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Decolonising Dependency: Economic Subjugation and Neo-Colonial Critique in Badal Sircar's Third Theatre

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Abstract: The growing global influence of the United States and the promotion of the dollar as a hegemonic force after the Second World War have drawn sharp criticism from neo-Marxist thinkers. Although many colonies gained political independence by the mid-twentieth century, the persistence of acute poverty and the lack of financial infrastructure raised critical questions about the reality of this autonomy. Former colonies often remained economically and commercially reliant on their ex-colonial powers through capital systems and neo-colonial intermediaries. Critics have thus questioned the performative nature of sovereignty, interpreting postcolonialism as a reconfigured form of colonialismnamely, neo-colonialism. Issues such as economic dependency, debt traps, neo-capitalism, and internal colonization continue to obstruct genuine emancipation and liberation. This paper explores how Badal Sircar's Third Theatre confronts these lingering colonial structures in postcolonial India by employing a decolonial theatrical approach. Through an analysis of *Indian History Made Easy* and *Bhoma,* the study examines how Sircar's dramaturgy critiques neo-colonial capitalism, internal colonization, and bourgeois complicity, while advocating for collective resistance grounded in subaltern memory and material suffering.

Keywords: **Neo-colonialism, Internal-colonialism, Decolonial Options, Dollarisation, Debt-trap, Dependency.**

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1. Introduction

Badal Sircar's Third Theatre embodies a radical transformation of theatrical practice. It is conceived as a mode of political and cultural defiance. It is positioned at the crossroads of neo-colonial critique and avant-garde experimentation. This paper situates the Third Theatre within the broader discursive framework of neo-colonial and decolonial thought. Although India achieved formal independence in 1947, Sircar's dramaturgy contends that colonial domination endures, reconfigured through global capitalist networks, the complicity of indigenous elites, and the lingering cultural and epistemic residue of empire. His plays expose how colonial power operates not only through material exploitation but also through the absorption of colonial ideologies by the national bourgeois class. The analysis focuses on *Indian History Made Easy* and*Bhoma* as theatrical interventions challenging the continuity of neo-colonial structures, visible in forms such as economic dependence and inter-colonialism. Drawing on Kwame Nkrumah's analysis of neo-colonialism, Frantz Fanon's critique of native complicity, Aníbal Quijano's notion of the coloniality of power, Ashis Nandy's theory of inter-colonialismand Mignolo's decolonial options, this paper contends that Sircar's Third Theatre interrogates not only external imperial legacies but also internal reproductions of colonial hierarchies by postcolonial elites. While addressing the superficial attainment of political independence, Sircar's theatre delves deeper into the structural, ideological, and epistemological legacies of colonial domination. Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate Sircar's efforts to reveal and resist the ongoing colonization of the Indian subject in the postcolonial era.

2. Main Work

Neo-colonialism describes the ongoing influence of former imperial powers over newly independent states through indirect means such as economic manipulation, political interference, and cultural domination. In *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), Kwame Nkrumah famously defines neo-colonialism as a condition in which

The State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside (Nkrumah, 1966, p. 1).

Unlike classical colonialism, neo-colonialism is often more elusive. It is not necessarily perpetuated by the former colonizing power alone, and may not be directly tied to any single nation-state.

Nkrumah argued that this form of imperialism was both more adaptable and more insidious, often spearheaded by transnational corporations, financial networks, or new global actors such as the United States. As Nkrumah notes:

Where neo-colonialism exists the power exercising control is often the State which formerly ruled the territory in question, but this is not necessarily so. For example, in the case of South Vietnam the former imperial power was France, but neo-colonial control of the State has now gone to the United States. It is possible that neo-colonial control may be exercised by a consortium of financial interests which are not specifically identifiable with any particular state (Nkrumah, 1966, pp. 1–2).

This form of domination is not only more exploitative but also more morally elusive, providing imperial powers with economic benefits while freeing them of responsibility. The native elites who serve as local intermediaries for these external interests often bear the social and political fallout. As Nkrumah forcefully states:

Neo-colonialism is also the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress. In the days of old-fashioned colonialism, the imperial Power had at least to explain and justify at home the action it was taking abroad. In the colony those who served the ruling imperial power could at least look to its protection against any violent by their opponents. With neo-colonialism neither is the case (Nkrumah, 1966, pp. 9).

