International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

An Analytical Study of Women's Condition in Bengal Through the Lens of Badal Sircar's Pagla Ghoda

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Badal Sircar's Pagla Ghoda (1967) as a critique of enduring patriarchal emotional structures in West Bengal. We argue that society functions with an emotional "legacy code," where rapid external modernization (education, economy) fails to overwrite deep-seated gendered psychological patterns. The play's core conflict—men's guilt, cowardice, and fear of social disapproval leading to women's tragedy—remains disturbingly relevant. Contemporary data confirms the persistence of violence and the middle-class woman's conditional autonomy, proving the social "cremation ground" is still burning with the same old, unaddressed emotional patterns six decades later.

Keywords: Badal Sircar, Pagla Ghoda, Patriarchy, Stagnation, Guilt, Absurdism

1. Introduction

Badal Sircar's Pagla Ghoda occupies a distinctive place in modern Indian theatre for its stark portrayal of gender relations, patriarchal conditioning, and the emotional violence embedded within the institution of marriage in Bengali society. Written in the late 1960s, the play emerged during a period of intense social churn, where economic limitations, restrictive gender norms, and deeply entrenched cultural expectations shaped personal relationships. Although Sircar's Third Theatre had not yet fully taken form at this stage, Pagla Ghoda already reveals his instinct toward minimalism. Its single cremation-ground setting, absence of elaborate props, and emphasis on the raw power of dialogue suggest that the foundations of Third Theatre were quietly germinating in Sircar's creative vision. Even in this early phase, the drama indicates that content—not spectacle—was Sircar's primary vehicle of protest, and that social critique could be staged without theatrical excess.

Although the drama's setting and thematic concerns belong to the milieu of the 1960–70s, many of the questions it raises about love, masculinity, emotional responsibility, and marriage continue to resonate powerfully today. This leads us to an essential inquiry: Is Pagla Ghoda merely a product of its historical moment, or does its critique remain relevant in 2025?

In this paper, we first present a concise discussion of the drama itself—its narrative, dramaturgical form, absurdist elements, and its position within Sircar's evolving theatrical philosophy. We then extend the analysis to examine whether the structures of patriarchy, marriage, and gendered emotional expectations depicted in the text have undergone meaningful change in the six decades since its writing. Despite economic liberalization, advances in science and technology, rising female education, and greater mobility, the persistence of patterns such as honour killings, female foeticide, domestic violence, and

conditional love norms suggests that the emotional foundations of gender relations remain largely unchanged.

The subsequent sections of this paper therefore ask: How much has truly changed since the world of Pagla Ghoda? Does the play remain a bounded critique of its historical period, or does it function as a living socio-psychological mirror for contemporary Bengal and India at large? Through a synthesis of theatrical analysis, feminist critique, and socio-cultural data, this study evaluates the endurance of patriarchal structures and investigates the play's continued relevance in the present moment. Ultimately, this inquiry seeks to determine whether Pagla Ghoda should be read as an archival document—or as an ongoing commentary on the emotional realities that shape Bengali society.

2. Pagla Ghoda – Summary & Dramaturgical Context

"Pagla Ghoda" stands as one of Badal Sircar's most incisive plays, structured around a stark, symbolic environment and a psychologically charged narrative that interrogates patriarchal masculinity and the emotional violence embedded in intimate relationships. The drama unfolds in a cremation ground where four men have gathered to cremate a young woman who has died by suicide. As they drink, gamble, and attempt to distract themselves from the burning pyre, the atmosphere forces them into a confrontation with their pasts. Through a series of confessional monologues, each man reveals his relationship with a woman whose life was shaped—and ultimately destroyed—by his indecision, pride, cowardice, or emotional negligence.

Critics note that Sircar constructs these men not as overt antagonists but as flawed individuals moulded by a patriarchal culture that rewards emotional repression and punishes vulnerability. Mishra observes that the "four losers" of the drama are defeated not by external enemies but by their inability to act with integrity within the constraints of masculine expectations [2]. Their failures illuminate how patriarchy produces harm for both genders: women lose their agency and, in several cases, their lives, while men lose their capacity for emotional truth and moral responsibility.

Roy emphasizes Sircar's innovative dramaturgy, noting how the cremation ground operates as a liminal space where the boundaries between the living and dead dissolve, allowing memory, regret, and suppressed guilt to surface with intense dramatic force [1]. The dead woman's unseen presence becomes a structuring device, compelling each man to confront the emotional and psychological violence that shaped his past relationships. This blending of realism with symbolic, spectral interventions reflects Sircar's interest in absurdist textures—heightened situations, psychological fragmentation, and moral exposure—while remaining grounded in the recognizable social fabric of Bengali life.

