

PARSI THEATRE AND ITS DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

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ABSTRACT

Parsi theatre was a highly influential movement in the realm of modern Indian theatre. It flourished between 1850 to 1930. It was an outcome of the mixture of European techniques and local folk forms of Indian theatre. They adopted English ways of living more than Indian ones. The theatre groups were run by Parsis, the Zoroastrian community of Persian people, who had come to the western part of India for business purpose. They brought theatre with them for their personal amusement. Later on, they used it for commercial purpose. This foray of the Parsi theatre into the commercial theatre not only enabled the faster development of Indian theatre but it also became instrumental in the establishment of the Bollywood film industry.

INTRODUCTION

The first performance of Parsi theatre in India was done in Bombay (Mumbai) by a well-known Parsi of that time Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy. For the performance of Parsi theatre two theatre buildings were popular- Bombay Theatre (built in 1776) and Grant Road Theatre. About the beginning of Parsi theatre in Mumbai, Anand Lal opines,

“The first Parsi Production is normally dated to October 1853, by the Parsee Stage Players at Grant Road Theatre. Beginning as amateur groups that soon turned professional, many new troops were launched in this period of rapid expansion when audience grew large, made up mostly of Bombay’s middle class.” (339)

The prominent achievement of Parsi theatre was to introduce the Western plays and techniques in India. In earlier part of the performances, they staged the play in English and selected the plays written by British playwrights but with the passage of time they saw the interest of Indian audience in theatre and translated all those English plays in other Indian languages like Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, etc. and performed them. But with the passage of time the directors of Parsi theatre had started to select the plots from Urdu literature and Hindi

literature and performed them because in those days Urdu literature was popular amongst Hindu and Muslim audience in India. In this respect Somnath Gupta says,

“Then fairies, princes, devils, and wizards from Muslim tales became more attractive than English spirit and ghosts, and the Parsi stage presented its patrons with such highly successful plays as Indar Sabha, Khurshed Sabha, Farrukh Sabha, Havai Majlis and Benazir Badre Munir.”(175)

Then they turned towards the Hindu stories to satisfy the desire of Hindus by selecting the Hindi and Sanskrit narratives. Gupta says,

“When the Parsi theatrical companies turned their attention towards the Hindu spectators, they had plays written on such stories as Harishchandra, Gopichand, Mahabharata, Ramlila, and Bhakt Prahlad, which they subsequently performed.”(175-76)

About the selection of various types of themes for the plays, Ananda Lal says, “The form was highly eclectic and of unlike parts, taking stories from the Persian legendary Shahnama, the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata, the fabulous Arabic Arabian Nights, Shakespearean tragedies and comedies, and Victorian melodrama.” (339)

About the use of dramatic techniques in Parsi theatre Karnad has given very sharp views and said,

“In the process of settling down, the Parsi theatre had absorbed several features of eastern traditional or folk performing arts, such as music, mime, and comic interludes.”(306)

This citation explains that the plays of Parsi theatre were not just an imitation of western theatre but could be called the good mixture of Eastern and Western dramatic techniques. Thus, Parsi theatre started a new theatre which was neither based on pure Western theatre nor on the eastern theatre. It was started as hybrid theatre. By creating this hybrid theatre, they got success in catching the attention of Indian audiences and spread its influence in all over India.

Karnad in “Theatre in India” explains the range of Parsi theatre and says,

“The play dealt with subjects ranging from Middle Eastern romances to Hindu myths and the adaptations of Shakespeare, but the treatment avoids all religious and ethical nuances. Secularism was a fashionable concept” (336)

In the matter of writing a play for the stage of Parsi theatre, secularism as a concept was always required to be present on stage because the writers of the plays were, most of the time, Muslim or Parsis and the audience were mostly Hindus. Karnad explains that secularism was necessary in Parsi theatre and says:

The secularism was partly necessitated by the ethnic heterogeneity of the new entrepreneurial class. In Bombay, for instance, the enterprises were financed by the Parsis, who spoke Gujarati. But the commonly understood language was Urdu, popularised by the Muslim chieftains who had ruled over most of India since the sixteenth century. Naturally many of the writers employed by the Parsi theatre were Muslim. And the audience was largely Hindu! (305)