The emergence of neo-colonialism can be traced to the aftermath of World War II. In the post-war era, capitalist nations were under domestic pressure to prevent a return to the pre-war conditions of economic depression. Maintaining domestic welfare systems required continuous flows of wealth, previously generated through colonial exploitation. However, this old model was no longer sustainable. As Nkrumah points out, "pre-war capitalist states were so organised internally that the bulk of the profit made from the colonial possessions found its way into the pockets of the capitalist class and not into those of the workers" (10). Post-war realities necessitated a shift from direct to indirect forms of control, particularly as anti-colonial resistance intensified in Asia and Africa. Britain and other powers adapted, giving rise to neo-colonialism as a subtler but equally exploitative alternative.Nkrumah explains how this new form of domination worked by fragmenting formerly unified colonies into smaller, economically dependent states, ensuring they remained tethered to their former rulers:

Neo-colonialism is based upon the principle of breaking up former large united colonial territories into a number of small non-viable States which are incapable of independent development and must rely upon the former imperial power for defence and even internal security. Their economic and financial systems are linked, as in colonial days, with those of the former colonial ruler(Nkrumah, 1966, p. 11).

In his critique, Nkrumah further argues that leaders of neo-colonial states often derive their legitimacy not from popular support but from their alignment with external interests:

In the first place, the rulers of neo-colonial States derive their authority to govern, not from the will of the people, but from the support which they obtain from their neo-colonialist masters. They have therefore little interest in developing education, strengthening the bargaining power of their workers employed by expatriate firm, or indeed of taking any step which would challenge the colonial pattern of commerce and industry, which it is the object of neo-colonialism to preserve (Nkrumah, 1966, p.12).

Neo-colonialism often cloaks itself in the language of benevolence-aid, development loans, or foreign investment, but these gestures conceal the ulterior motive of sustaining external control. These mechanisms serve to perpetuate what Aníbal Quijano would later call the 'coloniality of power.' Nkrumah emphatically calls upon newly independent nations to resist these exploitative structures. Nkrumah also draws attention to the more subtle manifestations of neo-colonialism, warning that it extends beyond the economic sphere:

For the methods of neo-colonialists are subtle and varied. They operate not only in the economic field, but also in the political, religious, ideological and cultural spheres (Nkrumah, 1966, p.18).

In the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre expands on Fanon's critique and strongly rejects the idea that neo-colonialism represents any meaningful departure from colonialism. He argues that such distinctions are deceptive because the fundamental systems of exploitation and control remain firmly in place. As Sartre sharply observes:

Neo-colonialism, that idle dream of mother countries, is a lot of hot air; the 'Third Forces' don't exist, or if they do they are only the tin-pot bourgeoisies that colonialism has already placed in the saddle" (*The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon,* 1963, p. 12).

For Sartre, the notion of neo-colonialism is merely a convenient illusion for the former imperial powers, sustained by the local bourgeois classes who were already complicit with colonial interests.

Fanon critically examines the role of the native elite in sustaining neo-colonial power structures. In the chapter "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness", he highlights how these local elites imitate the behaviours and values of their colonial predecessors:

The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement: doctors, barristers, traders, commercial travellers, general agents, and transport agents (*The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon,* 1963, p. 150).

According to Fanon, this emergent bourgeoisie does not seek genuine national development but instead perpetuates colonial domination by continuing the economic structures left behind by the colonizers. Rather than fostering national progress, they serve the interests of foreign capital. Their complicity is not limited to the economic sphere; it extends into the political and ideological realms. These elites reproduce colonial ideologies to safeguard their own privileged positions:

The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism (*The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,* in Fanon, 1963, p. 152).

