes it negatively and starts flogging Hekim and orders him to leave the country. He protests against him by saying that they cannot manage to pay him taxes and build a water tank as well. If he leaves them alone, they may, probably, die.

Through the characters of Wali and Pashupati, Manoj Mitra tries to represent the pathetic condition of modern India in this historical play where there are multiple villages that remain bereft of the facilities given by government. Even during the election, the leaders from all the parties assure them to fulfil all their demands like road construction, proper water supply, health facilities, security, and electricity etc. but after being elected as their representatives, they forget them and do not show their faces, let alone fulfil their promises.

The term 'ideology' has a profound bearing in socio- economic discourse especially in Marxism. The author tries to sketch the society in his play *The Tale of Hekim-shaheb* where he



underscores how upper class society exercises their ideology in the society to control the working class. If we refer to Marxism to understand the concept of ideology, it will help us to apprehend it clearly. “Human consciousness is constructed by an ideology- that is, the beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which they explain, what they take to be reality. An ideology is, in complex ways, the product of the position and interest of a particular class. In any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimize and perpetuate, the interests of the dominant economic and social class” (Abraham-203-204).

In the play, Dariyaganj and Palashpur’s poor villagers spend their whole lives under the rule of the two haughty Zamindars who with their own repressive worldview force them to submit to dominate the working class. Nobody thinks about the cause of the diseases that spread in Dariyaganj and Palashpur. Poor people perceive themselves as workers and are controlled by the Zamindar’s superstructure. They do not think that there are no water tanks, roads, health services and the tools of dispelling flies and mosquitoes in the village. Unconsciously, they accept it as their fate decreed by God which may be referred to as “false consciousness”, a term given by Karl Marx and Engels in his work *Das Capital* (1867). They do not protest against Wali and Pashupati who increase taxes, notwithstanding their crop being wasted in the drought or the rain. Thus Wali and Pashupati become richer and the villagers become poorer. In the ongoing exploitation, the taluk forget their own interests and desires and submit themselves to the will of the two Zamindars. Antonio Gramsci observes ideology as “a kind of deception whereby the majority of people forget about or abandon their own interests and desires and accept the dominant values and beliefs as their own” (Bressler-198).

In the modern era of Indian politics, we observe that there are a lot of parties who wish to rule the citizens by imposing their own ideology. Whenever a party takes over the government from the other one, the first thing that we notice is that they make a lot of changes in the functioning of the government. So we can refer to it as the government’s own ‘ideology’ which it uses to direct the citizens of the country. Manoj Mitra indirectly describes the ideology of modern Indian politics



through Wali and Pashupati. Like Dariyaganj and Palashpur, there is a large network of villages in India where people are ruled by the government's ideology but they are not conscious about it. They spend their lives like poor taluk and unconsciously, accept their poor condition as their fate. They do not even say word against them and think it is their right to lead them and their duty to obey their commands blindly.

Amid this rat race of the ideological dominance by the Zamindars, there comes into being the concept of 'resistance theory'. Hekim comes to rescue the villagers from their pitiable situation. He spreads awareness among the people about the unknown diseases which take away their lives every year. He instructs them to construct a tank and stop paying taxes. He motivates the taluk to resist against the unjust policies of Wali. Wali questions Hekim the reason of Munna's death. He does not find sufficient proof against him and orders Hortuki to free Hakim which creates a surge of happiness among his taluk. He asks Maulvi regarding the cause of their intense happiness. He knows that his taluk become happy for the release of Hekim. The popularity of Hekim generates in him a sense of fear and doubt. Once again, he asks; "Wali. Had he not been freed, would they have abused me?" (Mitra- 83).

Anyway, he is afraid of Hekim's popularity among his Taluk. Maulvi answers to his question that they know Hekim is innocent. You cannot be able to punish him without reason. This statement hurts his ego. He becomes furious and asks them; "Wali. What? I cannot punish? When did it come to this? (Addressing Hortuki) What have you reduced my taluk to? I cannot punish my own subjects? Eh Hekim, come here, come close to me" (Mitra-83).

He starts beating Hekim with his jabs and sticks that creates commotion among the poor villagers. He cannot understand why my taluk become so furious when I punish one of my subjects. The commotion of the villagers supports Foucault's repressive theory that has been mentioned earlier in which he comments that power breeds resistance. Wali's taluk, till now, were subverted by his own ideology but Hekim enlightens their inner hearts. As a consequence, they protest against Hekim's punishment. Wali gets agitated once again when Hekim raises his hand to the motion to





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remain them calm. He beats him once again because he wants them to stop shouting. He shows his power and dominance over his taluk by beating Hekim but, after all, he becomes conscious of his loss of control over them and thinks Hekim to be the reason behind it who has become so important for them. He assuages his anger by beating Hekim and tells him that despite of being his taluk, they are now seemed to be controlled by him. In the beginning, Hekim does not raise any resistance against him but he loses his control and orders him to beat him as much as he wants. He advises him that he should leave them alone since they are poor and innocent people and devoid of proper food and medicine.

