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### **Aesthetics of European Experimental Theatre and Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra**

#### ***Abstract***

*Experimental theatre is a general term for various movements in European Drama beginning with Alfred Jarry and his Ubu plays in the late nineteenth century, movements that were modes of rejection of the dominant ways of writing and producing plays. It is used more or less interchangeably with the term avant-garde theatre, which literally means threshold literature, an attempt at something new. It altered the audience's mode of reception by introducing a marked use of language and innovative use of body positions and stances and established thereby a more active relationship with the audience. Physically, theatre spaces took on different shapes, and practitioners re-explored different ways of staging the performance. The given conventions of space, movement, mood, situational tension, language and symbolism stand altered. I have taken four key statements of experimental theatre for the study - Bertolt Brecht's "A Short Organum for the Theatre", Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*.*

Theatre in Europe has a history of more than twenty five hundred years. As European intellectual tradition is rooted in Greek civilization, consequently, European theatre also has its genesis in the Greek roots. Traces of ancient Greek theatre are found in the initial cultural forms of Greek civilization. Greek theatre developed gradually and simultaneously with the changing reality of its cultural forms. European theatre, in all its forms and practices refers to Greek tradition. Due to this common source of reference, different theatrical modes have been brought

under this umbrella term i.e. 'European Theater'. The first seminal theoretical text of European theatre, which established its philosophical foundation, is Aristotle's *Poetics*. The long tradition of theatrical performances in the form of classical plays by Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus and Aristophanes etc. left Aristotle with very little to say on theatre in his theoretical discourse on drama. The treatise *Poetics* discusses theatre not as an independent art form but as a minor and not so significant element of drama. It may be assumed that Aristotle's discourse determined the future course of theatre in Europe where it was never considered as an independent and autonomous art form by the forthcoming generations of playwrights, scholars and theatre artists. This is why, in European theatrical tradition, theatre is perceived as an offshoot of drama.

In Europe, theatre has been produced, received and understood in terms of drama. Considered as a subsidiary to dramatic art, theatre was not theorized as an independent art form in European intellectual tradition. The tradition does not have a single theoretical text devoted to the aesthetics of theatre except Aristotle's *Poetics*, Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* and Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* (which are primarily devoted to dramatic literature). Having its roots in dramatic tradition, European theatre lacks a proper poetics and a sound theoretical grounding to guide its developments. Most of its categories of analysis are taken from drama or dramatic literature. The basic tools of dramatic art are considered as constituent elements of theatre in their already existing aesthetic forms in the absence of a proper theory pertaining exclusively to theatre. Ironically, theatre in Europe, in all forms, couldn't free itself from the tyranny of drama that was considered its ultimate source. It is a matter of inquiry for any scholar of European theatre, why this dichotomy between drama and theatre is so severe in European tradition till twentieth century that it almost ceased any aesthetic development in theatrical art.

The paradigm shift in European intellectual tradition begins towards the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century. New researches in Linguistics, Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology and Politics problematized European metaphysics resulting in the emergence of a host of critical approaches in twentieth century European academics. These approaches opened new ways of looking at phenomena or reality. No aspect of life or knowledge remained unaffected or uninfluenced by this intellectual onslaught. Theatre was also not an exception. This intellectual onslaught or shift broke the twenty five centuries old theatrical conventions of Europe. This complete breakup with the existing conventions of European theatre ushered it in a new era of experiments. Scholars or Historians

of European theatre designate this breakup or rupture as 'Experimental Theatre' in a consolidated form to represent all types of changes or transformations that appeared in the aesthetics of this theatre. The European theatre entered a new era where it attained a complete divorce from dramatic literature and claimed an independent and autonomous status as an art form. It was no more considered as a subsidiary to drama. It evolved with a poetics of its own thus creating a structure of independent categories and terms of analysis. The term Experimental Theatre consolidates different modes of theatre i.e. Brechtian theatre, Theatre of Cruelty, Theatre of the Absurd, Poor theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed etc. into a single identity. The theoreticians and practitioners of these theatrical modes, beginning with Alfred Jarry and then Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Piscator, Stanislavsky, Jerzy Grotowski, attempted various types of experiments with conventional theatrical tools with great success and redefined their functions and operations. The four representative key statements of Experimental theatre which have been taken for the study are Bertolt Brecht's "A Short Organum for the Theatre" and other writings, Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*.