The play's formal structure further strengthens its thematic power. Pagla Ghoda shifts fluidly between present action and recollected pasts, creating a kaleidoscopic dramaturgy where confession, memory, and emotional breakdown coexist. Wadikar's analysis demonstrates that the women in the play are not just victims but symbolic carriers of the society's moral failures: their suffering highlights how patriarchal norms regulate female desire, restrict autonomy, and weaponize marriage as an instrument of control [3]. Sircar's decision to tell their stories through the men's remorse underscores the systemic nature of these harms—it is the structure, not merely individual choices, that produces tragedy.

Although Sircar's Third Theatre was not yet fully developed at the time of writing, Pagla Ghoda unmistakably anticipates its principles. The minimalist setting, absence of elaborate props, and reliance on dialogue, memory, and physical presence reflect an early move away from the proscenium and toward a theatre grounded in human experience rather than spectacle. As Roy notes, the austerity of the staging

ensures that "content—not the set—drives the drama's force," allowing the audience to focus on emotional truth rather than visual design [1]. The cremation ground's simplicity becomes a political choice, aligning with Sircar's later belief that theatre can reveal social truth only when stripped of ornamentation.

In this sense, the dramaturgy of Pagla Ghoda is both a critique of social reality and an experiment in theatrical form. Its oscillation between dark humour, psychological tension, and exposed vulnerability aligns with absurdist dramaturgy, while its social critique remains deeply rooted in the everyday experiences of Bengali society. By combining minimalism, symbolic tension, and emotional confession, Sircar creates a drama whose relevance—both in content and form—extends far beyond its 1960s context.

3. Continuity and Change – 1960 vs 2025

Although Pagla Ghoda was written in the late 1960s, its critique of patriarchal marriage, emotional violence, and gendered expectations remains strikingly relevant in 2025. The core social structures that produced the tragedies in the play—male ego, social honour, fear of female autonomy, and marriage as an instrument of control—continue to persist in contemporary Bengal. Modernization has altered external conditions, but the internal emotional patterns of society remain largely unchanged.

3.1 Historical Control of Female Mobility and the Logic of Paternity

Historically, control over women's movement was rooted in the anxiety surrounding paternity. Before the advent of DNA technology, societies had no scientific mechanism to verify biological fatherhood if women exercised unrestricted mobility. As a result, many communities, including those in Bengal, evolved strict norms to preserve patriarchal lineage. Women were expected to remain indoors, bound by domestic and familial supervision, and labelled as "good" only when confined within prescribed moral boundaries. Sircar's representation of the women in the play reflects this inherited anxiety, where the slightest deviation invites suspicion, judgement, and punishment.

Even after the arrival of DNA testing, which can conclusively establish both maternity and paternity, the old psychological wiring has not transformed. Cultural memory continues to treat female autonomy as destabilizing, and the emotional reflexes of society operate much as they did half a century ago.

3.2 Stagnant Gender Norms Despite Modernization

Mukhopadhyay's study of gender inequality in West Bengal notes that increased access to education has not dismantled the ideological structures that regulate women's autonomy [4]. Women may study, work, and travel more than they could in the 1960s, but decisions around love, marriage, sexuality, and life choices remain strongly mediated by family expectations. Patterns observed in Pagla Ghoda—fear of social gossip, prioritisation of reputation over compassion, and suspicion of female desire—still shape everyday interactions across rural and urban Bengal.

In many cases, societal norms continue to pressure women to compromise more than men, and marriage remains a central determinant of a woman's social acceptance. Contemporary examples such as honour-based restrictions, domestic abuse, and community control mechanisms show that the internal structure of patriarchal thinking has not meaningfully changed.

3.3 Marriage as a Continuing Site of Control

Roy's recent review emphasizes that Pagla Ghoda exposes marriage not as a relationship of mutual respect, but as an instrument of social conformity [5]. This observation holds true in 2025. Marriage in Bengal continues to be shaped by caste expectations, class boundaries, dowry negotiations, and judgements about a woman's past relationships. Even in highly educated urban families, women face unspoken constraints regarding career choices, mobility, and personal freedom.

Sircar's depiction of the four women whose lives are demolished by male indecision, pride, or cowardice becomes a mirror for ongoing realities. The external forms of marriage may appear progressive, yet the underlying logic—where women carry the burden of honour and emotional labour—remains firmly intact.

