



Communal Violence and Ordinary Life: A Critical Study of the play *Adios!* By Raju Das

Injam Ahmed Molla

Independent Research Scholar (UGC-NET Qualified), M.A. in English Literature, University of Calcutta
(Main Campus), Email: injamacademic@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7779-1437>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19499948>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 22-03-2026

Published: 10-04-2026

Keywords:

communal violence, Dalit literature, religious identity, subaltern historiography, Raju Das, identity politics, Urvashi Butalia

ABSTRACT

Raju Das's play *Adios!*, translated by Aritrik Dutta Chowdhury, explores the painful reality of communal violence and its impact upon the ordinary people. Set in the backdrop of fear and instability, the play presents an encounter between two individuals. At first, they judge each other through their rigid religious identities, but gradually, they develop a fragile bond grounded in shared human experience. This paper argues that the play *Adios!* critiques the artificial construction of communal division. It also shows that beyond religion human beings share similar fears, emotions and struggles. Through a close textual analysis, the play shifts its focus from the larger political events to emotional and existential realities of individuals caught within them. Ultimately, the play suggests that even though communal violence fractures human relationships; it cannot break the bonds between people who share the same fear, the same hunger, and the same grief.

Introduction

The opening stage direction of Raju Das's play *Adios!* instantly places us in the middle of a riot: "The distant sound of the treading of military boots heard offstage. Few random people walk across the upper wing of the stage holding spikes, longbow, dart, lances and spears. Children and mothers whining" (Das 199). In the middle of this chaos, two men collided in the middle of the stage. The first one asks the other, "Who are you? A Hindu or a Muslim?" (Das 199). This question becomes the centre of this play, which neither of them wants to answer.



Raju Das, one of the most significant voices in Bengali Dalit theatre, was born in 1953 in a poor, low-caste Namasudra family in Ramnagar village of Dacca, which was then East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh. Das grew up, as the editors of this collection note, within "the bounds of the prevailing oppressive caste hierarchy on the one hand, and the pains of the Partition" (Chatterjee and Biswas 12). Raju Das wrote over a hundred plays. These plays were not written for elite audiences. These plays were written for the common people, which focus on "social issues", and each of these plays has "a clear message" (Das 12). In his own essay, *Dalit Drama and its Origin*, translated by Debi Chatterjee and Asit Biswas, Das writes that drama should be a faithful representation of "the incidents of life that are closely related to the unbearable contemporary fiery social, economic political "(Das 15).

The play *Adios!* was originally published in *Ektrishiti Dalit Andolaner Muktir Natok* (Chaturtha Dunia, 2016) and later translated into English by Aritrik Dutta Chowdhury. It is a short play, fewer than 10 pages, but it portrays a strong lived experience of those caught in communal violence. The play features poor working-class characters, the Lackey and the Boatswain, who were trapped in a communal riot they did not start or understand. As the play moves forward, their mutual suspicion transforms into a fragile sense of trust. However, one of them dies before he can reach home.

This paper conducts a close textual analysis of the play and uses Urvashi Butalia's subaltern historiography as its guiding framework. In *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), Butalia argues that official histories of communal violence focus on political events. It erases the lived experiences of ordinary people. Das's play does the opposite by focusing mainly on the lived experience of two men who tried to survive in a communal riot that none of them started. The main argument of this paper is *Adios!* works as a counter-archive of official history while documenting the effects of communal violence on the lives of ordinary people.

Theoretical Framework

Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, writes that the history of partition "seemed to lie only in the political developments that had led up to it" (Butalia 6). Everything else—the grief, the particular losses, the small decisions people made under terror—was treated as having a "lesser status" in the historical record (Butalia 7). She writes that the "human dimensions" of partition are mostly missing from the official history (Butalia 7). To address this, Butalia chooses an alternative path. She deliberately turns away from the major figures, such as Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, and Mountbatten. Instead, she focuses on "the stories of the smaller, often invisible, players: ordinary people,



women, children, scheduled castes" through interviews and oral narratives (Butalia 7). Butalia's choice is both methodological and political, which challenges the hierarchy of historical knowledge.

Raju Das also follows this same path through his plays. In his essay "Dalit Drama and its Origin," Das writes that drama should faithfully represent the social and economic conditions of life. These plays were not written for entertainment. These plays mainly focus on the lives of ordinary individuals. Das's plays, as the editors of this collection note, "give voice to the silent anguish of the socially oppressed and marginalised people, both men and women who are the victims of persistent caste and gender discrimination" (Das 12-13). Like Butalia's oral histories, Das's plays also record those lived experiences. These plays, including *Adios!*, refuse to represent those marginalised people as passive victims. The link between Urvashi Butalia and Raju Das is not just thematic. Both of them are concerned about the erasure of the common people's lived experience from official historical records. While Butalia shows how history ignores them, Das brings them back to the centre through his play *Adios!*. More importantly, Das's play, *Adios!*, portrays them not as numbers or symbols, but as real people with names, families, relationships, struggles, and fears. Thus, reading Das's play, *Adios!*, alongside Butalia, helps us understand the politics behind this play clearly. The play is not just a story of violence; it is an attempt to restore the lived experiences of ordinary individuals during a communal riot.

