



DECONSTRUCTING CHARACTER AND VIOLENCE: PARALLELS IN ANTONIN ARTAUD'S THEATRE OF CRUELTY AND RITUAL THEATRE OF INDIAN TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

European theatre during the last century witnessed several innovations in theatrics and dramaturgy. Moving away from the canons of illusionary theatre of Aristotle, these theatres experimented with the techniques used ranging from dialogue and music to the participation of the audience in plays. One of the major innovation was that the change of audience from the role of mere spectators to that of the enactors. Theatre of Cruelty propounded by the French playwright Antonin Artaud was a major experimental theatre of this kind. This paper concentrates more on the theatrical techniques used by Artaud and not on the dramatic literature. Experiencing and experimenting Artaudian theatre reveals that it has several parallels in the traditional theatre of India, particularly the ritual theatre. Both have been deconstructing violence. Ritual theatre tradition of India includes several representations that take place mostly in the premises of worship. Theyyam, Padayani, Mudi yettu etc., in Kerala represents how there is an application of these techniques and its parallels and similarities in the West. Make-up and costumes of ritual theatre has similarities to the masks used in Artaud's theatre. Dialogues have limited patronage. Both theatres make a wide usage of surrealist techniques, incantation cries and haunts. Audience participation makes the theatrical experience more effective and has an undertone of therapeutic experience for the spectators. There has also been an attempt to trace the theatrical tradition of Antonin Artaud, the influences upon him by the oriental theatre and the Mexican theatre the several elements of which he has incorporated into his plays. Since several of his plays remain not preformed, it is the need of the hour to throw light upon the innovative techniques used by Artaud.

Keywords: Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud, Ritual theatre, Surrealism

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There have been major innovations in the European theatre from the nineteenth century onwards, which in a general way moved away from Aristotelian canons and post-Renaissance illusionism. Focussing more on the style, and incorporating the audience more into the dramatic

art, these experimental theatrical forms revolutionized the western canons of drama. This paper entitled *Deconstructing Character and Violence: Parallels in Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Ritual theatre of Indian tradition* attempts to make a preliminary investigation of the

similarities and parallelisms between the theory and practice of a major experimental theatre of the west of the recent times –the theatre of cruelty propounded by French playwright Antonin Artaud and that of the traditional Indian theatre, particularly the ritual theatre of India with an ancient lineage. Rather than focusing upon the dramatic literature or comparing the dramatic literature of east and west, the attempt is to focus upon the presentation of these theatres in front of the spectators and the techniques used, and the problems related to the presentation of plays.

The ritual theatre of India is a diversified one and covers a wide range of castes and communities. It would also include the elements of folk and tribal theatres. But these theatres have diverse features of their own and are much secular in their spirit. Ritual theatre has an element of religion embedded within it, for it being a sacred one it exists only across the premises of worship. Ritual theatre still preserved in its root form by different communities in many parts of India helps to keep alive the link between theatre and *Yajna* or sacrifice. This has been made clear by Christopher Byrski in his *Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre* that,

“The fact that *Yajna* is an organized movement makes out of it an archetypal action, the actors of which are the gods. The first action, which signifies the emergence of order from chaos and of dynamic activity out of the womb of stillness or rest dressed up in the intricacies of an elaborate ritual and endlessly repeated by both gods and men became not only a model sacrifice but became also a pattern for everything that happens.”(79-80)

Several specific features can be seen special to ritual theatre. ritual theatre is mainly noted for the elements of cruelty and violence which are often absent in the classical traditional Indian theatre which has the canons drawn out of texts like *Natysastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana* and *Sangita Ratnakara*. Ritual theatre takes up the role as a theatre of therapy whereby the devotee has an assumed role of a patient too, is cured of the illness or demonic possession through theatrical exorcism.

