

PROBLEMS OF SELF-REALISATION IN AJOKA THEATRE PRODUCTION 'GRANNY FOR ALL SEASONS'

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ABSTRACT

This study makes an attempt to analyse the political role of Ajoka theatre with reference to its production 'Granny for All Seasons'. The play thematises the dilemma of non-realisation of self in the context of Pakistani society. The self-questioning playtext and the gestural theatricality both foreground the cause and effect of this sociopolitical problem. The traditional anti-art ideology of Pakistan triggered puritanism and cynicism to block all the avenues for self-actualisation which led to the widespread meaninglessness of life in the society. The present theatrical production incorporates Bertolt Brecht's technique of dialectics to challenge this dreary site of the society. For this purpose, the self-realised playful Indian society, represented through the character of Tahira, is dynamically juxtaposed against the stagnant society of Pakistan, symbolised through the persona of Sabira. Various encounters on various levels are staged to enlist the politically mobilised audience so that they may frown at the monotonous ruling structures in the country and vote for the alternative healthy perspective.

Key words: Ajoka, political theatre, self-affirmation, Granny for All Seasons.

Introduction

Ajoka theatre is a politically charged cultural institution in the contemporary Pakistan. Its productions keep on challenging the relevance of the existing neocolonial hegemonies that have made comprehensive arrangements to block all the avenues of self-actualisation processes in the society. Informed by the materialist poetics, this diagnostic theatricality operates in a specific historical background. Since its birth in 1947, the country has been subjected to various neocolonial/fabricated ideologies; one of them is the anti-art state policy that was strictly pursued both by the civilian and military governments (Kich, 2007). This philistine official approach was adopted, in fact, to construct an image of Pakistan that should clearly distinguish it from India, a site where fine arts flourish freely. Such puritanical practices continued to intensify with the space of time and resultantly the society is confronted with so many ills like hypocrisy, cynicism, narrow-mindedness, and superstitious religiosity that ultimately led to the regressive existence, closed culture and stagnant social life. 'Granny for All Seasons' by Ajoka is

an artistic reaction to this context. It exposes the anti-art approach of the state by exposing its disgusting results and it also urges the critically addressed audience to opt and vote for the alternative perspective.

Methodology

Ajoka works in the traditions of oppositional theatre. The in-house playwright for the troupe, Shahid Nadeem, is inspired by the works of German theatre theorist Bertolt Brecht and the great Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray's ideologically subversive movies. Keeping this phenomenon in mind, Brecht's writing *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (1984) is selected as the conceptual framework for this study. Brecht uses a range of alienation devices called *Verfremdung* or V.effects to distance the institutional practices in such a way that the pettiness of the ruling ideological discourses is exposed. Dialectics that works as the underlying structure of the V.effects sets various characters, situations and perspectives in a conflicting mode so that they may continue to dynamically generate their actions and reactions against each other. This is a political strategy that works

to expose the contradictions, pettiness and hollowness in the hierarchical structures and to attract the audience for their vote for the alternative point of view. The spectators are politically charged in the theatre hall. They go back to their social life to resist there the institutionally and ideologically naturalised and legitimised discourses which is in fact something unnatural and manmade. This denaturalising and deautomatizing process is achieved through self-critical playtext and split acting called “not-but” (Brecht, 1984, p.137) formula. Contrary to the conventions of traditional dramaturgy based on the Aristotelian *Poetics*, the political actor does not identify himself with the role on the stage; rather he, through a variety of tone, and dialectical gestures urges the spectators to grasp the alternative meanings that aim at ridiculing the prevailing ‘common sense’. This is the way that an alternative theatricality operates and works to produce socially committed art that spurs the audience to be culturally responsible person.

Data Analysis and Discussion

‘Granny for All Seasons’ theatricalises the dialectical encounters between two sisters: Sabira and Tahira from Pakistan and India, respectively. The former was a renowned actress in the United India. In 1947, she migrated to Pakistan, left her professional career, and started to live a puritanical life which is the metaphor of non-realised self of the stopped up and stagnant society. Tahira, a famous actress of the past, positively given to performing arts in India, comes to Pakistan to meet her elder sister after a period of twenty five years. This playful woman is a dynamic character who lives a meaningful and rapturous life. Bracketed with self-accomplishment, she stands for the mobile and progressive society of India. These old ladies are in fact two opposing ideologies that creatively operate against each other at different levels. Petty exercises of regressive institutions of the social formation are tremendously challenged. As a consequence

of these encounters, the socially stopped up Sabira is restored to her previously realised self. Her granddaughter Sabeen also gets permission to become an actress. Having transformed the Pakistani family culturally, socially and intellectually, Tahira flies to India to resume her artistic activities there.

