

REPORTRAYING COLONIALITY: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF INDIAN DRAMA**Mustajeeb A. Khan**

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The history of Indian drama starts with the legend Bharatmuni. The perspective of Indian drama and the art was bound by history, folklore, mythology and social customs till the invaders, Muslim rulers and the imperials brought certain change in the art and architecture. This ruling class of the society changed even the source of entertainment and the distinction was created in the performative places also. And this gave birth to the folk art to be the part of society in large. Actually drama was a part of Indian civilization and developed the folk art which was need of the time. The text was not available so the text performed was actually the myths and stories of oral tradition.

...There are artistic manifestations based on the two epics and many 'Jatakas' and 'Puranas' of Buddhist, Jiana and Hindu origin. In many parts of Asia these epics and 'Jatakas', often local and indigenous myths based on them and similar legends

of oral traditions continue to play a vital role. The many pageants and tableaux and local forms of dances and dance –dramas developed from both the pure recitative word and its consequential interpretation through gestures, mime and song (Vatsayan:2005:3)

Folk art was just because of this reason become popular in the society. This, after the invaders and colonial power changed the concept and it gave chance to the dramatic art to have a place in the class. The language of masses 'Prakrit' become popular and the reformists brought the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata in this language which gave a chance to the performers to use this text in as a story in their performance. This was a process of civilization in the society. The drama of pre modern period was the eternal theatre which was based on the time and situation of the given time. The changes in the

dramatic art showed the role of the invaders and the change which they had brought in the society. The language of every period from invaders to imperials played an important role in changing the art and its structure. Sanskrit, Persian and English became the language of the rulers. *While Sanskrit was not a spoken language and was confined mainly to the Brahmins, Persian, a living speech had a much wider distribution in respect of different communities. A language of the elite undoubtedly it was, but that elite class consisted of both Hindus and Muslims. Its area of operation was also wider, it being the language of the administration and judiciary. (Das: 1991: 26)*

This history revealed the search for authentic Indian theatre which has started from 18th century. These folk forms can be treated as Indian forms of theatre and not as Indian theatre. The paper back edition of *Cambridge Guide to Theatre* never defines Indian theatre where as it discusses the various folk forms such as Tamasha, Burrakatha, Ramlila, Raslila and defines it as a form of Indian theatre. *Cambridge Guide to Theatre* defines it as follows:

Tamasha: Indian Theater form. It is major rural theater genre in the state of Maharashtra. (362)

Burrakatha: Indian theater form. It is popular in form of entertainment

especially in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh. (51)

Ramlila: Indian theater form. It is popular in villages and cities in north India. (303)

Raslila: Indian theater form. Raslila of Vrindavan is a devotional dance drama. (304)

These examples prove that Indian theater doesn't carry the drama but the folk forms. The concept of drama was restricted to the specific class in pre- colonial phase.

The 19th century drama of India started to present the epics in the theatre within the proscenium arch. The fact that, this new theatre, in written and presentation, was under the shadow of the British rule. It has to be borne in mind that from hundred years Indians have not defined the parameters of the theatre. For colonial period theatre is a medium to introduce the new culture and erase the traditions and culture of the area. This modernity has taken several directions. To encounter with the colonial masters our dramatist starts to produce the new terminology to the world theatre in our own vernaculars. The 19th century showed the struggle of the writers with the classical heritage. Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote a play on 'Sharmista' in Bangla and Kirloskar wrote 'Subhadra' in Marathi in 1856 whose source was again

Mahabharata. Most of the playwrights in the 19th century hadn't availed the translation of Sanskrit. Various European creative writers had taken support of Kalidasa and revival of Sanskrit literature. Max Muller, Sir William Jones and Goethe were the prominent amongst them. Even Max Muller who brought Sanskrit literature in front of the European world, Sir William Jones with the translation of *Shakuntala* in 1791 and Goethe who was inspired by *Shakuntala* wrote the prologue of *Faustus*. But Indians were under influence of the colonial masters. They had never utilized the stories of the epics which was successfully carried in the folk forms of Indian theater instead they searched the jealousy of Othello and ambition of Macbeth in their plays. Gauri Vishwanathan rightly comments:

The study of English literature became the study of models of moral worth to extent that English literature seemed first and foremost about morality. This weaving together of morality with a specifically English literature had ideological consequences. Literature implied that moral behaviour and English behaviour were synonyms, so that the English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state. In reading English literature in moral terms, then, Indian students were

being exposed to a code of values deemed Christian and universal, yet also specifically identified with the colonizing nation (Mcleod:2007:142)

Dutt adopts the Elizabethan model in full and this had given a distinctively derivative air to his drama, Kailasam used the prose, poetic and Sanskrit words in the dialogues of the play '*The Purpose*' again based on Eklayva, the neglected character of *Mahabharata*, and Bharti Sarabhai in her play '*The Well of the People*' was under Yeatsian influence. Many of the dramatists of 18th and 19th century were in confusion either to use the techniques of English drama or to follow the Sanskrit drama or folk art. This was the fallacy of the Indian dramatist not to get the difference or the amalgamation of the two styles in their performance. Master's language '*English*' was the major influential aspect of these playwrights. The impact of the language surreptitiously enters into the writings.

Colonial theater writing was generally influenced by Shakespeare. A new prose style developed- a style could be described as Anglo-native prose-style. Long, flowing sentences, ornate speech, Sanskritization of speech were some of its specialties. The colonizer's sense of culture and a Brahmanical sense of

culture combined to a new language which some critics like Bhalchandra Nemade dismissed as Anglo-Bhat (not even Anglo-native) language; making it sound as if it were some kind of comprador culture articulated on comprador language.

(Deshpande:2000:xii)

The long ornate speech, romantic idioms, rhetoric and archaisms brought artificiality in dialogues. To follow the Elizabethan pattern and Greek style of dramatic structure made the writings of these playwrights just to read not to perform. The drama was accepted by the class which got education in English specially. The Bombay amateur Theater built in 1776 presented these plays. These theatres became famous in big cities where the colonial masters were praised and colonial India was celebrating the English theater specially Shakespeare who became icon for most of the creative writers.

The critical judgment of the English-educated class about Shakespeare was hardly shared by the traditional scholars or the common spectators. Bankimchandra's observation that Shakespeare is "the one man in the world's literature whose works hold up mirror to every possible phases of man's inner life", and Hemchandra Bandopadhyay's eulogy: Bharter Kalidas

jagater tumi (Kalidas belong to India, you to the world) are manifestations of the English educated Indian's passionate admiration of the English bard. But the Shakespearean tragedy influenced our poets and novelists more than our dramatists who learnt to adopt only certain devices and techniques from Shakespearean plays.(Das:1991:188)

To encounter with the canonical British literature our dramatist starts to produce the new terms in the world theatre in our own vernaculars. Shakespearean heroes and their problems were transformed into the problems of neglected Indian heroes of the epic with the problems of the cotemporary Indian society. For example Kailasam in his play 'The Purpose' the hero, Ekalayva, his sacrificing of the right thumb, his fight to gain the recognition in the society the great injustice he faced talks of the problems of the downtrodden of our society heightens to the tragic elements and reaches to the Aristotelian concept of Catharsis. The use of language:

Ekalayva: You will see somebody stop you! (sharply to Drona) Tell me Gurujee, if I had not learnt archery, would he have really been the greatest archer of the world?(Bhatta:1987:37)

The use of the words like Gurujee(Teacher), Bramacharya(Celibacy), Pariksha(Exam), Sabha(Court), Khadga(Sword), etc were to be considered that it was a protest to the colonial language and probably giving birth to the Indian English in today's concept. Because of this use of the prosaic language the performers come out of the poetic performing style. The cruelty of the colonial world was also portrayed in many of the vernaculars by the dramatists for example in Bengal Dinbanhu Mitra who's Nil Darpan which was considered as a first protest play in Bengali language against colonial rule.