The performance is sometimes arranged as an offering to the deity to propitiate him or sometimes as a form of ancestor worship. In all these areas, the performance makes a wide use of surrealistic elements so as to create dreamlike or nightmarish effects. Apart from all these features what makes the ritual theatre more important is the participation of its audience. They do not keep a distance or have a *Verfremdung* effect as in the theatre of Brecht; where the spectators regard what is happening with a sense of critical awareness. Specific to ritual theatre is the lack of any written dramatic literature, except in the case of the incantations. Nightmarish atmosphere with bizarre sounds cries hauls and grunts along with the incantations and chants influence and engulf the audience.

Ritual theatre of this kind could be seen in several temples of Kerala especially in the form of *Theyyam*, *Mudiyettu*, *Padayani* etc. An extensive study on the spirit cult festivals of South Kanara by Martha Bush Ashton would explain a typical ritual performance:

“Meanwhile the priest comes before the altar. Wearing a simple costume (either short red pants adorned with bells or a silk cloth wrapped around his torso and ankles and sometimes a white turban), he is given the spirit’s sword, bell and yaktail fan to hold. After he is sprinkled with water, the audience throws rice or flowers on him to signify its request that the spirit enter his body. He begins to shake from his feet up until his entire body is trembling. Often he shouts wildly, puffs out his cheeks, stares at the sky and runs to and from the altar. When the priest begins to tremble, one or two musicians play rapid extemporaneous amelodic doodles on oboe-like instruments called *mauris*. Two to five drummers each with, each with a different timbered drum, begin to play rapid extemporaneous rhythmic passages. When the priest is close to full trance, this changes to a high-pitched rhythmic repetition of one note, with the drums as loud and rapid as possible. Finally the spirit comes. When the priest is fully

possessed, the spirit, through him, relates the *nudi kattu*. This speech, which summarizes the spirit's origin story and how it came to be worshipped in this place, is delivered in a highly stylized and dramatic manner. It includes a short account of how the patron's ancestors conducted the festivals in the past and how the spirit, in turn, treated them."(92)

Folk theatre shares similar traits of ritual theatre but it lacks the religious element and the audience participation here is in a socio-aesthetic nature. The rejection of the post-Renaissance illusionism began in the dramatic scripts of western theatre with the appearance of Ibsen and Strindberg but in the case of techniques of production and acting it became crystallized by the pronouncements of Edward Gordon Craig and Alexander Hevesi.

Antonin Artaud is one of the most influential dramatists of the experimental theatre in the West. He rejected the Aristotelian theory of imitation and focused on a surrealistic aspect. This makes his dramas more close with the ritual theatre of India, than to the classical oriental theatre. The rejection of illusionism, the emphasis on dance and rhythm than on speech and plot, excess of cruelty and violence being freely displayed etc in a surrealistic and symbolic manner can be seen in both Artaud's theatre and the ritual theatre.

The ritual theatre of Kerala, prominently *Theyyam* in the Northern part and the *Padayani*, *Mudiyettu*, *Kaliyootu*, *Theeyaatu* etc the similar ones to the south presents super human characters from the past or from the Puranas or legends. Several of them deal with gruesome stories of death, murder and cruelty. The plays based on the legend of *Kali*, sometimes identified in the folk imagination as the goddess of small pox, are performed in the open air space often in the vicinity of temples or shrines. Vast audience witnesses the war of *Kali* with *Daruka*, where the performer has transcended to the goddess *Kali* which has now the power to preserve and destroy. Without pursuing the tools of reason and analysis the spectators believe the performer as the personified form of *Kali*. Only blurred lines of distinction exist here between the observer and the observed or the spectator and enactor.

Artaud had learnt about the treatment of forces of destruction in Hinduism and he wrote: "In India there are worshippers of Siva, the destroyer, and of Vishnu, the conservator. However, destruction is a transforming force. Life maintains its continuity by means of the transformation of the appearances of being." (Sellin, 98). He reveals more about the influence exerted on him by oriental theatre in his book *The Theatre and Its Double*. Martin Esslin on his study of Artaud says,

