

**POLICIES AND
PRACTICES**

129

Brecht, Manto and Two Situations



November 2021



Policies and Practices 129

November 2021

Published by:
Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group
IA-48, Sector-III, Ground Floor
Salt Lake City
Kolkata-700097
India
Web: <http://www.mcrg.ac.in>

ISSN 2348 0297

Printed by:
Graphic Image
New Market, New Complex, West Block
2nd Floor, Room No. 115, Kolkata-87

This publication is brought out with the support of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. It is a part of the research programme of the Calcutta Research Group on migration and forced migration. It is conducted in collaboration with Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Institute of Human Science, Vienna, and Several Universities and Institution in India.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a German-based foundation working in South Asia and other parts of the world on the subjects of critical social analysis and civic education. It promotes a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic social order, and aims at present members of society and decision-makers with alternative approaches to such an order. Research organisations, groups working for self-emancipation, and social activists are supported in their initiatives to develop models that have the potential to deliver social and economic justice. The work of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, South Asia can be accessed at www.rosalux.in.

Sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung with funds of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany. This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication. The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the partner and does not necessarily reflect a position of RLS.

Brecht, Manto and Two Situations

Ranabir Samaddar

2021

Brecht, Manto and Two Situations

Ranabir Samaddar *

I

Two writings of Bertold Brecht and Sadat Hasan Manto are joined by a realisation that in certain situations political openings become impossible. Strangely these are not stable or more correctly speaking static situations but are situations of mobility. Yet the conditions of mobility bring to us only spectres of closure and deaths. Political openings towards transformation at least in a conventional sense are ruled out. The severity of itinerant situations at times makes it impossible for the migrant subjectivity to become political. German dramatist Bertold Brecht's play, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) and the short story on the Indian partition by the Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto, *Toba Tek Singh* (1955) tell us of situations marked by an impossibility of politics. These two literary pieces critique existing political responses to the closures of the time – a war and a partition. They produce an aesthetic of empathy paradoxically perched on an interrogative posture, and this irrespective of whatever the authors may have wanted to convey through these two writings. They replace politics as they become “acts of literature”.¹ Precisely by refusing to suggest a political solution, they have presented an uncertain and delicate message, namely that politics does not solve everything. There are many situations on earth that prove a closure of politics, where perhaps aesthetics provides the opening. Aesthetic sensibility acquires fundamental importance in envisioning alternatives to capitalism. It makes the reach of understanding global while its roots may be local. The power of the aesthetic escapes the postcolonial bind.

II

We always have this nagging question in our minds and politics seems incapable of addressing, or at times stops short of addressing it. The question is deceptively simple, namely: During war, famine, riots, massive population flows, political upheavals and ruthless coercive steps by the army, police, administration, etc., what happens to the itinerant? What happens to people on the fringes of societies - the criminal, the lunatic, wandering vagabond, and the forgotten? We are speaking here of impossible situations. We can say that if wars, riots, and famines will be with us, the situation of the itinerant will be an impossible one: impossible for political doctrines, welfare measures, humanitarian policies, impossible for the itinerant, but also impossible for narration. Recall young Marx, who in the *On Jewish Question* (1844) had said that to abolish the Jewish Question the identity of the Jew

* Distinguished Chair in Migration and Forced Migration Studies, Calcutta Research Group
Policies and Practices, Issue No. 129, November 2021

along with the identity of the political state would have to disappear. Marx pointed out the closure of political language in situations that call for social transformation.

Readers of *Toba Tek Singh* perhaps will not remember the name of the main protagonist of the story, Bashan Singh, but they will remember the name Toba Tek Singh. By the end of the story Toba Tek Singh, a settlement, has been anthropomorphized. Bashan by the time of his death has become Toba Tek Singh, who Manto says, lay dead on the middle ground between two countries. We must carefully read Manto in his incomparable economy of words here as he describes the situation in the wake of the partition of lunatics between India and Pakistan and thus the division of Indian lunatics and Pakistani lunatics:

Two or three years after Partition, the governments of Pakistan and India decided to exchange lunatics in the same way that they had exchanged civilian prisoners... I cannot say whether this decision made sense or not. In any event, a date for the lunatic exchange was fixed after high level conferences on both sides of the border. All the details were carefully worked out. On the Indian side, Muslim lunatics with relatives in India would be allowed to stay. The remainder would be sent to the frontier. Here in Pakistan nearly all the Hindus and Sikhs were gone, so the question of retaining non-Muslim lunatics did not arise. All the Hindu and Sikh lunatics would be sent the frontier in police custody.

Most of the lunatics were opposed to the exchange. They did not understand why they should be uprooted and sent to some unknown place. Some, only half-mad, started shouting... When Bashan Singh's turn came to be entered in the register, he spoke to the official in charge. "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" he asked. "Is it in Pakistan or India?"

The official laughed. "It's in Pakistan," he replied.

Hearing this, Bashan Singh leapt back and ran to where his remaining companions stood waiting. The Pakistani guards caught him and tried to bring him back to the crossing point, but he refused to go.

"Toba Tek Singh is here!" he cried...

The officials tried to convince him that Toba Tek Singh was now in India. If by some chance it wasn't they would send it there directly, they said. But he wouldn't listen.

