

Discourse of Power and Resistance in

Poile Sengupta's *Samara's Song*:

A Foucauldian Reading

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ABSTRACT

Poile Sengupta's play *Samara's Song* delves into the complex relationship between power, truth, memory, and resistance in a nation gripped by authoritarian politics. It is not simply a political drama about authoritarian rule; it is a searching theatrical inquiry into the ways by which power enters language, history, memory, bodies, and everyday behaviour. The play imagines a nation where democracy survives as vocabulary while its ethical substance is steadily hollowed out. Through the Thandwai's invisible command, Uri's administrative violence, Hamun's manipulation of documents, Gandava's remaking into a political instrument, and Samara's wordless song, Sengupta stages power as something more diffuse than the will of a ruler. It travels through announcements, rituals of mourning, police intelligence, classed speech, family secrecy, gendered obedience, and the official production of truth. Read through Michel Foucault's ideas of discourse, power/knowledge, discipline, normalization, and resistance, the play reveals how subjects are made governable not only by fear but also by narrative, visibility, and self-regulation. Yet the drama does not end by granting power the last word. Resistance appears in Arrah's memory, Gandava's troubled conscience, the damaged testimony of the three historians, and, most hauntingly, Samara's song. The play's achievement lies in showing that resistance

does not come from a pure space outside power; it rises from the same wounded field in which power operates.

Keywords: Poile Sengupta; *Samara's Song*; Michel Foucault; discourse; democracy; power/knowledge; Indian English drama; resistance.

To begin with Poile Sengupta's own note to *Samara's Song* is to enter the play through the door she deliberately leaves open. She calls the play "explicitly political" (Sengupta 433), but the politics she dramatizes is not restricted to elections, conspiracies, assassinations, or state offices. Her concern is more unsettling: how democracy becomes a language of legitimacy even when democratic life has disappeared. She asks whether equality remains "a slogan" and whether democracy may pass into despotism (433). This question is not merely thematic; it shapes the dramatic form itself. The street, the chamber, and the palace do not simply represent three social locations. They form a theatre of governance in which the populace, bureaucracy, and ruling family speak different languages, inhabit different rhythms, and yet remain caught within one apparatus of control.

The central argument of this essay is that *Samara's Song* presents power as a dispersed discursive force rather than as a possession held by one tyrant. The Thandwai is powerful, but the play is careful not to reduce domination to her personal cruelty. Power moves through press statements, staged grief, bureaucratic files, caste-class prejudice, gendered blackmail, police surveillance, and the rewriting of biography. Sengupta's drama is therefore deeply Foucauldian, not because it mechanically illustrates Foucault, but because it imagines political control as a network that produces subjects, regulates speech, and manufactures truth. At the same time, the play keeps alive Foucault's equally important insight that resistance is not external to power. It appears within damaged speech, within silence,

within memory, within the body that refuses to be fully absorbed into official meaning.

Foucault's usefulness for reading this play lies in his refusal to see power only as prohibition. In *Discipline and Punish*, power becomes modern by becoming minute, observational, classificatory, and normalizing. In *The History of Sexuality*, it becomes productive: it creates categories, identities, truths, and desires. *Samara's Song* dramatizes precisely such a field. The nation of Eos is not governed merely by soldiers or decrees. It is governed by the management of attention. People are made to watch screens, hear official voices, repeat rumours, mourn on cue, and distrust their own knowledge. Sengupta's prefatory emphasis on the "manipulation of language" (433) thus becomes a key to the whole play. Language is not decoration here. It is the first machinery of rule.

The opening movement of the play already establishes this politics of speech. Arrah and Mati wait for water, and their rough, quarrelsome, affectionate language immediately locates them among the urban poor. Their speech is broken, comic, abusive, tender, and alive. It carries hunger, fatigue, humour, and survival. Against this living language enters the Thandwai's amplified address, mediated through a portable screen. The contrast is devastating. Arrah's world is made of scarcity: water comes after three days. The Thandwai's voice is made of nation-building abstractions, public mourning, and rehearsed tenderness. The people must grieve because the screen instructs them to grieve. Even water seems politically timed, prompting one woman to remark that it has arrived so that people may wash their faces before crying. Sengupta thereby places basic life and political spectacle in the same frame. Governance is not simply the provision of water; it is the ability to convert deprivation into emotion and emotion into obedience.

This is why the Thandwai's absence is theatrically more powerful than her presence would have been. For much of the play she remains behind curtains, behind voice-overs, behind commands. She is not

seen, but she is heard. Her invisibility does not weaken her; it enlarges her. Like the unseen centre of disciplinary power, she organizes conduct by producing the sense that she may be everywhere. The crowd knows this instinctively. A woman says that the Thandwai has the “whole country” in her fist (444). The phrase is crude but politically exact. The state is felt as grip: intimate, bodily, suffocating. Yet that grip is mediated through rituals of mourning and claims of democratic propriety. When Princess Sabah mockingly questions the reality of elections, the Thandwai replies that theirs is a democratically elected government. Sengupta’s irony is sharp: democracy is invoked most insistently when it has become least credible.