This assessment portrays the native elite not as genuine leaders of liberation but as collaborators facilitating the continuation of global neo-colonial domination. Without meaningful economic and social transformation, Fanon argues that political independence is reduced to what he calls a "phony independence," preserving the colonial system under a new guise. He also emphasizes that colonialism deliberately fostered class divisions and racial hierarchies to maintain its control. For Fanon, dismantling neo-colonial structures requires a revolutionary transformation led by the rural peasantry—the group most severely impacted by colonial oppression. He asserts that:

The peasantry, when it rises, quickly stands out as the revolutionary class. For it knows naked oppression, and suffers far more from it than the workers in the towns, and in order not to die of hunger, it demands no less than a complete demolishing of all existing structures. In order to triumph, the national revolution must be socialist; if its career is cut short, if the native bourgeoisie takes over power, the new state, in spite of its formal sovereignty, remains in the hands of the imperialists (*The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon,* 1963, p. 11).

For Fanon, true decolonization demands a complete break from both the colonial legacy and the

interests of the native bourgeoisie aligned with global capitalism. Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy* expands the critique of neo-colonialism beyond politics and economics into the psychological and cultural spheres. He conceptualizes neo-colonialism as a "second colonization"—a system that "colonizes minds in addition to bodies and… alters their cultural priorities once for all" (Nandy, 1983, p. 11). Even those resisting politicalcolonialism often unconsciously internalize this mental colonization: "Even those who battle the first colonialism often guiltily embrace the second" (Nandy, 1983, p. 11).Nandy exposes the complicity between colonial powers and native elites, both using the rhetoric of 'progress' to justify their dominance: "internal colonialism… uses the fact of external threat to legitimize and perpetuate itself" (Nandy, 1983, p. 12). Unlike traditional oppression, modern domination is marked by "dehumanized bureaucracies imposing control over objectified victims" (Nandy, 1983, p. 16).As a response, Nandy calls for "authentic innocence"-a return to indigenous voices and ways of life, as key to resisting neo-colonial modernity (Nandy, 1983, p. 13). He advocates alternative "universalities" rooted in lived traditions, urging ethical recovery through fidelity to one's inner cultural self.Aníbal Quijano's collected essays in *Aníbal Quijano: Foundational Essays on the Coloniality of Power* deepen the critique of neo-colonialism through his influential concepts of "coloniality of power", "coloniality of knowledge", and the idea of "decoloniality". The volume frames neo-colonialism as a form of global domination that persists beyond the formal end of colonial rule. Quijano argues that this new form of control operates through racialized divisions of labour, Eurocentricknowledge systems, economic dependence, and institutionalized violence—all of which continue the legacy of colonial domination. Although colonialism's official era may have ended, its foundational structures remain embedded in global systems, now disguised by the rhetoric of development, democracy, and globalization.Neo-colonialism functions through what Walter Mignolo describes as the "colonial matrix of power"—a structure encompassing the control of economy (through global capitalism and neoliberalism), authority (via state institutions and legal systems), as well as gender, sexuality, and knowledge. This matrix is sustained by historically embedded structures like education, law, media, and global finance, which normalize global inequalities under the guise of neutrality or benevolence. In this framework, neo-colonialism sustains itself not just through economic dominance, but also through cultural influence and control over knowledge systems.

The play *Indian History Made Easy*could be read as a theatrical metaphor for the historical

shift from classical colonialism, embodied by British imperialism, to the mutated form of neo-colonialism, driven by American economic dominance. Badal Sircar masterfully critiques how Britain, after formal decolonization, conceals its imperial identity, while global capitalism, now spearheaded by the American dollar, takes its place. The declaration, "Let name 'Britania' be hidden from public view for the time being" (*Indian History Made Easy*2010, p. 48), symbolizes how formal British colonial rule ends, but imperialist exploitation continues under new disguises. Neo-colonial control no longer operates with military occupation or colonial governors, but through the insidious mechanisms of development aid, foreign loans, and global markets—all orchestrated by the hegemony of "Dollar-ia," as Sircar satirically names it. The line, "Goddess! Mother of the world, its Provider and saviour, Dollar-ia!" (*Indian History Made Easy*2010, p. 48),dramatises the deification of the dollar as the new imperial godhead. This suggests that global capital has replaced the colonial army as the primary instrument of control. Sircar's use of ritualistic performance-complete with bells and ceremonial postures, mocks the complicity of native elites in this new imperial order. It is turning economic dependency into a ritual of subservience.This critique resonates directly with Kwame Nkrumah's analysis of neo-colonialism, particularly his argument that while postcolonial nations may have their own flags and parliaments, the real power remains in the hands of foreign capital (Nkrumah, 1966, p.239). In effect, Sircar exposes neo-colonialism as the disguised continuation of colonial exploitation—replacing the Union Jack with the Dollarand incisively mocks the farcical compromise of postcolonial independence under the shadow of global financial domination.