At the apogee of her career as an actress, Sabira loved and married one of her fans. Soon after the marriage, the puritanical background of her husband began to exercise its influence and it became difficult for him to remain related to a self-affirmed showbiz woman. One day he died of heart attack. Considering herself responsible for his death, Sabira said good bye to her actualised self as an artist and began to live a puritanical life as a conservative woman of Pakistan (Khan, 1993, p.4). The self-referential text and the gestural acting pitches the two contrastive selves of Sabira’s husband – a progressive lover and a backward looking husband – against each other. This tactical move raises politically relevant questions for the audience. Is not the husband criminal who dismantles his playful wife? Is it possible for man to live a happy life without self-accomplishment? Is not the third world male an exploiter of the female? Is not silencing of woman an inhuman act? Is it not the duty of humanity to support the cause of the voiceless?

Althusser (2001) holds that the education system of a society is the most important agency to interpellate and train the young ones to a particular mind-set. The tutor of Sabeen asks her to study but ‘the Islamic Fine arts’ and not to include music and dance in the Pakistani culture as these features are considered the integral part of Indian society. Sabeen’s response ‘if that is true, what are we left with?’ subverts the anti-art policy of Pakistani establishment that has been going on since 1947. The tutor also teaches that Pakistan was established the very day when the first Muslim put his foot on the Indian soil. Sabeen’s naïve query was not the Land of the Pure achieved by the Indian Muslims themselves

questions the pointless myths attached to the ideological foundations of the country. This tutor also advises her to memorise and uncritically reproduce the questions in the examination. In fact, it is all ideological. It is a syllabus that is rigorously pursued to fashion the life of Sabeen in accordance with the ways of an internally withdrawn society. Here, 'not-but' technique played very significant role to materialise the self-questioning text and quotational acting. The gestural acting ridicules the stale aspects of the syllabus.

Sabeen wants to realise her natural talent as an actress but her grandmother is intended to block all the avenues for her self-actualisation. Sabira is fully determined to marry Sabeen, as soon as the later passes her B.A, to a snobbish Behzad who always remains in a struggle to impress his would-be life partner through the display of his wealth. In this situation, Tahira comes forward to play various political roles. Her acumen one day concludes that the tutor who is a joke as a teacher is well-versed soul in music. She awakens the musician in him and sets his two selves to be dialecticised. When Sabira is on tour for condolence in the locality and other ritualistic activities of her routine life, Tahira instigates the tutor to arrange for music classes for Sabeen. Within a short period of time, inertia stricken atmosphere of the house dies into a dynamic site and a rhythmic pace of life. The anklets that Tahira brought for Sabeen from India help the young soul abandon the traditional shackles of backward looking life and practically move her for the affirmation of her artistic goals as an actress. The tutor in the role of a music master is relaxed therefore in high spirits. When Sabira comes to know that a sea change is taking place in the house, she is in ashes. She taunts Tahira for staying in India to

continue her career as an actress and not coming to Pakistan in 1947. She also accuses her sister of making plans to steal Sabeen from her grandmother. In her reactions, Tahira is just superb. With the help of music and dance, she introduces Sabira to her buried self as a famous actress of the subcontinent. Sabira's cynical and withdrawn self is replaced by a progressive and playful self that is linked with ripeness of life. Now, Sabira allows Sabeen to go for the fulfilment of her desire to become an actress. The medievalised life is substituted by the dynamised life. Having restored Sabira to her actualised self, she flies to India to resume her activities as an artist.

Conclusion

'Granny for All Seasons' remains marked in many ways. It successfully challenges the anti-art policy of the state of Pakistan by exposing its horrible results on the individual and the collective life of the society. It also questions the syllabi in Pakistan that label fine arts as un-Islamic activity as it is the part the Indian culture. The state policy to carve out the ideology of Pakistan by opposing any thing that has echoes in the Indian society is rejected altogether. The Ajoka production under analysis gives a loud and clear message to subvert all those existing myths, traditions and structures which ideologically blindfold the subjects to keep them away from the processes of realisation of self. This political production mobilises the relevant audience to see through the ideological interpellations and to reset their orientations especially with reference to the backward looking hegemonies based on some ill-founded bias. Althusser (2001) holds that the audience in a political theatre appear as a wise judge that sees through the dominant hierarchies and votes for the socio-political change.

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