Experimental theatre is a general term for various movements in European Drama beginning with Alfred Jarry and his *Ubu* plays in the late nineteenth century, movements that were modes of rejection of the dominant ways of writing and producing plays. It is used more or less interchangeably with the term *avant-garde theatre*, which literally means threshold literature, an attempt at something new. It altered the audience's mode of reception by introducing a marked use of language and innovative use of body positions and stances and established thereby a more active relationship with the audience. Physically, theatre spaces took on different shapes, and practitioners re-explored different ways of staging the performance. The given conventions of space, movement, mood, situational tension, language and symbolism stand altered. I have taken four key statements of experimental theatre for the study - Bertolt Brecht's "A Short Organum for the Theatre", Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*.

This diversity of theatrical modes and consequently the variety of plays in twentieth century make the institution of theatre problematic for understanding its nature and function. Each of the theatrical modes tries to define/redefine the nature and function of the art of theatre in its unique or peculiar way. But we can still discern an epistemological concern that appears

to be central to most of them- a concern that has to do with a redefinition/reconsideration of the metaphysics of the Western theatre; its nature or essence, without imposing similarity/shared categories on these theatrical modes and theories. And it is within the paradigms of this concern that one is able to explain the theoretical postulations of the above mentioned theorists in the frame work of *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

The work of Antonin Artaud forms the starting point for the radical theatrical movement in the twentieth century Europe. He recast the theatre, into what he thought was its true nature and its real role, as the art form of the future. This new theatre, he insisted, very importantly, must repudiate the written text, a gesture that rejected the long scriptal tradition and the status of the nature of *logos*. Thus, when he declared in 1933, “we must be rid of this theatrical superstition of the text and written poetry” (34, *Theatre and Its Double*), he was actually demanding a theatre where the poetry is carnal, and all creativity arises from the stage, finding its expression in a secret psychic impulse which constitutes the speech anterior to words. His attempt, therefore, was to locate a theatrical mode that transcended the limitations of the verbal/ideational. What he had hoped to evolve was a language of performance through which he could tap sources other than the intellectual. Artaud mentions, “One therefore understands that theatre, to the very degree that it remains confined within its own language and in correlation with it, must break with actuality” (70).

Any reflection on the theatre of this century, more particularly any reflection on the radicality of the theatre must in some way come to terms with Bertolt Brecht. His greatness lies in the fact that he was able to search out and develop the radical, gestic, potential of the theatre in a political ambience. And through this exploration he has altered the scope and added substantial quality both to theatrical experience and to political thought. The philosophical act which takes place in Brecht’s theatre is precisely the placing of a lived world before our eyes for ratification. The value of his theatre lies in what it is able to discover praxically, materially, through communication and exchange among theatrical workers; its totality not that of formal idealism, but of an experiential texture.

Brecht’s dramaturgy turns in the main on two ideas. First, that of the bracketing or the suspension of belief required by ‘*Verfremdungseffekt*’, and second, the radicalization of this act in his idea of the theatrical ‘*gest*’ as the raw material of performance. It is in the idea of ‘*gestus*’, however, that the corporeal dimension of the epic theatre is most explicitly located. The gesture in the real world, held in all its embodied complexity, but worked on by the actor, stylized, expressively recast, in order that its meaning be made manifest, makes for theatrical

'gest'. The 'gest' is not an entity in the real world, but a conception of theatrical aesthetics; at once social and corporeal, typical and opaque. Brecht in "The Literarization of the Theatre" argues, "Today, when the human being has to be seen as 'sum of all social circumstances' the epic form is the only one that can embrace those processes which serve the drama as matter for comprehensive picture of the world" (44).

'Theatre of the Oppressed' is a theoretical framework and a set of techniques developed by Brazilian director, artist and activist Augusto Boal. Recognizing that humans have a unique ability to take action in the world while simultaneously observing themselves in action. Boal believed that the human is a self-contained theatre, an actor and a spectator in one. And because we can observe ourselves in action, we can amend, adjust and alter our actions for different impact and for changing our world. Boal states that "we can begin by stating that the first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body, the main source of sound and movement. Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive". The plan for transforming the spectator into actor can be systematised in the following general outline of four stages:

1. Knowing the body
2. Making the body expressive
3. Theatre as language
4. Theatre as discourse

The term 'Poor Theatre' is associated with Jerzy Grotowski and the influential Laboratory Theatre. He called his theatre 'poor' because it dispensed with theatrical trappings and the technological resources of 'rich' theatre, a theatre of external spectacle. Grotowski writes that "we know that the text *per se* is not theatre, that it becomes theatre only the actor's use of it". Grotowski made the actor's voice and body central to the performance. Grotowski sought for something beyond drama. He worked to develop physical and emotional responses so that impulse and reaction are concurrent.