3.4 Free Economy Without Free Emotion

Economic liberalization broadened job opportunities, increased mobility, and reshaped urban lifestyles. Yet, as Mukhopadhyay observes, participation in the modern economy does not automatically translate into social or emotional empowerment for women [4]. Families continue to impose restrictions based on tradition, respectability, and community values, even when women contribute financially.

This contradiction is apparent in the contemporary landscape: a woman may earn her own income but still be judged by marriageability; she may work independently but face moral policing; and she may have legal rights without the supportive emotional environment required to exercise those rights. Society has embraced economic change without altering its emotional foundations.

3.5 Women's Empowerment and Psychological Continuity

Women today have greater legal protections, access to education, and professional opportunities. However, empowerment has been structural rather than psychological. Mukhopadhyay notes that deep-rooted attitudes within families still restrict women's agency in subtle and persistent ways [4]. Roy's interpretation of the play reinforces this point: emotional neglect, moral cowardice, and societal expectations continue to define male-female relationships in ways that resemble the dynamics presented in Pagla Ghoda [5].

Technological advancements such as DNA testing, greater social mobility, and exposure to global norms have introduced new possibilities, but they have not shifted the inherited emotional patterns of male entitlement or female responsibility. The patterns Sircar exposed remain part of the everyday lived reality of many women in Bengal.

3.6 Why 2025 Still Resembles the World of the 1960s

The persistence of these structures explains why Pagla Ghoda reads as a contemporary drama rather than a historical artifact. External conditions—technology, economy, education—have changed rapidly. But the deeper emotional, cultural, and psychological frameworks governing gender relations remain surprisingly stable.

The key elements that bound women in the 1960s—fear of dishonour, social surveillance, restrictions on desire, and marriage as a measure of worth—continue to shape the lives of many women in 2025. Sircar's critique therefore retains its urgency because it captures not just the social practices of a particular decade but the lasting emotional architecture of Bengali society.

4. Why Pagla Ghoda Remains Relevant in 2025

The enduring relevance of Pagla Ghoda lies in its exposure of emotional and social structures that have changed far more slowly than the material conditions of Bengali society. Although the external world has been transformed by economic liberalization, expanded educational opportunities, and technologies such as DNA testing that eliminate older anxieties about lineage, the underlying attitudes that once justified the strict control of women's mobility continue to operate. Historically, women were confined within the home because patriarchal systems lacked any scientific guarantee of paternity; their movement itself was treated as a threat to lineage, family honour, and social order. Even after these foundations have become obsolete, research shows that the psychological inheritance of such norms continues to shape decisions

about love, marriage, and female autonomy in contemporary Bengal [4]. The play's portrayal of suspicion, emotional neglect, and the policing of women's choices therefore reflects patterns still visible today.
This continuity is the reason the drama resonates so strongly in 2025. As Roy observes, Sircar's critique is not tied to the specifics of the 1960s but to the emotional logic of a society where male hesitation, social fear, and concern for reputation routinely override compassion and personal truth [5]. Despite visible progress, marriage remains a site where women are expected to compromise, where their choices are scrutinized, and where family honour continues to outweigh personal well-being. Sircar's minimalist staging helps preserve this relevance: by stripping the play down to a cremation ground and the bare voices of memory and regret, he created a narrative that mirrors persistent social attitudes rather than a particular historical moment. For this reason, Pagla Ghoda continues to speak directly to the unresolved tensions of contemporary Bengali society and remains an important lens for understanding why structural change has not translated into deeper emotional transformation.

5. Acknowledgement

A staged Hindi adaptation of "Pagla Ghoda" by TheatreNama Studios, Bengaluru, directed by Komal Gusain and produced by Aashish Rana, was attended, and this viewing facilitated subsequent engagement with the original Bengali text. Support from the ChatGPT-5.1 language model was used exclusively for academic language refinement during manuscript preparation. All conceptualisation, interpretation, and analytical arguments presented in this paper were independently developed by the authors.

6. Conclusion

This paper's analysis shows that the social world of Pagla Ghoda continues to mirror contemporary Bengali society because the deeper cultural attitudes behind patriarchy and marriage have not transformed at the same pace as external modernization. Despite advances in education, technology, and economic freedom, the emotional structures governing honour, autonomy, and gender expectations remain largely intact. By comparing the play's depiction of constrained relationships with present-day patterns, the study demonstrates that Sircar's critique endures not as a historical artifact but as a commentary on ongoing realities. The work of this paper therefore reinforces a central reminder: genuine social progress requires internal cultural change, not only external modernization.

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