Because he was harmless, the guards let him stand right where he was while they got on with their work. He was quiet all night, but just before sunrise he screamed. Officials came running from all sides. After fifteen years on his feet, he was lying face down on the ground. India was on one side, behind a barbed wire fence. Pakistan was on the other side, behind another fence. Toba Tek Singh lay in the middle, on a piece of land that had no name.²

But we can also say that while Bashan Singh asserted that the place where he was standing was Toba Tek Singh – his only memory of the past, Manto was suggesting surreptitiously that the place which he stood on and knew, was indeed the place of his memory or dream, and therefore, "Toba Tek Singh lay in the middle, on a piece of land that had no name".³ This is, in as much we could say that the individual had been transformed into a place, an imaginary of a place which was there perhaps in Pakistan or perhaps in India, but no, as Manto said, was in the middle. In the story Manto gives the reader no clue as to where this asylum was. It was somewhere, and Manto tells us that Partition had just taken place, "two or three years" before. Political rationality in the form of division, territorial policies, and administrative fairness, had failed. Manto is particular about suggesting administrative fairness in implementing partition – even lunatics were to be exchanged on a fair basis. Yet it was a closed situation for politics; perhaps and more importantly, for language. Standing through the night on the border fence, Bashan Singh gave out a scream and died.⁴

However, if we think that at least a scream can express the impossibility of any decision that the itinerant must make, please hold on for a little. Yes, you can refuse a choice that politics places

before you, you can become a lunatic to scream and die. But as Bertold Brecht wrote in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, “The screamers don't scream long, only half an hour, after which they have to be sung to sleep, they're all in.” Even screaming out does not solve the problem. All it does is to signal that language has ended. In case of Brecht, we may say that he at least thinks that only political consciousness can prise open such situation. Manto however declines to make that suggestion. Perhaps the closure is permanent and therefore the situation has the potential to make readers think of its absurdity. Not without reason *Toba Tek Singh* will rank as one of the remarkable short stories of our time.

Manto describes the situation as the situation closes in on language and the exchange of lunatics is about to take place:

Preparations for the exchange had been completed. Lists of the lunatics coming from here to there, and from there to here had arrived, and the day of the exchange had also been fixed.

It was extremely cold when the lorries full of Hindu and Sikh lunatics from the Lahore insane asylum set out, with a police guard. The escorting wardens were with them as well. At the Wagah border the two parties' superintendents met each other; and after the initial procedures had been completed, the exchange began, and went on all night.

To extricate the lunatics from the lorries and confide them to the care of the other wardens, was a very difficult task. Some refused to emerge at all. Those who were willing to come out became difficult to manage, because they suddenly ran here and there. If clothes were put on the naked ones, they tore them off their bodies and flung them away. Someone was babbling abuse, someone was singing. They were fighting among themselves, weeping, muttering. People couldn't make themselves heard at all-- and the female lunatics' noise and clamor was something else. And the cold was so fierce that everybody's teeth were chattering.

The question of the failure of language tells us of the failure of spirituality and ethics. Recall Marx once more namely that Jewish spirituality will live and die with Christianity; political democracy of the Christian state will not emancipate the Jew. In Marx's words, “Once society has succeeded in abolishing the *empirical* essence of Judaism – huckstering and its preconditions – the Jew will have become *impossible*, because his consciousness no longer has an object, because the subjective basis of Judaism, practical need, has been humanized, and because the conflict between man's individual-sensuous existence and his species-existence has been abolished. The *social* emancipation of the Jew is the *emancipation of society from Judaism*.”⁵ (Italics in the original)

Here, as if the storyteller is saying: in a situation like this we fail in our own opinion once we have dispensed with critical judgments. We have submitted the declaration of human worth to an impossible situation. Our subjectivity is meaningless. Our heroism is a deceit. The verification of truth does not come by political means, because verification faces a blocked situation. On the other hand, it is the dramatic development exhibited in a flash by the literary mode that brings out the subject-less state of an exile, the situation of an itinerant – a situation where language becomes meaningless. Word, philosophy's wait to be listened to, must be postponed. That is the biggest part of the reality. The reality of politics must reconcile itself as only the exterior of a situation, whose materiality defies political language. The critique of politics is achieved through an aesthetic mode. In other words, politics must be subjected to criticism from outside, as if our storyteller and the playwright are saying, we are taking you, readers, immersed in your petty political judgments to a situation where you will find political language has ended, the conceit of politics has been brought home to you, and the void will tell you that to prise open the situation, force has to appear from outside. The closure will invite this force. “Political spirituality”, we can borrow a phrase of a

philosopher, emerges in the wake of the death of political language: the language of reason, administration, and solution.⁶ If spirituality as a world reordering phenomenon has died as indeed Marx pointed out in his discussion *On the Jewish Question*, it can reappear now only in a combination with politics, that is when politics is able to emerge as a spiritual response. Political spirituality makes counter-conduct possible. As if through death Bashan was saying, men will not be governed by politics; the hold over people's lives will come to a stop, from now on will begin the story of "counter-conduct". We must therefore dare to think of Bashan's life as wildly as possible. The counter-conduct was possible as the situation closed down on language. As one commentator has noticed, it was a case of "the loss of word" but at the same time "the meaning of the world" retrieved by Manto.⁷

Manto's language revolves around the great technique of expression, yet it retains the power of symbols and abstraction, and injects the critique of politics through the combination of a sense of confusion and the eventual breakdown of the narrative. It is a message of the death of the contemporary language of politics. We must ask, why could not politics produce a critique of Partition that literature could produce? Is it because such a critique will be a critique of politics itself and can be produced only from the outside, which is to say from outside of politics? Must we then engage in an analysis of what one reader of Manto terms as "radical evil" that plagues politics today, at least conventional politics? Must we term the unexpected consequences of human actions – deliberated and taken with proper political considerations – as satanic urges propelling our political situations to unexpected outcomes with complete disruption of our fragile sensibilities?⁸

Manto writes in the same story,

A mad person got embroiled in the syndrome of Pakistan and India to such an extent that he got further deranged mentally. While sweeping the floor, one day, he suddenly climbed the nearby tree. He delivered a long speech from the tree for about two hours on the delicate issue of India and Pakistan. When soldiers asked him to climb down, he climbed further up the tree. When he was threatened some more, he said, 'I want to stay on this very tree'...

