

Ritwik Ghatak's 'Jwala'(Agony): Exploring the Elements of Expressionism

Soumik Mukherjee

PhD. Scholar, Department of Bengali/Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India

Email – soumikmukh1995@gmail.com,

Abstract: This paper explores how elements of Expressionism appear in Ritwik Ghatak's Bengali play *Jwala* (Agony). Expressionism was an artistic movement that developed in Europe during the early twentieth century, especially around the time of the First World War. It focused on showing strong inner emotions rather than presenting reality exactly as it is. Artists used exaggeration, distortion, and intense imagery to express fear, pain, and confusion caused by a rapidly changing and troubled world.

The paper explains how these features can be seen in *Jwala*. The play tells the stories of six characters, five of whom are dead. Each of them had taken their own life because of poverty, unemployment, illness, displacement, or social failure. Their spirits meet and talk about their past lives, trying to understand what led to their tragic ends. The stage setting, descriptions of the characters, and style of dialogue all show clear Expressionist qualities. The atmosphere is dark and unsettling, the characters appear in distorted and frightening forms, and their speech often feels emotional, broken, or exaggerated. These techniques help express the inner suffering of the characters more deeply.

However, the paper argues that Ghatak's main goal was not to create a purely Expressionist play. Instead, he used Expressionist methods to highlight serious social problems of post-independence India and to show the need for unity and collective struggle. For this reason, *Jwala* can be seen as a socially motivated play influenced by Expressionism rather than a complete Expressionist work.

Key Words: Expressionism, Ritwik Ghatak, *Jwala*, Bengali theatre, Social issues.

The era was contemporary to the First World War. In the realms of European literature, culture, and art, a succession of transformative shifts was taking place. New schools of thought were emerging. Between 1910 and 1925, an emotionally charged artistic sensibility emerged across Germany—and indeed the entirety of Europe—manifesting in painting, drama, poetry, and cinema. This movement was termed 'Expressionism.' The central theme of this Expressionist ethos lies in the exaggeration or heightening of individual emotion. In essence, it signifies the imaginative and amplified articulation of the emotions and reactions that an object evokes within the mind of the beholder; it is the act of giving voice to the internal resonance that our visual perceptions create within us. Through their art, artists give expression to their personal sentiments. However, the surrounding political and social upheavals of the time often found an amplified resonance within their work, channelled through their chosen mediums of expression. It is for this very reason—amidst the anarchy that prevailed during the First World War—that Expressionism is understood to have taken root in Europe. Thus, through their art, these practitioners did not merely depict objective reality; rather, they moved beyond it to portray the subjective reflection of those real-world events as they unfolded within the individual psyche. Their artwork captured distortion, harrowing imagery, and a pervasive sense of unrest.

In their work 'A Glossary of Literary Terms', M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham define "Expressionism" as follows: "The expressionist artist or writer undertakes to express a personal vision—usually a troubled or tensely emotional vision—of human life and human society. This is done by exaggerating and distorting what, according to the norms of artistic realism, are objective features of the world, and by embodying violent extremes of mood and feeling. Often the work implies that what is depicted or described represents the experience of an individual standing alone and afraid in an industrial, technological, and urban society which is disintegrating into chaos."¹ In other words, the vision that Expressionists typically articulate in their art often manifests as a turbulent and distorted portrayal of human life and society. This artistic form diverges from traditional art and highlights the darker facets of a materialistic, mechanistic

civilization. Artists adhering to this philosophy prioritized their inner emotions and sentiments; moving away from a literal depiction of what they observed with their physical eyes, they instead expressed in their art an exaggerated representation of how those external objects were subjectively perceived and visualized in their minds.

We observe the influence of this movement across various branches of the arts during that era. In the realm of painting, the most notable example is the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's work, 'The Scream'. In it, we see a shadowy figure—with sunken cheeks resembling a skull—clutching its ears while emitting a piercing scream. The painting evokes the impression of a human being confronted by some external, terrifying situation, attempting to articulate that horror through a scream. In this context, the thematic depth of the work reflects the futile human struggle to give voice to inner thoughts and emotions. Conversely, in the field of poetry, figures such as Georg Heym, Ernst Stadler, and August Stramm experimented with their literary works, centering them around this very ideology. In drama, the primary objective of Expressionism was to challenge the capitalist, mechanized, and materialistic nature of modern society. It is well known that the advent of mechanized civilization in Europe occurred significantly earlier than in the Eastern world. This mechanized civilization gradually began to render human existence itself mechanical. Reflections of this human condition are frequently depicted in the plays of the era. In this regard, a name that warrants mention is that of August Strindberg; we find such themes prominently displayed throughout his dramatic works. Overall, Expressionism gave birth to a new, protest-oriented ethos within the theatrical movements of that time. From set design and lighting to characterization and dialogue, the Expressionists challenged and subverted conventional norms across every facet of dramatic production.