The theatre, as seen by Artaud in *The Theatre and Its Double*, is essentially a religious ritual, the content, the underlying myth of which is the theatre itself; that is, the theatre defined as an assembly of human beings striving to establish contact with the profound main-springs of their own being, the dark forces of physical emotion which lie beyond the trivialities of their everyday existence. The theatre enables them to experience the full reality of these emotions without involving them in the irreversible life situations in which alone experiences of such shattering power could otherwise be lived through. And by making the full force of a full emotional life, the whole gamut of human suffering and joy again active in multitudes of human beings, the theatre could change their basic attitude to life and institutions, their ways of thinking, their entire consciousness and thus transform society and the world.(83)

Rejecting the traditional mode of the theatre of representation, Artaud experimented with the new technique of theatrics. Derrida in his *Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation* argues that the theatre of Cruelty has a six fold rejection of –all non-sacred theatre, all theatre of words, all abstract theatre that excludes something of the totality of art, all theatre of alienation which involve non-participation of the spectators, all non political theatre and all ideological theatre seeking to transmit a content. These details point to a theatre where the theatre becomes an enactment of life and not any representation. It is through the participation that the theatre exists. Artaud explains the purpose of his theatre that ,

"The Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigour and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. (*The Theatre of Cruelty*, 66)

Eric Sellin has pointed out that "the two greatest influences on Artaud's dramatic theories were ancient Mexican culture and the oriental theatre, the one solar, the other lunar. The latter has generally been thought to be the keystone in the structure of Artaud's theoretical writing, but the interest in and research on Mexican culture may date back to as early as 1932-33, or only one or two years after he witnessed the 1931 Balinese dance performance that had such an impact on his ideas". (15-16) Sellin classifies the Artaudian concept of solar drama as the "action, the Male, revolt, and self-assertion" and that of the lunar drama as "stasis, the Female, acquiescence, and self-abnegation." (11) Even though Artaud was inspired by both the forms, he was more inclined to the solar drama which encompassed a self defiance or cruelty against gods or the civilized norms and societal standards. In his *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud reveals the great influence which the oriental theatre had on him. The Balinese performance which he first witnessed was a combination of drama, song, pantomime and sound. With startling gestures and body movements, the players attempt to visually illustrate the feelings and emotions, adding to the overall mysticism of these groups. Albert Bermel puts in *Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty* that what inspired Artaud was their "ability to reach a state of ecstasy, delirium, intoxication, trance and to propel their audiences into this same mood of spellbound alertness" (24).

Violently opposing the accepted forms of theatrical practice, Artaud experimented with the theatrical techniques. Those of which were used to supplement and reinforce the dramatic text would

essentially began to replace the texts themselves. Artaud focused in the emotional state of the viewers rather than their intellectual state. His scripts with less dialogues with abundant human noise like screams, cries, grunts, yelps, moans etc, were accompanied by the gestures and movements of the actors. Rationality or linear narration of plot was not a necessary feature. Dialogues attained the form of incantations and the dramatist centered in releasing the soul of the characters, actors and viewers. "It is intended to be full of passion in order to provoke an emotional reaction and to appeal to the five senses. The goal for Artaud was to be void of rationality in order to probe at the mental status quo of the spectators." (Potie)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's in *Phenomenology of Perception*, claims that true, primordial consciousness is found within the body. In a similar way, Artaud calls for a theatre of embodiment, utilizing the maximum of the human body or to be more specific e maximum, "through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds." (*Theatre and Its Double*, 20) Artaud exalts this concept of drama to a level of metaphysics or an ethereal platform, exploiting all that the theatre is capable of becoming rather than what the theatre is. All the different elements used in his theatre contribute to making the theatrical experience an incantation or that of a religious ritual experience. Artaud describes his ideal theatre,

"Every spectacle will contain a physical and objective element appreciable to all. Cries, laments, apparitions, surprises, dramatic virtuositities of all sorts, the magical beauty of costumes based on certain ritual models, splendid lighting, the incantatory beauty of voices, ...concrete apparitions of new and surprising objects, masks, mannequins several meters tall, and brusque changes in lighting." (Sellin, 84).