Manto continues,

Molbi Saab, what is this Pakistan?" After deep contemplation, he replied, "It is a place in India where blades are manufactured.

As Bashan the lunatic dies at the end, we cannot ask any more if the event of Partition was historically a damned thing – true or false by the great standard of the history of a nation form. On other hand, as the story builds up with Bashan and other inmates of the holding place for the lunatics arguing and trying to reason out their places of belonging in the event they end up being divided, we are faced with the impossible challenge of deciding what is this specific history of the nation form that must produce a true/false division and eternally shape our historical understanding of our own past? What kind of historical knowledge is this that will depend on such specific divisions? *Toba Tek Singh* is not the tale of a futility or if you will fatality; it is a critique of the mode of historical knowledge by itself.

An itinerant situation has produced the critique. Conventional commentaries have pointed out the salience of madness as a critical factor in Manto's narrative. Yet, we must go further and ask, why could not madness be imagined in the "normal" setting of a violence-ridden space, say a locality, a family, a community, but somewhere at some unknown place at an unknown time ("two or three years after Partition", in a holding place for the lunatics) – suspended in our imagination? Both the

nature of the situation and the form of commentary produce a critique which conventional political language would have failed to discern. Manto composed his own epitaph. Though it does not appear on his grave, it shows the bite of his form even in death.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Here lies SaadatHasanManto and with him lie buried all the
Secrets and mysteries of the art of short-story writing...
Under tons of earth he lies, still wondering who among the
Two is the greater short-story writer: God or he.

Saadat Hasan Manto
18 August 1954.

III

I have referred already to the phenomenon of “counter-conduct”. In a sense *Mother Courage* is a story of counter-conduct. Anna Fierling is not a noble character. She is a wanderer, displaced from her job as a canteen woman as the war begins, roams along the war fields with her three children, but more importantly her wagon – her home, depository of food, goods, and clothes, and her place of hiding – which Anna Fierling, the Mother, pulls to survive the thirty years’ war of Europe. Her cart or the wagon symbolises survival in the time of a war, hence also the perpetuation of war. With it she knows that she will have shelter and a way to support herself and the children. As a petty businesswoman she must find the means of wading through the war with the help of the cart. Considered as the greatest play of the twentieth century, *Mother Courage and Her Children* does not tell us of any ethical practice, humanitarian motto, any moral lesson, specifically a moral lesson of how to survive a war. Yet you cannot say that it is a dog-eat-dog world, a Hobbesian world; it is a world where you must move on to survive. As the Chaplain said in the play,

Well, I'd say there's peace even in war, war has its islands of peace. For war satisfies all needs, even those of peace, yes, they're provided for, or the war · couldn't keep going. In war - as in the very thick of peace - you can take a crap, and between one battle and the next there's always a beer, and even on the march you can snatch a nap on your elbow maybe, something can always be managed. Of course you can't play cards during an attack, but neither can you while ploughing the fields in peace time: it's when the victory is won that there are possibilities. You have your leg shot off, and at first you raise quite an outcry as if it was something, but soon you calm down or take a swig of brandy, and you end up hopping about, and the war is none the worse for your little misadventure. And can't you be fruitful and multiply in the thick of slaughter - behind a bam or somewhere? Nothing can keep you from it very long in any event. And so, the war has your offspring and can carry on. War is like love; it always finds a way. Why should it end? ... Be sensible, the war will go on a bit longer, and we'll make a bit more money, then peace will be all the nicer.⁹

The mother survives by trading in war. She trades in a *situation*. She must look after Kattrin the dumb daughter, with the help of her judgments as to how to manage the war for her survival. She is a huckster, recall Marx's word in *On The Jewish Question*, and so war has enabled her to survive. The daughter dies at the end, yet the mother must survive, though by now after twelve years of pulling the wagon and barely managing life, she does not know if she will have the strength to pull the

wagon and continue. But she must move on to wherever she will survive, meanwhile the villagers offer to give her daughter a burial. Brecht said when the play was opened in war time Zurich in 1941, "The world premiere of *Mother Courage and her Children* in Zurich during the Hitler War, with the outstanding Therese Giehse in the title role, made it possible, despite the anti-fascist and pacifist stand of the Zürich Schauspielhaus (mainly staffed with German emigrants), for the bourgeois press to speak of a Niobe tragedy and of the overwhelming vital strength of the mother animal. Duly warned, the playwright made some changes for the Berlin production." Once again, the readers must consider the biting irony with which Brecht speaks of bourgeois humanitarianism over the tale of a Greek tragedy around the life of one who had to face the consequences of "arrogance", "excessive pride", in one word, "hubris". Again, Brecht makes clear that the story will not submit to piety, sympathy, ethics, as Mother says "(harnessing herself to the wagon): "I hope I can pull the wagon by myself. Yes, I'll manage, there's not much in it now. I must get back into business. Another regiment passes at the rear with pipe and drum." The playwright says, "*Mother Courage* starts pulling the wagon" ... and as the soldiers march and sing, she calls out, "Hey! Take me with you!"¹⁰