The MASTER and BRITANNIA start dancing to a waltz tune. It is Ballroom dancing. On BRITANNIA's back, a cloth with a 'Dollar' sign can be seen. The bell rings once again. Freeze (*Indian History Made Easy*2010, p. 50).

If the play *Indian History Made Easy* swiftly and potently lays bare the shift, then the play *Bhoma* provides a powerful commentary on the mechanism and operation of neo-colonialism. One of the methods of neo-colonial structure is to burden the newly independent state with predatory loans to annul their economic self-sufficiency and break their financial backbone. The loan provided in the name of aid and development ensnares the former colonies in debt-trap. The purpose of such loan is neither to promote indigenous industry nor economic self-sufficiency but to encumber them with colossal fiscal deficit engineered by the neo-colonial institutions like IMF and World Bank. The

chorus satirizes how foreign debt becomes both an economic burden and a psychological obsession

THREE FOUR, FIVE, SIX- Dollars.

ONE. How much will be needed for that?

Now we pay 60 per cent of the new loan in dollars.

THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX. Dollars (*Bhoma*2009, p. 85).

Postcolonial nations borrow in foreign currency while earning in local currency, creating an endless loop of dependency

ONE. And who will repay my dollars?

Two: You will do it, lord. You'll give us more loans and take more Payments. As you give us more, you'll take back more and more. sixty per cent!(*Bhoma*2009, p. 85)

The absurd escalation of repayments— "Sixty per cent! … Seventy! … Eighty! … Ninety! … Hundred!" (*Bhoma*2009, pp.85-86)symbolizes how neo-colonial debt traps hollow out national economies. As Two grimly concludes, "That's what it amounts to" (*Bhoma*2009, p.86), exposing sovereignty as a hollow performance. Sircar also exposes elite betrayal, as seen in the cynicism of offshore wealth hoarding: "Bless me, it's the country that will become bankrupt, why should I? My money is in a bank in Switzerland" (*Bhoma*2009, p.86).

ONE. You'll borrow 100, and repay 100?

Two. That's what it amounts to.

ONE. That means you'll become bankrupt then?

two. Bless me, it's the country that will become bankrupt, why should

I? My money is in a bank in Switzerland.

ONE. Shalt thou not be called a traitor by the nation?

two. Who dares call me that? I'm a patriot and I'll remain one (*Bhoma*2009, p.86).

Badal Sircar's *Bhoma* stands out as a powerful theatrical critique of neo-colonial capitalist marginalization. The play exposes how indigenous labour and production are subordinated to elite-controlled, foreign-branded corporations, while financial institutions systematically reinforce inequality by favouring global capital over grassroots enterprises. The "Sambird" diesel pump set, marketed as a product of the foreign-sounding "Samson and Blackbird Company," is in reality fully assembled and documented by a local manufacturer, Mahamaya Engineering Co.:

FOUR: We assemble the whole set. We even stick their nameplate for them. We even prepare the

specification literature for them, and supply it printed and ready (*Bhoma*2009, p. 70).

This moment reveals how local manufacturing is hidden beneath the branding of global legitimacy. Even technical knowledge—manuals, branding—is generated locally, yet the credit and recognition go to elite or foreign entities. This scenario reflects Aníbal Quijano's "coloniality of power", where postcolonial societies remain dominated by external or elite-controlled ideologies and economies.The sharp contrast in access to capital is dramatized when Four is denied a modest loan due to "lack of security," despite having a confirmed order. Meanwhile, elite corporations easily secure large loans:

FIVE (on phone): One lakh thirty thousand? … Oh, that's only a formality, sir, there's no question of securities… (*Bhoma*2009, p.70).