Nildarpan (The Indigo-Mirror) was published in 1860. This Bengali play exposed the oppressions and exploitations of the white Indigoplanters in Bengal countryside and presented the simple life and courageous struggle of the peasantry in vivid details. Its technical flaws and sentimentality notwithstanding it is the first play in the history of Indian drama to choose contemporary rural life as its theme, and to make drama an instrument of social protest and of awakening the masses. (Das:1991:185)

The text became prominent part rather than performance. The playwrights were known to the world but the performers, actors the

back droppers were not known to the world. The dramas were known by the name of the dramatist. Only after the west made the occident to understand the importance of the theater in social life this brought the professional and amateur to work as a group for example Baghbarar Amateur Theater in 1868 or National Theater in 1873 as a professional group. After Second World War this becomes prominent to learn from the western theorist who brought the different theories to the Indian soil just because of the education facility available at that time. By the time of 1947 modern drama and theatre was deeply aware of the work of the west and modernity with the help of dramatic theories. With the political independence we don't have post- colonial theatre as such. Shakespeare was present there in performance in one way or another and modern stage took Ibsen, Shaw and Wilde with it to start the proscenium in its own way. The theatre had not really changed whereas the theatergoer had. The western impact gave life to the drying sap of Indian theater.

The first five year plan find certain encouraging development with the establishment of Akademi and other organization as well as performances by some English and American troupes. These activities boosted mostly theatre in the

cities only. The rural part of India is yet related them to the folk art. The drama has carried the successful staging of the plays in urban India only. The education spread up amongst the new generation made the performance perfect. There was no longer change in backstage atmosphere, theatrical acting and the stage leaved on romantic sentimentality and imaginary unreality. The gaudy ornate dresses of kings and princes, the unstrained presentation of patriotism and cheap idealism, the ceaseless ranting passing for heroic emotions, the expression of grief with a flood of tears this conventional set pattern of characterization, flamboyant excess of acting made the theatergoer to get away from theatre.

In the 20th the dramatist comes to know the Shavian style of writing drama. The playwright, himself is interested in giving some directions to the performer. The detailed note of stage setting or lighting, time and the look of the character are also decided by the playwright. The writers' direction brought the change in the acting pattern and 'Director' become prominent in theater in this changes the major and important role was played by European and western theorist of modern stage. According to *Cambridge Guide to Theatre* the director was introduced to the theater in western concept which was the

prominent feature of 20th century modern drama.

In Asia, given the historical importance of performance genres, masters often took control of the preparations for the production. The sutradhara in classical Indian theater was often responsible for selecting, organizing and training the cast, overseeing the building of a theater, conducting offerings to the gods and appearing on the stage in preliminaries of the plays..... In many ways the hegemony of the director is problematic and the director seen as an authority separate and separable from either from actor or dramatist. Interpretation is all the work of director. The idea of the director is the most dominant feature of Western theatre in the 20th century. (p98).

This concept of the director as reaches to Indian theatre it changes the whole scenario of performances.

The masters have left and the style given by them is proved to be the perfect one in the production of the play. The audience now asking about the director for example in 1960's the production of Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajeet* or Tendulkar's *Shantata.....*(*Silence the court is in Session*)was known for the different production of different directors ; Satyadev Dubey or Arvind Deshpande. This made

the playwright to hand over the plays to the directors and to produce the play for performance not for reading only. The text was to perform with colonial style of performance and the presence of the director created multiple texts. G.P. Deshpande writes in the Introduction of *Modern Indian Drama*:

The presence of the Director was a very meaningful phenomenon. All dramatic texts are Ananta Patha (multiple texts) by their very nature. Different productions by different directors of the same play quite often makes us aware of the potential of the text which would otherwise be lost. It so happens also that these productions tend to create texts that are antithetical to each other. ... this phenomenon was not known before sixties of this century. This Ananta Patha character of a dramatic text is a major discovery of this period. (2000: xv)

Different directors with different productions of one play are the gift of masters. 'Tughlaq' performed by Alkazi in Hindi and by Satyadev Dubey in Marathi gave the two different approaches to the one play. The meaning in between the lines as known by the different directors brought the experimentation in the theater.