Ritwik Ghatak wrote the play 'Jwala' ('Agony') in 1950 in the Bengali language. Before analysing the elements of 'Expressionism' within the play, a brief discussion regarding its subject matter is necessary. The play is not divided into acts; instead, it features six characters: the Wife (Shefali Banerjee), Khokon, Purno Babu, Bhola, Peon, and Lunatic (Unmad). Except for Lunatic, the other five characters are all deceased; each of them committed suicide. The reasons behind their self-destruction vary from character to character. Shefali Banerjee, unable to provide food for her children due to financial debt, committed suicide by setting herself on fire. She was the wife of the Kalighat station master and, owing to severe financial hardship, had left her five children starving. Khokon, on the other hand, was a refugee; unable to bear witness to the suffering of his mother and sister, he chose the path of death by throwing himself onto the train tracks near Howrah Station. Purno Babu, having suddenly lost his job, searched tirelessly for new employment but to no avail; ultimately, he committed suicide by leaping from the rooftop of the Burmah-Shell office building. He had subsisted solely on water while wandering the Dalhousie Square area in search of work. Bhola, a worker in a jute mill, contracted tuberculosis after inhaling jute fibres that lodged in his lungs; deprived of proper medical treatment, he chose suicide as his ultimate escape. Peon aspired to educate himself and establish a secure life; however, due to a twist of fate, he was unable to sit for his examinations. After being humiliated while pleading with his college Principal for financial assistance, he took his own life. In the play, the souls of these five deceased characters encounter one another. Through their conversations, they engage in a collective act of introspection, analysing the lives they once lived. It becomes evident that the fate of each character stemmed from a shared deprivation: having been denied the minimum opportunities necessary for survival, they had each chosen death. However, toward the end of the play—through a song sung by Lunatic—they come to a profound realization: each of them had attempted to resolve their problems in isolation. Had they united to confront their challenges collectively, they would not have met such tragic ends. The playwright thus seeks to demonstrate that since social problems are not external to society itself, they must be confronted and resolved through collective unity. In the play, the playwright portrays the severe deterioration of the socio-economic system in the post-independence era. Ultimately, he points out the path to liberation from this situation.

The play 'Jwala' (Agony) is not a drama centered on any specific theatrical theory. Rather than focusing on characterization, dramatic structure, or dialogue, the playwright has placed greater emphasis on the play's subject matter. Nevertheless, the play contains several elements that lend it a distinct identity—one of which is 'Expressionism.' In the preface to the play, Ritwik Ghatak writes (translated into English; the English version of the play has no such section): "In staging this play, it might prove useful to keep Strindberg in mind; its production technique should be entirely Expressionist."² The first section of this discussion provided an exposition on 'Expressionism,' making specific reference to the Swedish playwright Strindberg. In this section, we shall examine how the playwright has incorporated the element of 'Expressionism' into the play 'Jwala'.

At the very outset of the play, the playwright presents a drab, grey canvas as the stage setting: "A small piece of pale land dotted with undulation; at the end of the stretch is an old, barren Indian Gum-Arabic tree (called 'Babla' in West Bengal), completely burnt out by the thunder strike. It's lifeless, high branches seem to be cursing the skies. The smoky, misty land disappears behind the tree into sheer emptiness."³ Through such stage design, the playwright seeks to create an atmosphere of unease—one that is equally pertinent to the play's characters and its central thematic core. Here, the characters belong to a realm beyond reality; they are disembodied spirits. As we have observed, a defining characteristic of Expressionism is its tendency to articulate concepts that transcend the boundaries of realism. It is

