



Brechtian Experiments and Theoretical Models with Traditional Folk: Interrogation of the Political, Social and Cultural Milieu of India

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century theatre had an impact of theoretical, technological and social changes that led to an unprecedented outpouring of dramatic creativity across the continent of Europe. Henrik Ibsen, generally considered the first modern playwright, wrote in Norwegian. August Strindberg, Ibsen's contemporary, wrote in Swedish. Anton Chekhov, perhaps one of the most influential early modern playwrights wrote in Russian. Despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of this disparate group of writers in the aggregate they forged a new theatrical world.

The aim of theatre was no longer, as Aristotle had described it long ago, to imitate action but literary to enact it. The development of theatre in the twentieth century reveals that in the success of Stanislavsky's method acting lay the seeds of its rejection. As with every art form once theatrical realism totally fulfilled its mission, the genre began to seem obsolete and gradually gave way to a new phase of modern theatre. Several possibilities emerged in the theatrical horizon. Some playwrights inaugurated a so called 'theatre of cruelty', a kind of sauna bath of senses, designed to leave playgoers shocked and tingling at every emotional pore.

1. Introduction

The best known theoretical principle or critical piece of writing concerning drama and other pursuits of literature is Aristotle's Poetics. (330 B.C.) The genesis of Greek drama is traced out in religious rituals like chorus, hymns in the honour of Dionysus the god of wine, music and art. In the beginning it was in the form of story, narrated through chorus. Greek drama flourished in the fifth century with the Greek master playwrights like Aeschylus (Orestia), Aristophanes (Lysistrata), Sophocles (Oedipus Rex or King), and Euripides (Iphigenia in Tauris) among others. These dramatists intellectually furnished a great stimulus to the development of the Poetics because Aristotle largely depended on these masterpieces for material. Poetics is matchless in its insightful vision, scientific and dynamic approach to theatre and drama. The Greek plays happened to be highly formal, written in verse, consisting of scenes and episodes. It was customary to use three characters in the lead role which was intervened by choral songs. This made the plays more narrative and little action occurred on the stage. Most of the dialogues used in the plays were in rhymed verse corresponding to songs.

Poetics, a theoretical book on the art of writing plays, consists of 26 chapters in which Chapters 6 to 22 deals with tragedy and its six constituents (plot, character, theme, dialogue, rhythm, and spectacle). Aristotle's view of dramatic theory depends on the fact that drama excites our 'pity and fear' affecting catharsis of such emotions. The concept of drama lies in his equally valuable definition of tragedy as, "an imitation of (human) action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude (or length)...in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper catharsis of these emotions" (James, Making of Literature 51). Aristotle's emphasis was on the mimesis (imitation) of human nature which he considered to be the source of all arts. Thus Aristotle's theory of drama validates only those dramas which are in the form of representation of action and it eliminates obviously all arts and expressions that are lyrical or narrative at their core. He asserts that tragedy should be necessarily organic in its structure- that is, its plot must conform to the unities of time, place, and action. Such a complete play in itself would lead to the climax of conflicts and would finally unburden the unhealthy emotions like 'pity' and 'fear' from the mind of spectators. In this

connection he underlines the significance of the plot. He holds that 'plot is the source and the soul of tragedy' and character is subservient to it, by which he meant that it is only plot that features the individual errors and which finally will lead to purgation of pity and terror like emotions from the minds of the audience/spectators for the healthy state of minds.

The advent of 19th century saw an adherence to poetry rather than drama; however, drama got its impetus from Germany, especially from Schiller and the philosopher Goethe. The plays were romantic in spirit and had no single style but were generally strongly emotional. Their experimentation with form laid the ground for the rejection of the inane phraseology and literary taboos of Neo-Classicism. "Mid-19th century", as Martin Esslin has asserted, "Was one of the dismal stagnation in the Europe theatre" ("Naturalism in Context", 68). He has further quoted Strindberg saying that all the previous dramatic styles have fallen flat with their extravagances clearing the way to Naturalism: "now that all this is overturned, the cloaks and the daggers have become unnecessary. The time has come to create works of truth. To replace the classical tradition by a romantic tradition would amount to a failure to make use of the freedom which our elders conquered for us. There must be no more schools, no more formulas, no more literary panjandrums of any kind; there is just life itself, an immense field where everybody can explore and create at his heart's content" ("Naturalism in Context", 68). Thus this movement came into being against gross realistic details and urge for psychological motivation and scientific temperament which led to the emergence of Naturalism.