The western drama gave birth to the concept of 'director' and the writers'

direction brought the change in writing of the dramas. The Indian drama got momentum with IPTA and various theaters of Mumbai and National School of Drama brought the revolution in Indian theatre. The western theorist of stage comes into existence on Indian scenario with the help of these performers. The age of 70's was a period of Brechtian wave and the world of theater come alive in India also. As G.P. Deshpande writes:

The Brechtian wave of 70's did bring a fresh look at our own traditional and folk art. Indian folk forms which have otherwise continued to beat the pre-modern path are used for modern subversive purpose by Brecht in his theatre. Modern Indian directors seem to have used Brechtian techniques more as a Indian form of performance.' (ibid: xvi)

This although changed the Indian dramatic world, in 70's India was playing the dramatic writings of Sircar, Tendulkar, Karnad and Rakesh. These dramatists are well aware of the modern theorists of stage. Each one has contributed something different in Indian theater as well. Sircar is using the absurdist way to introduce the problem of Indian society through his plays and the directors of his theater are interested in projecting Indian psyche. The proscenium arch which is basically a four

wall inside performance and fourth wall is invisible and this difference is maintained by the stage and auditorium. To create the effect of all this things the technique which is used plays an important role. But Sircar's concept of free theater and non use of techniques speaks about the economic approach. This concept of Sircar is called as 'Third Theater' where he rejected the Western and folk also and developed his own 'Third Theater'. He is influenced by the Grotowski's poor theater. Tendulkar introducing sex and violence in the proscenium and with the help Antonin Artaud's 'Theater of Cruelty' presenting it in an Indian way with the Indian family and its allied institutions, whereas Karnad and Rakesh presented the myths and Indian oral stories with Brecht's alienation effect and epic theater. To follow the performative style these writer's followed the appropriate style for the sake of performance.

The NSD produced directors and theater artists who are aware of modern dramatic theories of the world and uses the techniques for performances because techniques played an important role in drama as suggested by Artaud in the essay 'No More Masterpieces':

With the sound and lighting there is action and action's dynamism. This is where theater, far from imitating life,

communicates wherever it can with pure forces. And whether we accept or deny them, there is none the less a manner of speaking which gives the name forces to whatever gives birth to forceful images in our subconscious, to outwardly motiveless crime. (1992:86)

The modern technique is mostly used by modern Indian dramatists in their plays. The quadrangle of the playwrights brought changes in the writings of Indian drama similarly the quadrangle of directors brought changes in performance in the Indian theater. The theater become rich because of the directors like Dubey, Tanvir, Thiyyam, and Alkazi who brought the change in the performance of the plays written in vernaculars also.

The colonial impact can't be denied on the post colonial Indian theater because Indian theater is distributed into four periods. There were few examples in the performance of the play which led to change the style of playwriting. The Indian theater has seen different performative styles as Habib Tanvir rightly points out in his lecture on *Indian theater* delivered in Berlin on 6th March 2000:

I feel there are four different trends- the first is the type of theater that is influenced by the classical. The second is the kind of theater that is influenced by folk traditions

and a third that is influence by the Western proscenium theater and the fourth is a kind of theatre that is influenced by Bertold Brecht and that includes my type of theater.(Tanvir: 2005)

The world of theater art is changing with the technologies that appear in the world and Indian theater because of double impact one colonial and second the technological. These changes made the playwrights, directors, and artist to follow the world theater. Indian art created Rasa, Bhava and Anubhava whereas western art brought Catharsis and purgation of emotion. Today both the creations have been amalgamated together and Master's gift of dramatic writings, proscenium arch and new technology made our art rich. The plays are performed and this made the art to accept it and produced worldly accepted performance.

From the ancient time to modern period the contribution of the colonial and ruling power contributed in the Indian drama. It is impossible to decolonize the Indian theater or drama. The literature can have the post colonial literary theory but in the world of drama it seems to be quite difficult to run over post coloniality Indian drama is a portrayal of coloniality in different way.

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