Shortly before Kattrin's death, the cook the companion of *Mother Courage* proposes to Mother that he can take her away to another town that has no war and the two can live. Mother refuses to leave without the dumb daughter and the wagon. She tells, "Cook, how could she pull the wagon by herself? The war frightens her. She can't bear it. She has terrible dreams. I hear her groan at night, especially after battles. What she sees in her dreams I don't know. She suffers from sheer pity. The other day I found her with a hedgehog that we'd run over". (pp. 99-100) The cook says, "Yes, we're told to be unselfish and share what we have, but what if we have nothing? And those who do share it don't have an easy time either, for what's left when you're through sharing? Unselfishness is a very rare virtue--it doesn't pay." And then the cook sings,

Unselfish Martin could not bear
 His fellow creatures' woes
 He met a poor man in the snows
 And he gave this poor fellow half his cloak to wear:
 So both of them fell down and froze.
 His brothers' woes he could not bear,
 So long before the day was out
 The consequence was clear,
 Alas: Unselfishness had brought him to this pass.
 A man is better off without.

To this, *Mother Courage* says, "Lamb, I couldn't swallow a thing. I don't say what you said is unreasonable, but was it your last word? We've always understood each other." (pp. 101-102)

But have we understood *Mother Courage*? I suspect, not. The Mother will have to live and get Kattrin a husband, and only then you may say that Mother will be free to make a choice. She refuses the offer of the cook, and we do not know if *Mother Courage* survived the war. It is a situation. Brecht would call it "fabel" – a story, a fable, plot, narrative, the spectators, actors, stage workers, all communicating with each other to produce the on-stage performance itself. These interrelations allow variability which will then carry different intentions and messages.¹¹ The "mediation" is important.¹² It allows for a particular gesture to appear and become effective.

Yet if you say the gesture is effective because it presents itself to us as a spectacle, as Bashan's death after screaming out was, then this spectacular imagery also does not give any way out.

Instead, it tells of a closure. The construction of a situation is like moments of life deliberately put together in a design to show that politics - here the politics of war and in the earlier case the politics of rational governance of a territory - has completely colonised life to the point of closing it. What remains is the social relation left to be mediated by images.

The reader is alienated from the image. The image is distant, indeed estranged from the reader. It is impossible for the reader to identify with the image, the image cannot produce its *other*, and knowledge of the subject is barred. No bourgeois mode of knowledge will help us know the subject's mode of being. The impossibility of politics is profound. Closure of the situation makes politics in the routine sense of the word impossible. Yet this impossibility - dramatically presented - suggests possible worlds, *other worlds*.

Literature of this order we are seized with here, we may say, is built around an impasse internal to it. But this means that this impasse is a condition of its possibility. If *Toba Tek Singh* and *Mother Courage* have solved the representational problem, it is because they have abandoned the task of representing a reality - and here we are speaking of political reality. We confront the problematic of closure precisely because literature has opened up dramatically the closure of a situation. The paradox is internal to the phenomenon, and as immanent feature cries out for its resolution. The resolution however is nothing short of its supersession, yet this paradox is also a precondition for the opening. The end is where it all began.

Literature's conditions of possibility and impossibility are one and the same. Politics has much to learn from this.

The truth of the migrant condition can be attained only with an acknowledgement of the death of subjectivity of the migrant. Bashan Singh dies by literally becoming a place; Mother Courage tries to console her dumb daughter Katrin minutes before Katrin dies. Mother assures Katrin that she would not go away with the cook leaving Katrin behind, and the wagon is too valuable to discard. She says,

Katrin! Stay where you are, Katrin! Where do you think you're going with that bundle? (She examines the bundle.) She's packed her things. Were you listening? I told him there was nothing doing, he can have Utrecht and his lousy inn, what would we want with a lousy inn? (She sees the skirt and trousers.) Oh, you're a stupid girl, Katrin, what if I'd seen that and you gone? (She takes hold of Katrin who is trying to leave.) And don't think I've sent him packing on your account. It was the wagon. You can't part us, I'm too used to it, you didn't come into it; it was the wagon. Now we're leaving, and we'll put the cook's things here where he'll find 'em, the stupid man. (She clambers up and throws a couple of things down to go with the trousers.) There! He's fired. The last man I'll take into this business! Now let's be going, you and me. This winter'll pass, like all the others. Get into harness, it looks like snow. (p. 103)

Katrin is desperate about her situation. She beats the drum while the soldiers order her to stop drumming as the sound would give away their position to the enemy. The soldier gives a warning. The order does not reach Katrin's ears. The soldier fires at Katrin. The playwright finishes off the cry of Mother Courage and collapse of the girl with the line, "Katrin the dumb daughter is killed."