“Hekim. Beat me up as much as you want to. But leave those people alone. They are poor and weak. They don’t have food... they don’t have medicine” (Mitra-84). Existential crisis is also a major problem in our society where a person is, somehow, forced to lose his/her inborn identity. Often a person leaves his/her inborn place and takes an abode at another place where he or she loses his or her former identity. Women are born with their own stable identity but with their development in the society, their identity change on each stage of their life. At the stage of her childhood, she bears her father’s surname and the society knows her by her father’s name. Similarly, when she gets married, her identity once again changes and she is known by her husband’s name. Kate Millett, in her *Sexual Politics* in 1969 begins a new wave of feminism where she mentions that “a female is born, but a woman is created” (Bressler-173). We observe a fine example of transited identity in the present play where Gangamoni feels inferior in the society as being the woman who loses her present identity which is an obvious sign of existential problem. Throughout the play, most of the time, she is called Bhondul’s wife instead of her original name. In the village, the name Bhondul signifies terror for the people. Nevertheless, villagers call Gangamoni by her husband’s name. She is given her husband’s name not for his bad deeds but in the custom of male dominant society, women suffer from their transit identity in which their inborn identity is swallowed by the former. It is not only the problem in the play but even in the modern society where globalization has spread far and wide, women are losing their identity and find their existence at stake in the patriarchal society where the male uses her to serve his own vested



interests. It is not only the problem of general women but we observe a lot of incidents where women writers in literature bore the male identity to publish their works such as George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell and Mrs Oliphant. In spite of being women, they were forced to use masculine names that shatter their inborn identity. Elaine Showalter argued; "In the Feminine phase, 1840-1880, woman writers mostly imitated the male writer's modes. This meant, further, an adoption of the patriarchal aesthetic, social values and even masculine names, (George Eliot is the best example of this)" (Nayar- 95).

Even Hekim, who himself feels identity crisis in Palashpur and is the only epitome of knowledge and erudition between Dariyanganj and Palashpur, calls her Bhondul's wife in place of Gangamoni. He does not discriminate against dispensing medicines to the people of the two countries, but does injustice towards Gangamoni by giving her husband's name. When injustice is done in the society regarding any other issue, everybody tries to protest against it but in the case of women's identity, even the good person like Hekim does not come in the favour of women. The author draws the picture of patriarchal society where they dominate the women by their own ideology. Even her own husband calls her with different identity. Bhondul comes to Hekim as a spy of Wali to persuade Hekim to come to Palashpur with him. He tells him that he has quit his corrupt life and wants to live peacefully. Hekim agrees to his proposal but instantly labels him an imposter. She protests against her husband but is cursed as a bitch by him. He also throws her to the ground which shows the prevalence of patriarchal dominance. Bhondul's curses words like 'bitch' against Gangamoni reminds the viewpoint of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gilbert that: "submissive female-as- angel or the dangerous female- as- monster" (Nayar- 96).

"Bhondul. Let go, you bitch!" (Mitra-91). Hekim goes to Palashpur with the purpose of providing medicine to Mohor but he resides there permanently. He busies himself in curing Palashpur's poor villagers. But Pashupati beats and throws him outside of his country by accusing him and spreading rancour among people against him. Finally, he comes to his own homeland Dariyaganj where Chhayam hesitates to accept him as their country man. He also suggests him to go away from where



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he came. Thus, Hekim stands in a situation where he is not able to find his original identity and feels existential problem because, on the one side, Pashupati drives him out of his country, on the other hand; his own countrymen hesitate to accept him. Chhayam remarks that Pashupati has made him a ghost. Thus, his inborn identity as Hekim has been destroyed.

“Chhayam. Pashpati has reduced you to a ghost of yourself? Why should we accept you now? Why?”(Mitra- 108). Gangamoni deconstructs the centre of power of male dominant society by killing her husband. The act of killing her husband by her supports the viewpoint of Derrida who advocates the decentralization of power. According to him, nothing is permanent or fixed in the society. As the life of human beings are in flux, so male power cannot exist eternally. Thus, at the end of the play, a stiff resistance comes from Gangamoni against the suppression and exploitation that proves that power is not fixed or static but dynamic in the society. Rebel against the power changes the situation with time that helps the oppressed women to mould their destiny, character, identity and behaviour. Here, the writer in his portrayal of the character of Gangamoni tries to deconstruct the power in search of freedom against oppression and existential crisis from the patriarchal society. The character of Gangamoni shows some similarity to Bharati Mukherjee’s characters like Jasmine and Dimple because they also commit murder to get rid of the oppression from the male patriarchy and deconstruct the prevailing power in the society. However, their purpose of murder is different from her like Dimple in *Wife* (1976), kills her husband to rescue herself of mental disturbance whereas Jasmine kills the boatman to take revenge for her lost virginity. Their aim of rebelling against the power is also very similar to that of Gangamoni.