Thus, the secularism became the common ground between the different religious mind-set interplaying in this interaction. Writers always tried their best to avoid the use of religious subject matter in the play and used secularism in the plays. Without secularism any play of Parsi theatre could not be successful on stage. To show secularism on stage the playwright not only experimented with the theme but also used some dramatic techniques. They select the themes which deal with the existential problems or day to day problems. Love theme was one among the favourite themes of Parsi playwrights. Parsi writers were acquainted with the fact that if religious subject matter would be the theme, it would attract the particular class of the society. In the matter of the selection of the theme they have similar viewpoint as T. S. Eliot. Eliot started writing plays with his first play *Murder in the Cathedral* by adopting Christian dogmas. Later on he realised that the play only attracted a particular class of the society. Later on by the use of myths in his plays he got popularity as a playwright and wrote the plays like *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *Confidential Clark*, etc. Thus the secular theme was widely used by playwrights in Parsi theatre even before Eliot in his plays. Secularism brings interesting elements into the production of the play. It brought alienation on stage. The audiences (both the Hindu and Muslim) felt alienation on stage because they were not getting to see their religion openly and explicitly represented on stage. Another point which played very significant role in the matter of presenting secularism on stage is that Parsis were neither Muslim nor Hindus so thus it was natural for them to be secular. Thus alienation enters from wings to the stage and is an outcome of secularism. Karnad expresses his views about the relation between secularism and alienation in the following words:

The consequences of this secularism were that every character on stage, whether a Hindu deity or a Muslim legendary hero, was alienated from his true religious and cultural moorings; and myths and legends, emptied of meaning, were reshaped into tightly constructed melodramas with thundering curtain lines and a searing climax. Unlike traditional performances, which spread out in a slow, leisurely fashion, these plays demanded total attention, but only at the level of plot. Incident was all. Even in

natak companies run entirely by Hindus, the basic attitude was dictated by this Parsi model. (305-06)

The division of scenes into deep and shallow scenes is the strong feature of Parsi theatre. The Parsi theatre often contains the alternation of deep and shallow scenes. The reason for selecting the alternative of deep and shallow scenes is because the deep scenes contain the serious subject-matter and need much attention while the subject-matter of shallow scenes are often comic and is used only to amuse the audience. The shallow scenes often presented on the front stage while the deep scenes in the deeper part of the stage. When the shallow scenes run at the foreground of the stage, the deep scenes get prepared during this time. Karnad has expressed his views about the use of deep and shallow scenes and said:

The stagecraft of the parsi model demanded a mechanical succession of the alternating shallow and deep scenes. The shallow scenes were played in the foreground of the stage with a painted curtain- normally depicting a street- as a backdrop. These scenes were reserved for the 'lower class' characters with prominence given to comedy. They served as the link scenes in the development of the plot, but the main purpose was to keep the audience engaged while the deep scenes, which showed interior of palaces, royals parks, and other such visually opulent sets, were being changed or decorated. The important characters rarely appeared in the street scenes, and in the deep scenes the lower classes strictly kept their place. (307-08)

Thus, Karnad had given clear-cut picture of the deep and shallow scenes and the way these scenes are used in the play. Deep scenes contain the serious episode of the play and the shallow scene uses comic episode in the play which has very little relation with the deep scene. Karnad says about the shallow scene:

The shallow scene was usually a street scene and was kept for comedy. While the shallow scene was on, the deep scene was prepared, for a garden, a palace, a dance, whatever, the sets were being changed. While the set change was going on, in the shallow scene you had comical characters, crowds. (97-98)

Thus Karnad has counted the characteristics of shallow scene and explained that this technique of Parsi theatre has come from Shakespeare. This technique has similarity with the Shakespeare's uses of "comic relief" in his tragedies. But the differences between these two are that Shakespeare uses comic relief as the mental relief for the audience which occurs just after the blood-shed on the stage while on the other hand in Parsi theatre the shallow scenes are used for the passing of time when the scene preparation is on for the deep scene. Shallow scene is also used to satisfy the aesthetic need of the lower class people. It contains some

comic dialogues, romantic scenes, highly dramatic actions, some licentious scenes, etc. These kind of scene satisfies the need of lower class audience.