Uri’s function in this structure is more immediate. If the Thandwai is the invisible voice of sovereignty, Uri is the practical eye of discipline. He does not merely threaten Gandava; he instructs him in how to stand, speak, remember, and forget. His warning about the “special police” (448) is not an isolated threat. It introduces Gandava into a world where being watched is already a form of punishment. “Do you want that?” he asks after describing hanging, and Gandava’s body answers before his words do. He kneels. Later Uri strikes his head down and orders him not to forget himself. This small gesture is one of the play’s most Foucauldian moments. It is not only humiliation; it is training. The body is corrected into class position. Gandava must learn where to look, how to pronounce, when to obey, and what kind of self he is permitted to possess.

The remaking of Gandava is the play’s most sustained exploration of power/knowledge. At first he appears as an opportunistic marginal man, hungry for advancement, eager to escape poverty, yet not entirely without tenderness or fear. The officials see his vulnerability at once. He has no secure genealogy, no social protection, no linguistic prestige, and no institutional record strong enough to resist alteration. This makes him useful. Hamun and Uri do not simply conceal his past; they manufacture a new one. A missing childhood, a flood in the north, a lost family, a mark on the body, a recast birth chart—

these fragments are assembled into political truth. The absurdity is grotesque, but its logic is chilling. Uri says that Gandava's "recorded life history" has begun with them (471). The Blind Man's response, linking this claim to civilization and historiography, gives the moment a broader resonance. The state is not only lying; it is producing the archive through which the lie will become reality.

Here Sengupta's drama moves beyond a simple moral opposition between truth and falsehood. Gandava's new identity works because institutions authorize it. A name, a body, a document, a ceremony, a rumour, a press report—together they form a discursive shell that others begin to recognize. This is why Foucault's idea of power/knowledge matters. Knowledge in the play is not neutral information waiting to be discovered. It is fabricated, certified, repeated, and made operational. Gandava becomes Prince Ruak not because he has changed in essence, but because the machinery around him has learned to say so. Identity here is less a private interior truth than a public arrangement of signs.

Language becomes central to this arrangement. Hamun's instruction that Gandava must "stop speaking Kurubiri" (467) is one of the play's quiet acts of violence. On the surface, it is a practical demand: a fabricated prince cannot sound like a subaltern outsider. But Arrah understands what the officials do not, or do not care to understand. A language is not an ornament one removes before entering the palace. It carries memory, kinship, body rhythm, shame, desire, and belonging. To take away Kurubiri is to loosen Gandava from the world that once made him intelligible to himself. When he later returns in rich clothes and tells Samara and Arrah that he has lost his eyes, ears, and tongue, the palace has already done its work. It has dressed him, renamed him, desired him, used him, and emptied him.

This is where the play's treatment of class oppression becomes inseparable from its treatment of discourse. The poor in *Samara's Song* are not silent because they have nothing to say. They are silenced

because their speech does not count within the official order. Arrah speaks fiercely, Mati screams, the crowd mutters, Gandava pleads, Samara sings. Yet the state hears only what it can translate into use: rumour, spectacle, threat, vote, labour, sexual availability, or public emotion. Sengupta's prefatory comment that the ultimate tragedy belongs to those who "cannot articulate" (433) must therefore be read in both literal and political senses. Samara's muteness matters, but so does the larger condition in which the marginalized speak without being recognized as bearers of truth.

Samara is the still centre of this drama of articulation. She does not enter the political plot in any conventional sense, yet the play is named after her song. This title is important. The song is not an escape from politics; it is the deepest counterpoint to political speech. The stage direction describes it as wordless, moving from famine and thirst into lullaby, grief into care. It cannot be absorbed into the Thandwai's announcements or the historians' ledgers. It is not evidence, not propaganda, not policy, not testimony in the official sense. Yet it carries what the play values most: a memory of suffering that has not been converted into strategy. When Samara sings, the drama asks us to listen to what cannot be handled by the language of governance.

The three historians complicate this question of listening. Sengupta describes them as a modified Greek chorus and Indian sutradhar, impaired in their recording of events (434). This device is not merely comic or decorative. It is a profound theatrical criticism of historiography. One is blind, one deaf, one mute; each carries a damaged relation to truth. Their ledgers suggest the authority of record, but their quarrels, gaps, and absurdities expose the fragility of all recording. History in the play is never a calm repository of fact. It is partial, bodily, argumentative, and compromised. The historians watch what the state hides, but even they cannot fully master what they witness. Their presence keeps reminding us that truth is never outside mediation.