Casteism is another important issue in India which compels the people to become hostile to each other. Manoj Mitra tries to sketch it in his play. Even After seventy years of independence, modern India has not come out of its grasp which is an alarming toll for Indian democracy. Different caste groups do not show respect towards one another and their lack of cooperation shatters the unity and integrity of the country. Class differences have been practiced for vested interests while some believe that caste system is created by the divinely- ordained system.



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Hindu scripture like Vedas holds the notion that human being is composed of four hierarchical sects generally designated to be Varna System. Earlier, it was based on profession that is the scholastic work of Brahmins, the military work of Kshatriya, the commercial work of Vaishya and the work of Shudra to serve all other sects but subsequently these social echelons put on the rigorous form of caste system. The Shudras were not given their due right. They were not allowed to enter the temples and educational institutions, and ultimately were tagged as untouchables (Regin Silvest and Jemi-137).

Therefore, Brahmins and the high caste Hindus consider themselves belonging to the upper class like Britishers who too were proud of being white and thought it was their duty to teach manners to the eastern people. Similarly the upper caste Hindus and Brahmins started to control the lower caste people. But the irony is that lower caste people accept the humiliation and suppression as their destined fate just like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* where Bakha is persuaded by his father not to protest against the high caste Hindus and accept the humiliation and suppression as his destined fate.

In *The Tale of Hekim-shaheb*, Pashupati requests Hortuki to stay and asks him how he can leave his place so late without taking any food. He persuades him that he will not provide him the food prepared by the people of lower castes- his servant Jugi and Poddars. He seems to project the idea that he belongs to upper class and will not defile his own caste by serving the food prepared by the above-mentioned untouchables. The comment that comes from Pashupati clearly manifests the prevailing caste system. If we go through Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, we observe a striking similarity with this play. Here, the cultural difference in religion forces the grandmother to acknowledge that her uncle once considered a Muslim man's shadow capable of defiling his food. So, she thinks that her uncle's staying in Muslim family is the result of her uncle's own sins.



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“The cultural difference is perceived in religion as well that is represented by grandmother when she describes how the shadow of a Muslim spoils the food of her uncle. Now he resides in Muslim’s house which she thinks it as the price of her uncle’s sins”(Regin Silvest and Jemi- 68).

If we compare the two works, it clearly shows that Manoj Mitra writes it in the historical perspective. The time and setting of the play are older than that of Amitav Ghosh who has set it after the partition. However, the mentality of human beings towards caste system has not changed.

Thus, Manoj Mitra, from his keen observation in the society, has been successful in his mission to draw the picture of post-independent India’s burning issues through his famous play *The Tale of Hekim-saheb*. He indirectly, through historical context, portrays the prevailing social issues like dominance of power, plight of the oppressed class, gender discrimination, existential crisis and castism. As he never criticises on the role of contemporary Indian politics in the present play, he confirms in an interview that the main purpose of writing the play is to showcase the major concerns of the society but he cannot do it directly. From the characters of Wali and Pashupati, he attempts to draw the image of the dirty politics of India which is going on. Some opportunistic leaders become the symbol of terror for the society due to their insatiable thirst for power like Wali and Pashupati who endeavour to become more powerful. They do not care a fig for their taluk and keep themselves busy in collecting their taxes anyhow like the corrupt Indian politicians who use their dirty games to win the election. Thus, the whole citizens of the country become the victim of their narrow politics.

In the prevailing hypocrisy of power, Manoj Mitra tries to find out the antidote for the power in the socio-economic circles in the society in the character of Hekim who comes forward for the oppressed people as a ray of hope. He, unconsciously, puts a fresh breath among the deadly poor people and tries to bring them from their slavish lives making them conscious about their freedom and liberty. The writer does not give any direct solution to the prevailing social issues through his play but it is implicitly understood through the character of Hekim that there is hope for the society by reviving their freedom through eradicating the evil designs of politicians. Amid the





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conflict of power and powerless, there is another major issue in the society like Castism and gender discrimination. These problems will be eradicated from the society only when people try to understand the importance of freedom for each and every individual. Wali and Pashupati never give due importance to their taluk and never try to understand their problems. Wali does not give permission to Hekim to take raktagulab to prepare medicine for the poor people. He does not care that unknown disease may also attack him. So, it is a reminder for Indian politicians, that under the shadow of corruption, no society can reach the pinnacle of progress and development.

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