The migrant became a subject only after she died. Remember, in 2015 the four-year-old migrant child Alan Kurdi became a subject only after his dead body brought ashore by the wave had been photographed and the photograph been widely circulated.¹³

IV

Let us reflect for one more time on the lives of Bashan Singh and Mother Courage. Bashan Singh and Mother Courage have vitality. They have the strength to live in their worlds. You may call them stupid, as indeed one is a lunatic. They attain agency through we may justifiably say an illusion. We may deride at their powerlessness at that very moment they seem to have achieved agency. The paradox gives birth to a disfigured situation, which will force us out of our passivity, resignation, and compromise into active thinking. The cry of Bashan and the despair of Mother at the loss of her daughter as she resumes pulling her wagon to follow the soldiers are not self-conscious acts made from choice. Yet their gestures have a truth. They are truer than the choices that could have been made based on rational considerations. Gesture is thus not a matter of style, but of the entire composition which mediates the relation between the creator of the composition (a play, a short story, etc.) and the reader, the spectator or the listener. Gesture mediates the relation between literature and politics, and if you extend the line of thinking, between the migrant and the society. It foregrounds the social significance of an action with every component of the act (literary or the dramatic) contributing to the social theme. Gesture originates from the entire composition, accumulating surprises - as if accumulating elements by stealth, resulting in a calculated suddenness – in a jerk. The idea is one of a “pregnant moment”.¹⁴

The situation we are considering here is therefore one of immanence, which lends gesture a dramatic effect. Immanence lends gesture its power. Recall Marx who in the second thesis on Feuerbach calls for a practice of thought, which can demonstrate “its reality and power, this-sidedness of thinking in practice”, its position as an absolute being-within history.¹⁵ Immanence is on the concrete terrain of history, it is not a speculative notion. As concept it offers a concrete possibility to appreciate outcomes, more importantly the concept can work for outcomes, which are laws in a historical sense, which is say “tendencies”. Yet it will be reasonable to ask, why do we usually think of immanence in a metaphysical way? Both Brecht and Manto show, you do not have to be metaphysical to think of situations that produce out of themselves the *unpredictable, unimaginable*. We can only thank the literary form for bringing the unimaginable into our realm. Brecht and Manto both were formalists. In the dark time of war and the immediate aftermath of mass killings over the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, they found forms that said the unsayable, tackling the difficulty of formulating a response to war and killings over national allegiances.¹⁶ Consider what Brecht wrote as a War Primer positing the following lines below a photograph of steelworkers labouring over winching chains and sheets of metal that originally appeared in *Life* magazine in 1940:

‘What’s that you’re making, brothers?’ ‘Iron waggons.’
‘And what’ about those great steel plates you’re lifting?’
‘They’re for the guns that blast the iron to pieces.’
‘And what’s it all for, brothers?’ ‘It’s our living.’¹⁷

Form makes historical immanence possible, because form can detect a trend, a *tendency*. For an understanding of the possibility of a historical situation we must attend to the relevant question of the form – the form of the historical reality, the form of the response, the form of the new language. These two acts of literature convey the deep relation between immanence and form as two historical truths. They deal with unstable situations. Their central characters are migrants. They are itinerant figures – figures that carry the truths of potency as well as the possibility of doing the unpredictable.

However, after the readers have gone through all these, a cautionary note is for them: The main argument here is not that arts and literature can become an alternative to the politics of a capitalist world marked by wars, partitions, colonial conquests, and territorial aggrandisements. The main argument here is that representational politics reaches a dead end when the situation closes on the subjects of the time. The subjects cannot be represented anymore. The power of the aesthetic for instance brought out by these literary acts can prise open such situation and show new possibilities for the subject to emerge. Alternative is the other name of possibility. In these two great literary tracts, Bashan Singh and *Mother Courage* instruct. The instruction originates from a disorienting action – Bashan Singh dies with a scream after standing silently through the night, *Mother Courage* wails for the dumb daughter killed by the war and then follows the war to survive. In both cases, clarity is achieved but only through disorientation. Their actions escape our judgment.¹⁸ But as has been pointed out, their actions remain “infinitely available to our struggles to understand”.¹⁹

Note in passing that Brecht and Manto do not present their characters as victims, but if you like, subjects with desires. Their will defines the time and space; their predicaments offer the readers no freedom of sentimentality. The fluidity of the situation the narrators create enables the latter to keep distance with the characters. As readers we are not allowed to submerge in pathos. The situation will vex us as to what an itinerant situation can be. We must “suspend our belief” of the reality (the other way of saying “willing suspension of disbelief”) and thus disengage ourselves from the realistic arguments about what could have happened, for in these two tales of fantasy the semblance of truth is the real gesture towards a critical understanding of our subjectivity and the shape we as subjects are going to give to our life. Bishan died and the Mother lost everything while trying to do business in the war to protect her family. The paradox of truth and disbelief, and fantasy and belief is solved only through a specific form in which these present themselves to us, in this case the form to be known as gesture. As in *Mother Courage* we are told, “War is a business proposition...” Courage itself is an ambivalent quality. “The poor need courage. They are lost, that’s why. That they even get up in the morning is something – in their plight. Or that they plough a field – in war time. Even their bringing children into the world shows they have courage, for they have no prospects.”

And, therefore, with the Mother, her hunger, her practicality, her willingness and determination to pull off the impossible - surviving the war with her children – we must ask, was it useless for her to chart out the path that she took? Or, for the lunatic Bashan to cry and die for a place that we do not know where it was but was somewhere at some time and was his own? As wandering figures, they are like poor monuments. We shall not remember them. Yet can we not think of a history where great subjects will not be there to mark it for us? The lives of Bashan and Mother will forever ask us to struggle for such a history.