Modern theatre has liberated itself from traditional forms as a result of several waves of renewal which began with Pirandello, Bernard Shaw and others. Avant-gardism, Experimentation in theatre and anti-traditional method of playwriting began with Pirandello and others. Pirandello, twentieth century Italian dramatist made an effort to show how art or illusion mixes with reality and how people see things in a very different way. His new methods of performance where the actors consciously play the characters on the stage and participate in the audience while acting are innovative techniques to break the illusion of reality. His notion for words being unreliable and reality is at the same time true and false and not expressible, has been the driving force for the avant-gardists. Pirandello's tragic farces are often seen as forerunners for 'theatre of the absurd'.

Apart from Pirandello, there were key theorists of twentieth century drama and their schools of theatre theory who influenced or were influenced by Brecht, prominent among them are: Augusto Boal, Grotowsky, Appia, Craig, Meyerhold, and Stanislavski they have speculated, argued and theorized about cultural exchanges between theatrical traditions of the East and the West. In this cultural transaction the apt example is the journey of Eugenio Barba to India around sixties learnt the first hand experience of Indian dance drama like Kathkali and yoga and martial art.

Augusto Boal is much acclaimed for his seminal book Theatre of the Oppressed and his concept of 'forum theatre' which required actors to present the problems without any solution. He talked about the theatre of common people of society and contended that Aristotelian theatre catered to a handful of people at the cost of the working people. He portrayed the interest of specific section and promoted the spectators in favour of stability. They showed reality on the stage that led to the continued domination of the privileged. As against such a restricted theatre which catered to a particular class he promulgates the 'forum theatre' for audience to reflect over the social, economic, and political issues concerned with the common people and helps generate discussion. The whole thrust of his theatre was to encourage the audience as the active participant of performance and to be the 'spect-actor' to draw out his/her own practical solution.

Among other prominent theatre theorists in the twenty-first century is Richard Schechner who has theorized the concept of Environmental Theatre. In its application it is a kind of Total Theatre. Open space is used for the stage. Minimal props and decoration are used as the part of performance. The audience and the environment become integral parts of the production and are thus participatory in nature and social in appeal. The list tends to extent at

large, however, my soul concerns premises on Brecht's immediate contemporary or predecessors for the contextualization of Brechtian theory of performance.

Brecht's contribution to world theatre is his theory of 'Epic Theatre' which derives its pattern from the epic's narration and objectivity. Brecht's Marxist political convictions led him to propose unusual and an alternative direction for the theatre that would fuse the two functions of instruction and entertainment. In this way the theatre could project a picture of the world by artistic means and offer models of life that could help the spectators to understand their social environment and to master it both rationally and emotionally. He added to epic conviction because just as epic aims to narrate, he too intended to narrate the story on the stage. His theatre is the unique commingling of epic narration and dramatic form. All his masterpieces such as *The Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* were written while he was in exile from Germany. *Mother Courage* is an anti-capitalist and war play, based on the history of 17th century from 1618–1648. It is about a woman who longs for war to keep her business going even at the cost of the lives of her soldier sons and ultimately sings a pathetic lullaby for her dead sons. The play is wrought with political concerns and contradictions. He employed all equipments of epic theatre like episodic plot pattern, narrative story on the stage, unheroic character as the chief protagonist, use of history as the text so as to draw a parallel between past and present, use of chorus to comment on the action of the plot, actors changing characters and costume on stage, odd lighting and sound effect to create among the audience what he popularly called 'Verfremdungseffekt' or Alienation effect.

His theory offers a profound programme for understanding social and political terrains through his antirealist staging, nonlinear narrative progression and an appeal to reason and action rather than emotional catharsis in the spectator. In the Poetics Aristotle says, "Tragedy has a final purpose or end (telos) to be an imitation or representation (mimesis) of action and life" (Curran, 168). Thus it is not the narrative of action because that would break the flow of the action and cannot lead to the climax of situation and affect the catharsis of suppressed emotions. He rejected Aristotelian principles which he regarded as dramatic theatre or illusive theatre because it tended to arouse the emotions like 'pity and fear' by displaying 'the illusion of reality' and block the audience's intellect to think critically over the enactment. This emotional impact of tragedy i.e. catharsis which Aristotle solicited as the essence of it, according to Brecht, is the "opium of masses" because it induces "a trance like state" on the minds of the audience and people lose the intellectual hold of enquiry and criticism.