This exposes the hypocrisy of financial institutions—publicly claiming neutrality while serving elite interests. As Five sarcastically remarks, "Can any bank give loans without securities*?"* (*Bhoma*2009, p.72), before granting just such a loan to an elite client, highlighting how class and privilege override supposed economic "risk."Sircar's dramatization reflects Dependency Theory, which argues that postcolonial economies remain peripheral, structured to benefit global powers and their domestic collaborators. The denial of institutional credit pushes small enterprises toward ruin:

FOUR: If we can't meet this order the factory will have to be closed (*Bhoma*2009, p.72).

This collapse is not a case of personal failure but a result of systemic design. The postcolonial economy channels resources toward entrenched elites, rendering grassroots industry precarious. The sale of Mahamaya Engineering reflects this grim reality:

FOUR (in despair): For immediate sale—a running factory in Bellilious Road, Howrah… going cheap… (*Bhoma*2009, p.74).

Sircar critiques not only capitalist exploitation but also the complicity of domestic elites in perpetuating neo-colonial dependency. In the play the character Gadai Mitter epitomizes the neo-colonial intermediary class-the local elite who collaborate with global systems of exploitation while enriching themselves by preying on their own communities. His ownership of irrigation resources, particularly the Sambird pump acquired through institutional credit, situates him as a bridge between multinational profit extraction and the exploitation of poor peasants. While international corporations like Samson and Blackbird reap profits globally, intermediaries like

Gadai benefit by charging excessive fees for access to basic resources. As Two explains, cultivating crops during the dry season requires paying "at least 1,200 rupees for water alone" (*Bhoma*2009, p. 75), making agricultural survival for the poor nearly impossible. Figures like Gadai Mitter exploit this desperation to trap peasants in cycles of debt:

ONE: Whose is the pump set then?

TWO: Gadai Mitter's. He doesn't have much land this side, so he sells water (*Bhoma*2009, p.75).

Beyond controlling access to water, Gadai profits through a predatory form of sharecropping, offering a meagre "three quintals per acre" for harvests expected to yield much more-aruthless extraction of value from already impoverished farmers:

ONE: What? A rich man like Gadai Mitter—a Sharecropper?

TWO: Well, sir, it's a different kind of sharecropping—Those people have no money, how can they cultivate in the dry season? The land would have lain fallow if left to them. So Gadai Mitter cultivates it on a share basis, gives them three quintals per acre (*Bhoma*2009, p.76).

Gadai's position echoes Kwame Nkrumah's analysis of local elites as collaborators in neo-colonial exploitation-working alongside global capital to maintain structural inequality. His privileged access to formal credit contrasts starkly with the exclusion faced by smaller producers, who are pushed into exploitative private loans at exorbitant rates:

ONE: "How did Gadai Mitter get his own pump?"

TWO: "Ah, for him it's easy enough! He has more than 25 acres of land. Had a Ruston pump set already—five horse power, and last year he took a loan from the bank and brought this Sambird (*Bhoma*2009, p.75).

Gadai thus operates not as a farmer in the traditional sense but as a rent-seeking intermediary, profiting simultaneously from internal dispossession and external economic domination. His exploitation perfectly aligns with Frantz Fanon's critique of the native bourgeoisie in neo-colonial states, where they act as nothing more than conduits for external control. In this framework, *Bhoma* reveals that neo-colonialism is not a distant or abstract force but is reproduced locally through entrenched class hierarchies. Sircar shows that poverty in postcolonial India is not merely a residue of the colonial past but a deliberately maintained system. Through *Third Theatre,* Sircar not only unmasks these betrayals but calls upon his audience to recognize and resist the complicity of their own class positions in upholding these structures. His theatre thus becomes an active form of

decolonization—both intellectually and politically—challenging the dominance of local elites aligned with global capital.