Notes

¹ Name taken from the title of the book by Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992)

² Sadat Hasan Manto, *Toba Tek Singh*, trans. Richard McGill Murphy, edition: *Words without Borders*, Magazine, September 2003 - <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/toba-tek-singh> (accessed on 20 January 2021)

³ Commentators of Manto have noted the economy of words, while portraying him as a realist. However his verbal economy has depended on not realism but a reliance on the relations between the “internal elements” of a situation the presence or absence of which will determine the outcome of the situation – Salim Akhtar,

“Is Manto Necessary Today?”, trans. Leslie A. Fleming, *Journal of South Asian Literature, special issue on The Writings of Sadaat Hasan Manto*, 20 (2), Fall 1985, pp. 1-3 (p. 1)

⁴ Commentators have pointed out that “in the period following Partition, madness became the guiding metaphor” in much of his writings. Besides the fact that Manto’s fiction’s illness as a theme was deployed by a number of writers working on partition mental illness cast a “long shadow” on Manto, and “madness became the only conceivable response to the genocidal violence of Partition. Partition violence meant huge psychological trauma manifest in belated after-effects. This was, and continues, to be a long and difficult process, and it was one of the most important implications of Manto’s work...” – Tahir Jokinen and Shershah Assadullah, “Saadat Hasan Manto, Partition, and Mental Illness through the Lens of *Toba Tek Singh*”, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 2019 - <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-019-09590-w> (accessed on 3 May 2021)

⁵ Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question* (1844) - <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/> (accessed on 21 September 2021)

⁶ Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in *The Essential Works of Foucault*, Volume 3, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000); Foucault’s words, “How can one analyse the connection between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways governing oneself and others? The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false—this is what I would call ‘political spirituality’”. (p. 233)

⁷ Mohua Ahiri, “The Loss of Word and the Meaning in the World of Saadat Hassan Manto”, *Scholarly Research Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 3 (17), March-April 2015, pp. 3120-3126

⁸ Afreen Faiyaz, “The Satanic Urges: An Analysis of Radical Evil besetting the Short Stories of Sadaat Hasan Manto”, *Muse India*, 2017 (no further publication details available) – https://www.academia.edu/39007913/The_Satanic_Urges_An_Analysis_of_Radical_Evil_besetting_the_Short_Stories_of_Saadat_Hasan_Manto (accessed on 5 September 2021)

⁹ All excerpts are from Bertold Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), trans. Eric Bentley, edition: Doubleday, Garden City, 1955; pp. 74-75 – http://ciml.250x.com/archive/communists/brecht/english/mother_courage.pdf (accessed on 21 January 2021)

¹⁰ All quotations in this paragraph are from the online edition (n. 9)

¹¹ Brecht’s words and explanations taken from Manfred Wekwerth, *Daring to Play: A Brecht Companion*, ed. Anthony Hozier and trans. Rebecca Braun (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 153-155

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 154 (Wekwerth’s word)

¹³ I am indebted to Brett Nielson on the ways the photograph of Aylan Kurdi’s circulated in the global media. Alan Kurdi, initially reported as Aylan Kurdi, was a four-year-old Syrian child with Kurdish background. He drowned on 2 September 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea along with his mother and brother. Alan and his family were Syrian refugees attempting to reach Europe in 2015, known as the year of European refugee crisis. A Turkish reporter Nilufer Demir photographed the child’s dead body. The photograph of his body quickly went viral, triggering international responses. The child’s death became the symbol of the wider refugee crisis. Photographer Demir’s photograph accompanied by hashtag roughly translated in English as “humanity washed ashore” became the top trending topic on Twitter. In March 2016 it became the subject of a Dutch documentary about iconic photos, despair.

¹⁴ Roland Berthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 69-78

¹⁵ Marx’s actual words, “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.” – Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845), published as appendix Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of the Classical German Philosophy* (1888) - <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm> (accessed on 24 September 2021)

¹⁶ Indeed, while theorising his idea of the “estrangement effect” Brecht realised the importance of a form that would remove the illusion of reality. As one Chinese commentator pointed out in the context of the

introduction of Brecht's plays in post-liberation China, "Huang (Huang Zuolin, the director of Shanghai People's Art Theatre – RS) gave us a rather detailed lecture on Brecht's dramatic theories and their characteristics in 1959 when he began to direct *Mother Courage*. He pointed out that, as Western drama wanted to come out of the swamp of naturalism, Brecht found some help from the East. The difference between the Eastern and Western stages was that the latter emphasized the 'fourth wall' to create the illusion of living, while the former, especially Chinese opera, never used the 'fourth wall' and, instead, wanted to dispense with the illusion of living... This was seen in the whole process of our search for the meaning of the alienation effect during the rehearsals." – Gong Boan, "First Performance of Brecht's Dramatic Work in China: The Production of *Mother Courage* and its Stage Design", trans. Ping-leung Chan in Antony Tatlow and Tak-Wai Wong, *Brecht and East Asian Theatre*, The Proceedings of a Conference on Brecht in East Asian Theatre, 1982, mimeo (pp. 65-71), p. 66. I could not acquire any further publication details of the PDF of the conference proceedings.

¹⁷Bertold Brecht, *War Primer* (1955), trans. and ed. John Willett (London: Verso, 2017; second photograph with the verse below with no page number); the question of the form was again evident when Brecht composed these lines:

If you meet your parents in Hamburg or elsewhere
Pass them like strangers, turn the corner, don't recognize them
Pull the hat they gave you over your face, and
Do not, o do not, show your face.