In this respect, *Samara's Song* belongs to the larger tradition of modern Indian drama that uses fractured form to interrogate public life. Critics such as Aparna Dharwadker and Erin Mee have shown how post-Independence Indian theatre repeatedly turns to experiment, mythic displacement, and non-naturalistic devices to examine the pressures of modernity and politics. Sengupta's difference lies in the way she fuses political allegory with an almost tactile attention to voice and body. Her stage is not abstractly political. It is full of water pots, curtains, ledgers, headphones, walking sticks, screens, scarves, wounds, and songs. These objects matter because they show power at work in lived forms.

The palace, for instance, is never simply a place of luxury. For Gandava, it becomes carceral. When he returns to the street and says there is "no palace" (496), the rest of the line makes clear that splendour has become imprisonment. The rich clothes do not elevate him; they mark his capture. Princess Sabah's desire for him also belongs to this politics of the body. She is herself trapped within dynastic expectation, maternal manipulation, and gendered rivalry, yet she exercises power over Gandava through class and sexuality. Sengupta refuses to make her either merely victim or villain. Sabah has knowledge, and knowledge gives her leverage; she has been watching doors and windows, collecting secrets. But her agency remains parasitic upon the very structure that wounds her. She can expose, blackmail, desire, command; she cannot imagine freedom outside the palace game.

This is why the play's resistance is never simple. Arrah's resistance is ethical and affective. She protects Samara, remembers Kurubiri, and recognizes the violence hidden beneath social advancement. Yet she too is drawn into the cycle of revenge, killing Mati when Samara dies. Gandava's resistance is belated and fractured. He senses danger before he understands it; he wants to run but cannot; he recognizes his loss only after the state has consumed him. The crowd's resistance is equally unstable. Its rumour can become insight, but its anger can also become mob violence. Sengupta therefore does not romanticize

the oppressed. She shows how domination deforms the very energies that might oppose it.

The final movement of the play is consequently tragic without being nihilistic. The Thandwai's order collapses, but collapse does not automatically produce justice. The crowd storms the palace, bodies fall, Samara is dead, Sabah is killed, the Thandwai is poisoned, and Deyeth survives helplessly. The Blind Man's reflection on power and blood does not offer consolation. It asks whether the rising of the masses changes their condition or merely gives them a brief, terrible taste of the same force that had ruled them. This is a severe political question. Revolution may interrupt domination, but it does not guarantee liberation. Sengupta's play is most powerful when it keeps this difficulty open.

And yet, after violence, there is still the song. Gandava dresses Samara's dead body in the clothes he had promised her, turning political costume back into a failed love-gift. Arrah, who enters with a bloody knife, moves from revenge to recognition. Deyeth, weak and broken, asks whether she wants to kill him. She drops the knife and holds him. The gesture is small, but in a play crowded with spectacle, it matters precisely because it is not spectacle. It is not recorded as policy; it does not become a broadcast; it does not restore the nation. It simply interrupts vengeance. In that interruption, Sengupta locates a fragile human possibility.

The final image of the historians tying scarves around one another's organs of perception and speech is among the play's most haunting theatrical gestures. The Blind Man says he "was blinded" (520), and his companions similarly confess the cost of hearing and speaking. This is not an admission of ignorance alone. It is an indictment of history itself. To see such violence is to be wounded by it; to hear it is to lose the innocence of hearing; to speak it is to risk being silenced. The chorus that had tried to record events ends by embodying the

mutations of witness. Official history may tidy catastrophe into explanation, but Sengupta's theatre leaves the wound visible.

Read through Foucault, then, *Samara's Song* becomes a drama of manufactured truth and unfinished resistance. It shows that power does not merely descend from the ruler to the ruled. It circulates through institutions, families, bodies, screens, rumours, files, accents, rituals, and desires. It normalizes itself by making domination appear as mourning, accuracy, decorum, loyalty, democracy, or destiny. But the play also shows that no discourse can completely secure the field it governs. Samara's song exceeds language; Arrah's memory exceeds policy; Gandava's anguish exceeds his fabricated identity; the historians' fractured record exceeds the state archive. Even the crowd's whispers, however unstable, exceed official performance.

The achievement of Sengupta's play lies in its refusal to separate politics from the intimate textures of life. Governance is present in water, in speech, in marriage, in grief, in dress, in the body's posture, in what one is allowed to remember. That is why the play remains more disturbing than a direct denunciation of tyranny would have been. It reveals how easily democracy can become a theatre of managed feeling, and how difficult it is to preserve truth when every institution has learned to perform it. Yet *Samara's Song* does not surrender to despair. It leaves us with a song that cannot be translated into power's grammar. It is wounded, wordless, and persistent. In that persistence lies the play's hardest hope.

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