To encourage the audience to adopt a more critical attitude to what has happened on stage; Brecht propounded his significant concept of 'verfremdungseffekt'. This 'A-effect' as it is came to known, tends to make the spectators distant from the influence that the performance creates, so that they can view the play as a play only not as a real incident. Brecht used non-illusory techniques like bare stage, loud and unnatural sound, dazzling light, placards etc., to remind the audiences/spectators that they were in a theatre watching an enactment of reality, and not reality itself. This concept of alienation was used by many feminist theorists in the latter part of the twentieth century to underline the chauvinism of male oriented society and male made norms of characterization. This concept of alienation is similar to many Asian or Oriental art forms like the non-emotional detached methods in Chinese acting, stylized performance of Japan's Kabuki and its extensive make up, mime expressions in Koodiyattam/Kathkali, strong note of music, dance, odd decorated props, masks, and the impersonation of the characters, for instance female impersonalization. Brecht has accepted the impact of these performances of Orient on his dramaturgy.

Brecht regarded a play as a series of loosely connected scenes, each scene complete in itself and dispensed with dramatic climaxes. Plot was without linear progression and there was no beginning, middle and end. He used narrative pattern or story telling of epic on the stage and used the song in the form of chorus to comment on the action. His use of gestus- a method of non-verbal communication meant for physicalization of the emotion/ abstract

idea of the story through the character and the conscious role of actor-character among other theatrical props.

Brecht's earliest works were heavily influenced by German Expressionism. He believed that theatre should appeal not to the spectator's feeling but to his reason while still providing entertainment; it should be simply didactic and capable of provoking social 'change'. In the Realistic theatre of illusion, he argued, the spectator tended to identify with the characters on the stage and became emotionally involved with them rather than being stirred to think about his own life. Brechtian theory can be summed up as follows: it emphasizes rationalism and political aspects in drama, demystification of the stage through many techniques like narration, episodic plot structure or organization, historicification of the text etc, use of 'Gestus' and self conscious characters in drama.

Indian theatre has a very long history which dates back to the Vedic hymns and the rituals of offering and fire sacrifice. Bharat's *Natyashastra* is the oldest and complete, scientifically formulated compendium of theory of 'art of performance and playwriting'. *Natyashastra* expounded pleasure based realistic mode of performance. It was defined as *Bhavanukriti*- the representation of states of minds and human nature following the conventions of *Rasa* (aesthetics pleasure), drawing plot and heroes from the epics like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*. The plot was well made and the progress of the action was linear following the pattern of time and place. The theme was related to the noble action of the mythical and legendary characters. It was mandatory to show the characters in the pursuit of good deed. Heroes were inclined to be *dhirodatta* (self -controlled and valorous) and *dhiralalita* (desirous and noble) among other features. The recurring motif of the plays happened to be the victory in war (e.g.*Urubhangam*), love making (e.g.*Shakuntalam*), or grand sacrifice for the welfare of humanity. Death, murder and menial jobs like theft and robbery were not supposed to be presented on the stage.

The language it used was Sanskrit and the emphasis was given to define set of characters in special slot considering their castes, class, birth, colour and social position to cater to the audience or *Sahradayi*. The Sanskrit tradition of performance was by no means 'folk people performance' or *Lokdharmi* tradition of performance or to use Brechtian term *Weltanschauung*. The purpose was intended to reveal the real state of characters on the stage. With the *prekshagrihya* and closed structure of the stage it became the illusory theatre. The use of props like colorful costumes, masks, sound etc and the proper structure of the stage were creating the fourth wall -a dividing line between the actor and the audience. The stage was surrounded with audience from the three sides, leaving the only space for the actors which came to known as *Nepathya*. Backdoor was used for the decoration and the change of role of the actors. Curtain was integral part of the show known as *Yavanika*. Thus through these paraphernalia theatre became a medium to realize the real sense of happening of life on the stage. In its entirety classical Sanskrit performance tradition was purely elitist and *rasa* (pleasure) based and there was no scope for the concerns of common people in its purview. It was not at all a participatory performance rather had maintained difference between the audience and the performer which resulted in creating an illusion of reality and a place of problem's solution. This made the audience of course, complacent on the show of enactment. Audience was willingly suspending his belief on the reality of stage because he was considering the shown incident something natural and inevitable and this was creating a lulling affect on the mind of audience.