(Around 1926/7 Brecht wrote some poems under the title *Lesebuch für Städtebewohner*, *Handbook for City Dwellers*, or, *A Reader for Those who Live in Cities* – cited from Esther Leslie, "Ice is Set on Fire", 7 July 2017, Verso Blog - <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3311-ice-is-set-on-fire> (accessed on 21 September 2021))

¹⁸It will be pertinent to note here that Brecht's *Mother Courage* has an unusual pedigree. Here is what the relevant information in German language tells us – "Brecht took the name 'Courage' from the novel *Trutz Simplex: Oder Ausführliche und wunderseltzame Lebensbeschreibung Der Ertzbetrügerin und Landstörtzerin Courasche* (1670) by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, who uses the example of a gypsy woman to describe how the turmoil of the Thirty Years' War leads to moral and human neglect. Grimmelshausen's novels relentlessly depict the horrors of war... Brecht, who appreciated Grimmelshausen for his un-heroic depiction of the war, did not adopt the plot of the *Courasche* novel or the character of the title character. In Grimmelshausen's case, the *Courasche* is a soldier with a strong erotic charisma, she is infertile (but has seven different husbands; cf. the three different fathers of Eilif, Schweizerkas and Kattrin) and is of high birth. The term 'courasche' does not refer to courage, but to the vagina: 'But when the sermon was at its best, and he asked me why I had done my opposite so abhorrently, I answered: Therefore, that he has reached for my courage, where else no man's hands come.' Nevertheless, there are indirect parallels between the two literary figures. Like Brecht's *Courage*, Grimmelshausen's 'Courasche' also deliberately goes to war. In men's clothing, she seeks opportunities to live out her lust and greed for money. Neither of them thinks anything of religion. On the other hand, the *Courasche* tries to earn her money as a soldier, mainly through a chain of short-lived marriages, an aspect of her personality that is reflected in Brecht's character of Yvette Pottier." – I am grateful to my Professor Ludger Hagedorn for the information he sent me in personal correspondence, also for the translation in English from the German in original. My other dear Friend Sandro Mezzadra has clarified that the original German word "Soldatenhure" suggests, "the *Courasche* is a whore for soldiers, with a strong erotic charisma; the *Courasche* tries to earn her money as a whore for soldiers".

¹⁹ Tony Kushner, "Mother Courage is not Just an Anti-war Play", *The Guardian*, 8 September 2009 – <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/08/tony-kushner-mother-courage> (accessed on 7 July 2021; I am indebted to Partha Chatterjee for drawing my attention to this note)

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

113. The Invisible Migrant Workers: In Life , In Death
114. Biometric, Notion of Governmentality and Gender Relations in Rohingya Refugee Camps
115. Media on Migrants : Reports from Field -I
116. Media on Migrants : Reports from Field -II
117. Transition without Justice in the Postcolonial World: Protection Discourses for Refugees & Migrants in South Asia
118. Media Discourses on the Bengal Bangladesh Border
119. Culture, Migration and the Time of an Epidemic: The Nautanki Theatres/ Bhojpuri Nataks in 1990s
- 120.COVID-19, Migrants, Media
121. Refugees and Migrants as Subjects of Economy and Politics
122. COVID-19 and After: Work, Life and Salience of Primitive Accumulation
123. Two Essays on Ethics and Practices of Care and Solidarity
124. Protection and Punishment : Myths and Realities of Refugee Protection
125. Migrants, Refugees, and the Contested Question of Social Protection
126. Two Essays on the Rohingya Crisis
127. Development and Displacement in the Damodar Valley of India
128. Election Campaigns as Performance: Migrants and Refugees as an Issue in West Bengal Elections

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

74. Cities, Rural Migrants & the Urban Poor-III: Migration & the Urban Question in Delhi
75. Classes, People, and Populism
76. Logistical Space I: Logistics and Social Governance
77. Logistical Space II: Mobilities and Spaces
78. Logistical Space III:Hubs, Connectivity and Transit
79. Logistical Space IV: The Asam Paradigm
80. People, Politics and Protests I: Calcutta & West Bengal, 1950s - 1960s
81. People, Politics and Protests II: Bengal and Bihar
82. People, Politics and Protests III: Marxian, Literary Debates and Discourses
83. The Importance of being Siliguri, or the Lack thereof: Border-Effect and the “Untimely” City in North Bengal
84. Logistical Space V: Representations of Connectivity
85. Logistical Space VI: Logistics and the Reshaping of Global Governance
86. Logistical Space VII: Finance Capital & Infrastructure Development
87. Logistical Space VIII: Trade, Capital & Conflict
88. Logistical Space IX: Conflict & Social Governance in Northeast India
89. People, Politics and Protests IV: Occupy College Street: Notes from the Sixties
90. People, Politics and Protests V: The Creative & Cultural Dimension of the Naxalbari Movement
91. People, Politics and Protests VI: Karpur Thakur
92. People, Politics and Protests VII: The Radical Rural
93. People, Politics and Protests VIII: Left Front Government in West Bengal (1971-1982)
94. Population and Rent in *Capital*
95. *Capital*: Value & Translation
96. The Urban Turn
97. Peasants, Students, Insurgents and Popular Movements in Contemporary Assam
98. Migration and Governance I: Promises and Paradoxes of a Global Gaze
99. Migration and Governance II: Responsibility to Protect- Questions of Race, Religion, Resource and the Unspoken Fourth
100. Migration and Governance III: Population Flows, Refugees, and the Responsibility to Protect in the Global Protection System
101. Migration and Governance IV: Global Capitalism and Refugee and Migrant Labour
102. Migration and Governance V: Statelessness, International Conventions and the Need for New Initiatives ? Addressing the New Frontiers of Statelessness
103. Migration and Governance VI : Migrants and Movements across Asia : Mobility, Global Migration Governance and the European Response
104. Global Capitalism, Informal Economy and the Question of Labour
105. Reflections on the Mediterranean Refugee Crisis
106. Populism- I :Politics, Policies and Social justice
107. Populism- II: States and Political Parties
108. Populism- III: Leadership and Governmentality
109. Interrogating Citizenship: Perspectives from India’s East and North East
110. Auto-Ethnography as a Research Method: Evidence from Field Research on Ethiopian Irregular Migrants in South Africa
- 111 Borderlands, Migration and Labour
- 112 Two Writings on Climate, Disasters and Displacement