From Suspicion to Survive Together

The play opens with a striking question: "Who are you? A Hindu or a Muslim?" (Das 199). The Lackey asks this question after colliding with the Boatswain. The Boatswain does not answer; instead, he throws the same question back. For the next several exchanges, none of them confesses their original religious identity. Both of them know that during communal conflict, one wrong answer and you may get killed. This opening line shows us how communal violence works by reducing people to religious identities. Everything else, such as their name, their work, their family, even their basic fears and needs, is stripped away, and only the categories—Hindu or Muslim—remain.

Further, as the scene continues, the fixed way of seeing each other gradually begins to change. They start to share their personal lives, such as where they live and what kind of work they do, and, most importantly, their family members. Lackey says, "I just pray to God I return safe to my kith and kin, alive and untarnished. I don't even know if my family is still alive in the village residence" (Das 200). The play highlights every detail of their lives. The Boatswain operates a scull-boat on the Buriganga, while Lackey is employed at a thread mill in Narayanganj. Both lack political power and do not desire communal conflict. Their primary concerns are family security, job stability, and survival amid the unrest. The



Lackey says, "I doubt if my Master, Miah sahib, would employ the Hindus like us". Similarly, the Boatswain speaks of the Zamindar Rupbabu, whose manager hired him every month to row him to the city for "bursar and treasury work" (Das 202-203). He used to earn double the rent for this boat ride. However, the Boatswain wonders whether, after the riot, any Hindu babu will ever hire him again. Throughout those conversations, the playwright shows that riots not only kill people but also destroy mutual trust. Thus, the ordinary economic relationship between people is also disrupted.

The Lackey also recalls his personal losses and tells the Boatswain that in the riots of the previous year, his brother-in-law was killed—"chopped into four pieces" (Das 202). Now his widowed sister and her children depend on him. Thus, as the play moves forward, both of them begin to understand that they are victims of this riot, and their suspicion gradually fades. In this way, Das shows us that during communal violence, it is difficult to restore trust, but it is not an impossible task.

All of these connect with Butalia's "human dimensions" of communal violence (Butalia 6–7). Official histories of riots only record numbers, casualties, displaced persons, and political consequences. It does not record the brother-in-law who was chopped into four pieces. It fails to record the question of whether a Muslim boatman will be able to find work from a Hindu when this riot is over. *Adios!* records all of this. It shows that these details are not peripheral to the story of communal violence. They are the real stories of communal violence.

The Bidi Scene: Shared Vulnerability of Ordinary Life

The bidi scene is one of the most important scenes in this play. The Lackey offers the Boatswain a bidi. The Boatswain takes it. The Lackey tries to light the matchbox, but he fails. The Boatswain takes the matchbox and says, "Hai Allah! Here it flicked!" (Das 201). After hearing this, the Lackey gets startled, and the bidi slips out from his lips. The Lackey asks, "A Muslim, are you?" (Das 201). This moment suddenly shifts the play's mood. The Boatswain stands up and answers, "Yes, I am. What harm does it make?" (Das 201). The playwright here shows that the Boatswain does not deny his religion, and he does not apologise for his religion, because, like that useless matchbox, his religious identity is also useless. They have shared about their families, work, and their same worries. So at that moment, religious identity does not matter. The Lackey has no appropriate answer. He asks about the tote bag as if checking for weapons. The Boatswain offers to hand over the bag for inspection, and the Lackey refuses. Thus, both realise they are now in the same situation. They are trying to survive a communal conflict that neither of them started nor wanted. As the Lackey says, "the fault is in our system, our politicians. They infuse hatred and intolerance in the name of religion and raise a feud in the name of revolution" (Das 202).



Thus, the playwright shows that political powers create division and ordinary people like the Boatswain and the Lackey suffer its consequences. Das's observation still feels relevant today. Communal violence is not just history but something people continue to experience in everyday life. According to the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), India witnessed 59 communal riots in 2024, compared to 32 in 2023—an increase of 84%. The report also points out that religious festivals are being used to create communal conflict and serve political interests.

Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, writes, "I began to realise that Partition was surely more than just a political divide, or a division of properties, of assets and liabilities. It was also, to use a phrase that survivors use repeatedly, a 'division of hearts" (Butalia 8). *Adios!* highlights these same issues and shows how a communal conflict divides the Boatswain and the Lackey—a Muslim and a Hindu. By depicting the conversation between these two fellows, the play shows that riots often create divisions in hearts.

Naming as Resistance & Death as Witness

Finally, the Boatswain decides to go back home. The Lackey tries to stop him because the street is not safe at that time. The Boatswain knows that the situation is dangerous, but he still has to go. The Lackey further pulls the Boatswain's sleeves and says, "Don't, Mia bhai don't. Please don't go under such a risk" (Das 204). The Boatswain replies that tomorrow is Eid and his children are waiting for him to come back home. He has bought two dresses for his son and daughter and a saree for my wife. Before leaving, he also shares his original name and family background— "my grandfather's name is Harinath Mondal, his elder son is Brajanath Mondal, and younger one is Md.Azharuddin. I am Azhar's son Moinuddin Mondal" (Das 204). The Boatswain further says, "If destiny claims,we shall meet again brother. Adaab!" (Das 204). In reply, the Lackey also says, "Neither shall I forget you brother. Adaab!" (Das 204).

This departure scene is very much political. The riot creates categories like Hindu or Muslim, and in this way, during communal conflict, individual identity vanishes and only what remains is their religious category. Das deliberately chooses to expose the Boatswain's real name and family history. The Boatswain becomes Moinuddin Mondal, the son of Azharuddin, with a grandfather named Harinath. This kind of detail makes it harder to see him as just part of a group.

Similarly, Butalia also interviews "the smaller, often invisible, players" (Butalia 11). Official histories always record the big figures and political decisions. It fails to record the individual with their name. On



the other hand, it not only focuses on these personal details but also records that there are children at home who have seen the full moon and are waiting.

The Boatswain is shot or wounded in the chaos outside. He slowly drags his injured body in the middle of the stage. Seeing this, The Lackey forgets his own safety and rushes to help him. The Boatswain could not reach home; he could not see his family. In his last moment, he requests the Lackey to deliver those new clothes to his family. Then he says, "Adaab, dear brother," and he dies. The Lackey, crying, answers him: "Aa-daa-ab, dear brother, adaab" (Das 206).

The ending of this play is very devastating. The play does not show us an anonymous victim. It dramatises the death of Moinuddin Mondal, the Boatswain, who has a family. He bought Eid clothes for his children and wife. Thus, his death is not just an example of communal violence. It is the loss of a particular person who has unfinished responsibilities and promises. According to Butalia, this kind of communal violence is not recorded by the dominant narratives. *Adios!* captures the person, his pain, and what is left undone.

Conclusion

Raju Das's short play *Adios!* takes a communal riot—an event that dominant narratives always describe in political terms—and shows it entirely from an alternative perspective, through the experience of two ordinary working men who had no role in creating it. It records their names, their families, their jobs, their fears. It records some small but meaningful details, such as the bidi slipping from a man's lips, the clothes that the Boatswain bought for his children now soaked in blood. These are the details that official history usually ignores. Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* writes that this erasure is not accidental. Dominant historical narratives of communal violence are structured to privilege political events over human experience, treating "smaller, often invisible, players" as mere background (Butalia 11). Das's theatre works against this erasure. He writes about the unbearable contemporary social, economic and political life of ordinary people (Das 15). In *Adios!*, there is no political figure, no ideological debates, and no clear explanation of which riot this is or how it began. The play provides no historical overview. This is not accidental—it is a conscious decision, and it is the same decision Butalia makes in *The Other Side of Silence*. Butalia clearly states that she moves away from well-known political figures because their stories are already widely told and often overshadow other voices (Butalia 11). Instead, she wants to focus on the experiences of those ordinary people (Butalia 11). Das follows a similar path in his play. By keeping focus only on the Boatswain and the Lackey, he forces us to understand the riot through their experience of it. Ultimately, *Adios!*, shows us that communal violence profoundly impacts the lives of



ordinary individuals. It also proves that even though communal violence fractures human relationships; it cannot break the bonds between people who share the same fear , the same hunger , and the same grief.

Works Cited

- Das, Raju. *Dalit Protest Unbridled: Two Dozen Plays of Raju Das*. Edited by Debi Chatterjee and Asit Biswas, Ekush Shatak, 2022.
- “Hegemony and Demolitions: The Tale of Communal Riots in India in 2024 - Centre for Study of Society and Secularism.” *Centre for Study of Society and Secularism*, 22 Jan. 2025, csss-islam.com/secular-perspective/hegemony-and-demolitions-the-tale-of-communal-riots-in-india-in-2024/.
- Urvashi Butalia. *The Other Side of Silence Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi [U.A.] Penguin Books, 2014.