precisely for this reason that the playwright establishes this specific atmosphere right from the play's inception. In describing the character of Shefali Banerjee—the bride—the playwright notes: "She appears to be a lovable housewife from a middle-class home. But badly burnt flesh from half of her face is hanging loose. Burn marks in black and white can be seen on her body. Her saree is half-burnt and her right hand is raised towards her face in an obvious sign of fear"⁴ Here, we witness the very phenomenon M.H. Abrams alluded to when describing Expressionism as 'exaggerating and distorting what, according to the norms of artistic realism', would appear otherwise. In these character descriptions, imagination has been blended with reality to an intensified degree; the playwright has vividly captured the sheer horror and grotesqueness inherent in a face or figure ravaged by fire. A parallel instance is found in the character of Khokon: "The errant locks of his curly, unruly hair are stuck to his head, smeared with blood. His face is criss-crossed by narrow rivulets of clotting blood."⁵ In the portrayal of both characters, the playwright has prioritized the element of the grotesque. This grotesqueness emerges directly from the playwright's own imaginative vision. In describing the character—a woman—the playwright has vividly imagined and portrayed the horrific state of her face and features had she been disfigured by fire, or the condition of her body had she been severed by a train.

Another distinctive feature of Expressionist drama is evident in its dialogue. In his 'Dictionary of World Literature', while defining "Expressionism," Joseph T. Shipley notes: "...the language is clipped, telegraphic, breathless, repetitious, lyrical, ecstatic, abounding in self-revelling monologues."⁶ In this play, regarding the dialogue, we observe a distinct quality of introspection or self-communion within the characters. Furthermore, numerous instances of dialogue appear disjointed or consist of incomplete sentences.

"Woman: Nutu said, 'Mother, I want to eat'. Upon hearing that, I just couldn't control my rage and gave him a mighty slap. Soon, Nutu began to thrash around in pain. Khuki cried out: 'Mother, O Mother, look at Nutu. He is not alright. I was at the end of my wits. I lost my temper completely. I slapped all of them and drove them out of the room – those famished children I had given birth to! I sat down with my back to the door and began to cry.'⁷ — In this dialogue, we observe the character of the Woman seemingly conversing incessantly with herself. While recounting a specific incident, she uses the dialogue to articulate the event with profound emotional depth. Generally, one does not encounter such dialogue in the mere factual recounting of events. Additionally, the dialogue is punctuated by moments of incompleteness. This sense of disjointedness is a hallmark of Expressionist drama.

In another section of the play—where the characters share their experiences of death with one another—a distinct form of "dramatic distortion" is evident. "Dramatic distortion," in this context, refers to the use of exaggeration in literature. For instance, in Khokon's description: "It was then that the huge trains was rolling into the platform, whistling its arrival. I didn't think twice. I jumped in front of the train. There was a screeching noise, and it was all over in a moment. And the, here I am."⁸ Similarly, the character Purnababu recounts: "Old man: There! It's gone! The windows gone! Second floor, first floor, ground floor! A road is coming up fast. A road! No, no, no, no, no, no."⁹ These descriptions appear to be imbued with a distinct quality of exaggeration. This very exaggeration constitutes the 'dramatic distortion' that serves as the defining characteristic of Expressionism. This feature is not confined to literature alone but permeates the entirety of the arts; in painting, for instance, artists would manifest this exaggeration through their use of color. At times, while reading the dialogue in the play 'Jwala', one feels as though the reality being presented is not merely what we perceive with our eyes, but rather an interpretation of what we conjure in our imagination. It is precisely here that the reference to Expressionism—which Ritwik Ghatak had highlighted in the introductory section of the play—finds its true significance.

Explaining his rationale for writing 'Jwala' (Agony), Ritwik Ghatak stated that at that time in Kolkata, he witnessed thirty-one suicides. He submitted a piece titled 'Suicide Wave in Calcutta.' The play 'Jwala' features six characters selected from those incidents—each one a true character. From this, we can deduce that the playwright penned 'Jwala' with the specific intent of transforming a prevailing social reality into dramatic form, thereby bringing it to the attention of the public. Through the call for resistance via united struggle issued at the play's conclusion, we encounter in Ritwik Ghatak—the playwright—a figure defined more by his political consciousness than by anything else. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that this work was not written merely to validate or establish a specific theatrical theory. Although Expressionism is alluded to at the outset, it is ultimately the tangible social issues that take precedence within the play. Consequently, viewed in its entirety, 'Jwala' cannot strictly be classified as a play belonging to the Expressionist school of thought. Nevertheless, it remains undeniable that in its depiction of atmosphere, characterization, and dialogue, the play bears the distinct imprint of inspiration drawn from Expressionism.

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