Submitting speech to overall production and by enhancing new techniques for dialogues, Artaud blends the music with words- the harmonious flows is abruptly cut and mixed with speech altogether creating a cacophony. He wanted the vibrations of noise to surprise the

audience and create a more visceral bodily reaction. Artaudian theatre demands a lot from its actors requiring that they work their way through a variety of strenuous positions with ease. They needed strong lungs in order to execute both loud and quiet sounds whilst in an array of demanding stances. Artaud also included masks and puppets as characters within the play, which helped to increase the tension and shift the overall balance of the performance. A strong emphasis on breathing was put on the actors, comparing them to athletes: "What the athlete depends upon in running is what the actor depends upon in shouting a passionate curse, but the actor's course is altogether interior." (Artaud 133) Artaud related the act of breathing to external expression, stating that one is dependant and proportional to the other. He created a very detailed and specific sort of musical tempo, calling it "passional time", which was based around gender and feeling, distinct to each individual actor. (*Theatre and Its Double*, 135)

Inspired by the oriental theatre, he proposed an open stage. Lighting, especially, was an area that he wanted to upgrade drastically. Artaud was looking for "luminous vibrations [...], as well as new means of projecting lighting in waves, or in sheets, or like a volley of flaming arrows." (Sellin 87) The play would be setup in various arenas of the theatre area, such as the corners of the room and on the catwalks. The audience would have "mobile chairs which will permit [them] to follow the performance which will take place all around [them]," (*Theatre and Its Double* 96) giving the visual experience a much more physical and tangible quality. There was no longer the façade that what the audience was watching a distanced form of a theatre: a linear, fictional tale outside of the audience. Artaud's theatre was quite a lavish concept, needing full access to technology and equipment. Artaud thought big, and felt his ideas would not be successful if they were not executed in exactly the right manner. This is a significant reason as to why several of his pieces never went into production.

"Artaud altered the typical environment of theatre, as well as the expected procedures of a performance. He

completely immersed the audience as a whole making them feel as though they were one with the fellow audience members, with the actors, and with Artaud himself. The viewers were engaged in an interaction that included spiritual energy and bodily experience, as opposed to simple verbal communication. The goal was to form a collective of ideas, and also of participants." (Potie)

Artaud's plays create a cacophony of xylophonic sounds mixed with various percussive elements, mixed with the noise of alarming human cries, screams, grunts, onomatopoeia and glossolalia, verbal utterances, pants and chants. Theorizing the nervous performance as ritual, Artaud in his preface to *Theatre and Its Double* adds that,

"True theatre, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, goes on stirring up shadows, while life endlessly stumbles along. An actor does not repeat the same gestures twice, but he gesticulates, moves and, although he brutalizes forms, as he destroys them he is united with what lives on behind and after them, producing their continuation. Theatre, which is nothing, but uses all languages (gestures, words, sound, fire and screams), is to be found precisely at the point where the mind needs a language to bring about its manifestation". (7)

The theatre according to Artaud is not confined to any fixed language or form and destroys false shadows thereby preparing the way for another shadowed birth uniting the true spectacle of life around it. He believes in life's meaning renewed by theatre, where man fearlessly makes himself master of the unborn, gives birth to it. Theatre takes extreme gestures and develops them into a limit. Comparing theatre to a plague image where it reforges links between what is real and what is not-between the virtual nature of the possible and the material nature of existence. Theatre, he says, "...rediscovers the idea of figures and archetypal symbols which act like sudden silences, fermatas, heart stops, adrenalin calls, and incendiary images surging into our abruptly woken minds. It restores

all our dormant conflicts and their powers, giving these powers names were acknowledge as signs. Here a bitter clash of symbols takes place before us, hurled one against the other in an inconceivable riot. For theatre can only happen the moment the inconceivable really begins, where poetry taking place on stage nourishes and superheats created symbols" (18)

To sum up, the ritual theatre tradition of India shares common features with the diverse experiments that have tried to take European theatre away from its post-Renaissance realistic moorings. The theatre of cruelty propounded by Artaud has clear parallels in the ritual theatre. Both have common features especially in the use of theatrics and their preoccupation with the spectators. The surrealistic mood explains the further similarities.

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