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

- 31 Local Dynamics, Universal Context : Border Trading through Moreh, Manipur
- 32 Two Studies on Asylum Seekers and Other Immigrants in Finland
- 33 Endangered Lives on The Border: Women in the Northeast
- 34 Globalisation and Labouring Lives
- 35 Right to Information in a Globalising World
- 36 Bengal-Bangladesh Border and Women
- 37 Between Ecology and Economy : Environmental Governance in India
- 38 Incomplete Citizenship, Statelessness and Human Trafficking: A Preliminary Analysis of The Current Situation in West Bengal, India
- 39 Place of Poor in Urban Space
- 40 Law and Democratic Governance: Two Studies from Europe
- 41 Finding a Point of Return: Internally Displaced Persons in Sri Lanka
- 42 Colonialism, Resource Crisis and Forced Migration
- 43 Situating Transit Labour
- 44 Two Essays on Security Apparatus
- 45 Governing Flood, Migration and Conflict in North Bihar
- 46 A Gigantic Panopticon: Counter-Insurgency and Modes of Disciplining and Punishment in Northeast India
- 47 Public Interest Litigation in India: Implications for Law and Development
- 48 Governing Caste and Managing Conflicts-Bihar, 1990-2011
- 49 Emerging Spaces and Labour Relations in Neo-Liberal India
- 50 Peace by Governance or Governing Peace? A Case Study of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)
- 51 Women, Conflict and Governance in Nagaland
- 52 Tripura: Ethnic Conflict, Militancy & Counterinsurgency
- 53 Government of Peace
- 54 Bengal Borders and Travelling Lives
- 55 Financialisation, Labour Market Flexibility, and Global Crisis
- 56 The Chronicle of a Forgotten Movement: 1959 Food Movement Revisited
- 57 The Religious Nature of Our Political Rites
58. Social Impact of the City Planning Machinery: Case Study of Road-Widening in Bangalore
59. In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition
60. Stateless in Law: Two Assessments
61. Failed by Design? : The Limitations of Statebuilding
62. Contesting Ideas on Peace (A Report & Some Reflections)
63. Body/Law/Technology: The Political Implications of Society as Apparatus
64. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-I: An Overview
65. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-II: War, Debt, and Reconstruction of Economy
66. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-III: The Arab Question in Post-Colonial France
67. Accumulation under Post-Colonial Capitalism-IV: Mobile Labour and the New Urban
68. West Bengal-Bangladesh Borders: Humanitarian Issues
69. Policing a Riot-torn City: Kolkata, 16-18 August 1946
70. Labour, Law and Forced Migration
71. Rohingyas in India: Birth of a Stateless Community
72. Cities, Rural Migrants & the Urban Poor-I: Migration & the Urban Question in Kolkata
73. Cities, Rural Migrants & the Urban Poor-II: Migration & the Urban Question in Mumbai

CRG Series on Policies and Practices

- 1 People on the Move: How Governments Manage Moving Populations
- 2 Resources for Autonomy - Financing the Local Bodies
- 3 Peace Accords as the Basis of Autonomy
- 4 Debates Over Women's Autonomy
- 5 Unequal Communication: Health and Disasters As Issues of Public Sphere
- 6 Globalisation, State Policies And Sustainability of Rights
- 7 Autonomies in the North and the North East: More Freedom or the Politics of Frontier Management?
- 8 Examining Autonomy : The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in Assam
- 9 Democracy, Autonomy and the Community Media
- 10 Women and Forced Migration
- 11 Flags and Rights
- 12 A Status Report on Displacement in Assam and Manipur
- 13 Weapons of the Weak: Field Studies on Claims to Social Justice in Bihar & Orissa
- 14 Towards a New Consideration: Justice for the Minorities
- 15 Conflict, War & Displacement
- 16 The Draft National Rehabilitation Policy: A Critique
- 17 Limits of the Humanitarian: Studies in Situations of Forced Migration
- 18 Prescribed, Tolerated, and Forbidden Forms of Claim Making
- 19 Three Studies on Law and The Shifting Spaces of Justice.
- 20 Primitive Accumulation and Some Aspects of Work and Life in India in The Early Part of The Twenty First Century.
- 21 Citizens, Non-Citizens, and The Stories of Camps
- 22 Tales of Two Cities
- 23 Ways of Power, Minorities, and Knowledge on Minorities: An Assessment of Research Policies and Practices.
- 24 Whither Right to Food? Rights Institutions and Hungry Labour in Tea Plantations of North Bengal
- 25 Hunger, Food Scarcity, & Popular Protests in West Bengal
- 26 Cyclone Aila & the Sundarbans: An Enquiry into the Disaster and Politics of Aid and Relief
- 27 View from India: Media & Minorities in Europe
- 28 Protecting the Rights of the Tsunami Victims: The Sri Lanka Experience
- 29 Nation Building and Minority Alienation in India
- 30 Environment and Migration Purulia, West Bengal

POLICIES AND PRACTICES is the research paper series brought out by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG). Writings under this series can be referred to and used for public educational purposes with due acknowledgment.

ISSN 2348-0297