In *Bhoma*, Badal Sircar constructs the titular figure not merely as a representative of rural suffering, but as a potent symbol of resistance against the exploitative structures of neo-colonialism. Bhoma is not an individualised character with psychological depth; rather, he emerges as an embodiment of collective dispossession-the nameless, voiceless millions pushed to the margins by a development discourse that continues the logic of colonial extraction under new forms.The play repeatedly emphasizes Bhoma's invisibility within the national imagination. As the Chorus remarks, "I haven't seen Bhoma. But Bhoma is there!" (*Bhoma*2009, p. 33). This denial of Bhoma's visibility dramatizes Aníbal Quijano's notion of the "coloniality of being", where the existence of subaltern populations is systematically erased in dominant epistemologies (Quijano, 2024, p. 176). Bhoma's life-his hunger, his landlessness, his forced migration, becomes the invisible foundation of urban comfort, yet remains excluded from developmental narratives.Sircar links Bhoma's erasure to the internal colonialism of post-independence India, where indigenous communities are dispossessed in the name of progress. The chilling metaphor— "Bhoma's blood, red blood, blossoms into white jasmines of rice on our plates" (*Bhoma*2009, p. 39)makes visible the everyday violence underpinning bourgeois consumption. This aligns with Frantz Fanon's critique of the postcolonial bourgeoisie, who "have no interest in collective salvation; they only seek to secure their own comfort" (*The Wretched of the Earth,* 1963, p. 151).However, Bhoma's final gesture transforms him from victim to resister. As the Chorus proclaims: "Bhoma has risen… He has taken his rusty axe, he's grinding it, sharpening it…" (*Bhoma*2009, p. 45). The axe, once a symbol of Bhoma's survival in the forest economy, becomes a theatrical metaphor for decolonial praxis-a call to cut through not only literal jungles but also the ideological overgrowth of neo-colonial capitalism and bourgeois denial. Sircar thus aligns with Walter Mignolo's call for "epistemic disobedience" by dramatizing Bhoma's refusal to remain erased (Mignolo, 2011, p. 8).Bhoma's rising with the axe is not simply personal—it is collective. The repeated "heave ho!" of the Chorus evokes the rhythms of labour,resistance, and communal struggle. In this, Bhoma ceases to be an individual and becomes a symbolic agent of unfinished decolonization, staging the demand not only for economic justice but also for historical recognition.

3. Conclusion

Badal Sircar's Third Theatre emerges as a radical intervention in postcolonial cultural discourse, one that refuses to romanticize national independence while exposing the persistence of colonial structures under new guises. Through plays like *Indian History Made Easy* and *Bhoma*Sircar dramatizes how economic dependency, internal colonization, and bourgeois complicity form the ideological scaffolding of neo-colonialism in India.Thedollarization, debt traps, and the coloniality of financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, along with the hegemony of multinational corporations like Samson and the Black Bird Company, and the economic exploitation perpetuated by capitalist bourgeois figures like Gadai Mitter, collectively reinforce neo-colonialism and second-colonisation. The transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism marks a historical shift from British-led imperialism to U.S.-led capitalism, enforced by middle-class intermediaries.By reclaiming symbol like Bhoma's axeSircar transforms his theatre into a decolonial praxis-a call not just for remembering the exploited, but for acting with them.Sircar's dramaturgy rejects aesthetic detachment in favour of an embodied, participatory politics that demands from its audience more than spectatorship; it demands complicity be replaced with resistance. In doing so, Third Theatre not only challenges colonial and neo-colonial epistemologies, but offers what Walter Mignolo terms "decolonial options"-pathways of unlearning, dissent, and historical reclamation. By forging a connection between subaltern suffering and revolutionary potential, Sircar's work insists that true liberation requires dismantling of the economic foundations of dependency as well as the cultural and epistemic frameworks that justify it. Sircar thus questions the performative nature of political liberation and decolonisation. In this way, Sircar's Third Theatre stands as one of the most sustained theatrical critiques of neo-colonialism in modern Indian performance.

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