After the advent of colonialism in India, the cultural and literary transaction between India and the West which brought the western modes of performance and techniques in India and took Indian dramaturgy to the west flourished rapidly. From the British period up to India's Independence, Indian theatre scene was permeated by the proscenium Parsi theatre which was producing plays of Shakespeare and other playwrights in the realistic style conforming to the Aristotelian norms of three unities of drama. This western style theatre was professional and secular in its spirit, addressing the needs and providing entertainment to middle class English educated and elite of the society. The plays scarcely dealt with the problems and concerns of the common people of India.

Brechtian precepts have been a catalyst for the many post-independence Indian playwrights and theatre practitioners. Around the 1960s Brecht became a seminal part in the evolution of contemporary theatre in India. The main reasons he went down so well, especially in the 1970s and '80s, were the critical Weltanschauung(world view) and engagement of his texts and the tendency of Brechtian theatre to integrate—and demand—every possible mode of dramatic expression (speech, body language, music, dance), much as in India's native theatrical culture. His adaptation and appropriation in India, as

In his approach to theatre he seems to promulgate, to use a phrase from Lo/Gibert an “intercultural modality” (“Toward Topography”, 39) of theatre and performance. In the connection of the audience response and validity of diverse theatre décor without the binary of East and West, Schechner has expressed the similar opinion in “Golden Age of Innocence”:

People didn't question too much whether or not this interculturalism [...] was a continuation of colonialism, a further exploitation of other cultures. There was something simply celebratory about discovering how diverse the world was, how many performance genres there were and how we could enrich our own experience by borrowing, stealing, exchanging (Lo& Gilbert, “Toward Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre” 39-40).

This kind of reciprocal amalgamation of diverse types of theatre precepts is, to cite Lo& Gilbert again: “entails a process of encounter and negotiation between different cultural sensibilities, although the degree to which this is discernible in any performance event will vary considerably depending on the artistic capital brought to a project as well as the location and working processes involved in its development and execution” (31).

Tanvir has shared a similar kind of opinion regarding the pervasive impact of Brechtian dramaturgy over Indian scenario. As he has opined in his interview with Dalmia “I find him (Brecht) very contemporary, full of humour ...poetry, and meaning. So it was natural to take Brecht, especially because he's so open in his form, he's imbibed so much from the East techniques, that for any Eastern man to take to Brecht to try out his own Eastern techniques is a natural thing”(Dalmia, Poetics, Plays and Performance 255).

This appropriation of Brecht in Indian theatre and dramatic writings in 60's and 70's was fashionable and known as 'Brechtianism'. As it is clear Brechtian formulations were quite a dawn of change in theatre and films. It was not something alien or baffling but deeply rooted in the soil of Indian theatre. Brechtianism was more or less shaping the minds of Tanvir and Karnad alike. Like modernist Brecht both were doing the theatre of modern sensibility. Brecht, Tanvir, and Karnad- the trinity were directors and playwrights of eminence. They were acquainted with the all directorial problems and nuances and interrogated the many prevailing styles and crafts to challenge the audience's belief and complacency. Undoubtedly, it can be said that theatrical ideas of Brecht provided a perfect foil for intertexts in the plays and productions when Tanvir was writing and producing them with folk forms.

Both Tanvir and Karnad were not content with the kind of theatre form that was being slavishly imitated in India, they have to adopt a new style of performance like epic formulations with 'folk form' that was not classical or western but hybrid and something new in which a variety of styles none of them original blend and clash. Brecht too, had a high fascination for folk tales, folk songs and the popular parables of Germany (which) also marked a point of similarity among the three dramaturge since folk tales have a gripping impact over the plebeians, it was appropriate for them to catch the attention of the audiences and make them aware of socio-economic structure of the society. Such similar theatrical practices and theory of performance are more as the horizontal method of doing performance than the vertical matter of influence.

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