In the very beginning of the first article entitled "Towards a Poor Theatre" included in his text *Towards a Poor Theatre*, he makes two seminal statements on the type of theatre he wants to develop and perform. He says:

Our Theatre Laboratory productions are going in another direction. In the first place, we are trying to avoid eclecticism, trying to resist thinking of theatre as a composite of

disciplines. We are seeking to define what theatre is distinctively, what separates this activity from other categories of performance and spectacle. Secondly, our productions are detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship. That is, we consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art. (Grotowski 15)

In all these experimental theatres, the recurrent demands and attempts of playwrights and directors alike to link reform in the structure of drama with reform in the structure of the performance environment have been primarily grounded upon a rejection of ‘psychological’ theatre in favour of ‘metaphysical’ theatre. The theatre seemed suddenly, as if propelled by a revolutionary force, to break its conventional bounds. The new drama moved away from the authorial text. And in doing so it carved for itself not only a new sense of what constitutes performance, but also a new set of commitments: personal, political, aesthetic and epistemological. And with it came a new sense of the function of the theatre. The main axis of this movement is an awareness of a corporeal meaning vested in the physical immediacy of performance.

While the earliest and most explicit articulation of this new theatrical mode is found in Antonin Artaud, the movement is anticipated as noted by Susie Tharu, in several earlier dramatists: George Buchner, Anton Chekhov, Strindberg, Priandello etc. However, Artaud’s formulation takes more complex articulations in the ‘Epic Theatre’, ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ and ‘Poor Theatre’. Each of them has in some major way extended this mode. The shift then from a work, primarily verbal, to a work that arises for the lived body connects the theatre and the contemporary thought.

Bharata’s dramaturgy and its theoretical framework can be used as a tool for a comprehensive understanding of all the theoretical postulations by aforementioned theorists. Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a text of dramaturgy that follows a long empirical tradition of public theatre as A. K. Warder notes. Bharata designates his whole discourse as *Nāṭyaveda*, a comprehensive exposition of almost all the aspects of drama and theatre. Basically this seminal text is concerned with enactment and almost 23 of its 36 chapters deal with *abhinaya* that is enactment through language, gestures, positions and stances of different parts of the body and accoutrements.

The long tradition of drama originates in the *Rgvedic* core concept of *yajña* which for Bharata is archetypal theatre. After delineating the social origin of drama, *Nāṭyaśāstra* traces the sources of four dimensions of drama to the four Vedas: *Pathya* from *Rgveda*, *Geeta* from *Sāmaveda*, *Abhinaya* from *Yajurveda*, and *Rasa* from *Atharvaveda*. The first three elements (*Pathya*, *Geeta*, *Abhinaya*) are the means to achieve the ‘end’, *Rasa*, the art experience. Of these four, the most substantial exposition, in almost 23 Chapters, is of *Abhinaya*, ‘acting’ / enactment. *Abhinaya* is the nucleus of performance/enactment on which the aesthetic experience (*Rasa*) depends. In the first chapter, (*śloka* 107) Bharata says, “*Nāṭyaveda* does not represent the character of ‘Devas’ and ‘Asuras’ only, rather, this *Nāṭya* represents *anukirtana* i.e. all the *bhavas* of the three worlds.” In the same chapter (*śloka* 121), Bharata says that all the existing tendencies of the world (*Loka privrtiyan*) consist of both *Sukha aur Dukha*, considered as *natya* when performed with four kinds of *Abhinaya*. Further, in chapter 22 of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata discusses *Itivrtta*: body of *Natya*. *Itivrtta*, considered as the structure of performance, contains five well defined stages of action. Hence, *Rasa* and *Itivrtta* are the soul and the body of *Nāṭya* dependent on *Abhinaya*, the nucleus of performance. Etymologically, even the term *Nāṭya* goes back to Sanskrit root *Nat*, a performer. *Naṭarāja*, the iconic image of Shiva captures the god of dance in a frozen moment of a stance and a position and gestures. *Nāṭya* is contingent on *Abhinaya*, and the nature and structure of its constituent elements is the subject-matter of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Prof. M. Christopher Byrski in his book, *Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre* mentions:

Commenting upon the seventh verse of the *Natyotpatti adhyaya* Abhinavagupta says that the creation of *Natya*(theatre) cannot be compared to an ordinary making of things, which is *vyavaharasiddha* as for instance, making of a pot by a potter. On the contrary, *Natya*’s(theatre’s) existence is due to inborn original knowledge possessed by Brahma – due to his *upjna*.... Thus, Abhinavagupta accepts the fact of the divine creation of *natya*(theatre). Taking into consideration the role of Brahma as the creator of the universe we can assume that Abhinavagupta understood the creation of *natya* and the events which accompanied it in a similar way to the creation of the universe – which is equally beyond human perception. Apparently the faithful account of the creation of *natya* was not, according to Abhinavagupta, the only purpose of Bharata. His second important aim was to furnish a pattern of behavior for all those who wish to organize a theatrical performance....Consequently the story of *natyotpatti* is for him a description of events transcending ordinary human perception. (3-4)

The formal structure of the text reflects that *abhinaya* is the core concept of Bharata's dramaturgy around which all other dimensions of *natya* are discussed. Bharata divides *abhinaya* into its four possible categories: *angikabhinaya*(body-language), *vacikabhinaya* (linguistic), *aharyabhinaya*(costume) and *saatvikabhinaya* (inner emotional states). All types of *abhinayas* or the instruments of expressions have been analyzed through structural and formal aspects. On this textual structure of *Natyasastra*, Kapila Vatsyayan writes:

This grand design Bharata executes as a master conceiver of a great orchestra. He assigns a role to each instrument lays down the plan of each group of instruments, their interactions with each other, the phasing and the movement, never forgetting that all this is for the evocation of a 'mood', a state, where once each instrument and player has played a part, they are no longer important and meaningful. Like the actors of his drama, the *angika*, the *vacika*, the *aharya* and *saatvika* must transcend their individual identity and merge in the totality. Just as the instruments of an orchestra have their distinctive identity and special techniques of playing, each *abhinaya* is distinct and clearly identifiable, has a role to play in the totality, but is never absolutely autonomous. (99)

All the four critical statements of Experimental Theatre reject and refute the existing conception of theatre in Europe and create a radical space in the theoretical world of European theatre. The four theorists as discussed in the four chapters bring forth a new, innovative and peculiar style of performance in theory as well as practice establishing their unique theatrical modes. Their observations as guided by their individual understanding of the art of theatre are not in symmetry or an extension of the existing conventions of European theatre but bring a paradigm shift in contemporary Western theatrical criticism. Despite being different on categorical and philosophical plane, all the four critical statements of Experimental Theatre have been viewed with a common pattern. The study reveals that these critical statements locate the essence of theatre in a common source. The focal point of the four as observed and analyzed is their basic idea of theatre that it originates in human body and its dimensions determine the range of theatrical communication. Each critical statement, in its own specific way, explores the possibilities of human body as an indispensable tool of expression in a theatrical performance. They consider everything, except this carnal medium, secondary in theatre. Moreover, all these critical statements conceptualize theatre as an independent art form as different from drama for the very first time in the history of European theatre and perceive the essence of theatre in the actor's performance (enactment) on the stage not in the written script. Artaud's concrete physical language of theatre, Brecht's 'gestus', Boal's 'spect-actor' and

Grotowski's 'poor theatre', all refer to this physical or carnal source of theatrical creativity. The study reveals that in locating the source of theatrical creativity in human body, all of them share close affinities with Bharata's *Natyasastra* and especially with his theory of *abhinaya*. This study not only extracts a common epistemological pattern in these four critical statements of Experimental Theatre but also reveals that in their rejection of European tradition of drama they come very close to the ancient Indian theatre. The study also puts forth the most significant aspect of theatre, *abhinaya*, which has been partially neglected by scholars in their obsession with *rasa* and other prominent categories of *natya*.

The study provides a common platform to two entirely different conceptions of theatre and reveals the transcendental nature of theatre and its metaphysics. It fills the temporal and spatial gap between ancient Indian idea of theatre and twentieth century European Experimental Theatre by extracting a common point i.e. human body and its theatrical potentialities. The study, once again, validates the universality and transcendental character of the argument constituted in the classical texts like Bharata's *Natyasastra*. It reveals that the theatre as an art form, even after a long journey of more than two thousand years in different civilizations of the world, goes back to its metaphysical roots where its true essence lies.

**Key Words: Abhinaya, Verfremdungseffect, Gestus, Mise en Scene, Spect-actor, Poor Theatre**

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