Parsi theatre always uses back and middle curtains to change the location or scene. They use it in both the deep and shallow scenes. In Parsi theatre, painted curtain is used for the changing of scenes rather than using props on the stage. About the use of curtain in Parsi theatre Somnath Gupta says:

Painted curtain which dropped from pulleys according to the action were used in every play. The one closest to the front was called the drop scene, and the behind it the curtain were changed in accordance with the drama. Usually the street scene was the one most used after the drop scene. The actors assembled in front of it for the invocatory prayer as soon as the drop scene was raised. It was also used in farces. Unless some special scene was required, the dialogue scene of farce was enacted before it. Other curtains commonly used were the jungle scene, the 'cut' curtain, palace, garden, and the camp scenes. (176-77)

Thus, in Parsi theatre, three curtains were used - the front curtain, middle curtain and the deep curtain. The front curtain is used as drop curtain which signals the starting of the action and the end of the action. The middle curtain is used for shallow scene. In Parsi theatre the deep scenes take place at the deep level of the stage. The action which takes place in deep scene needs much time to prepare the stage and that is why the playwright according to the need of the situation introduces shallow scene at that place. In shallow scenes often the scenery of street was painted on the curtain. While in deep scenes the curtain was painted according to the need of scene. The deep scene contains the paintings like the fort of a king, masque, court, etc.

The painted curtain at the back side of action helps a lot to the directors of the play. The painted curtain minimizes the use of props in the play. The scenes in Parsi theatre often take place either outside of palace or inside of a room and by selecting this kind of scene the playwright minimizes the use of props. The playwrights of Parsi theatre always avoid the entire house as the location or scene. Thus the painted curtain has very significant use in theatre. The use of painted curtain in Parsi theatre can be compared with the use of curtain in Elizabethan Theatre. In those days to change of the scene was not possible for them in a short period so they used painted curtain at the backside or they put some symbolic props which denoted the scene. In the same way Parsi theatre also used that kind of curtains and props in their performances.

In Parsi theatre the playwright uses flash-back technique to cover all those parts which he cannot present on stage or he has difficulty in presenting. In this theatre flash-back is done through narration by the character. The character comes forward and narrates his past life.

To present the melodramatic scene of the play on stage is another characteristic of the play. Parsi theatre directly presents melodrama on the stage like death and blood-shed. By presenting melodramatic scene on the stage the playwright produces aesthetic pleasure in the mind of audience. About the characteristics of Parsi theatre, Nasser Dasht Peyama quotes Gokulsing and Dissanayake and says,

“The play blended realism and fantasy, music, dance, narrative and spectacle, earthly dialogue and ingenuity of stage presentation, integrating them within a dramatic discourse of melodrama.” (177)

The use of special kind of language for special kinds of characters in Parsi theatre has similarity with Shakespeare’s use of language in his plays. Shakespeare employs, often in his plays, poetic language for elite class characters like king, queen, senators, etc. while he uses prosaic language for the lower class people like porter, watchman, diggers, etc. The clear cut distinction can be seen in his plays like Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, etc. The characters in the play speak according to their social status. Higher class people speak in figurative language with poetic beauty. The lower class people speak in prose or communicative language. Thus, in the matter of the use of language in the play, Parsi theatre is once again the successor of Shakespearean kind of playwriting. In Parsi theatre the audience were mostly from middle and lower working classes. They enjoy the use of songs, metrical and rhythmic lines. In this regard Gupta says:

Basically, the Parsi theatre represented the middle and lower working classes. They responded to anything new or unusual with vocal demonstrations. The Parsi companies sometimes performed in prose, sometime in verse sometime in mixture of both. The lyrics of the songs were metrical and rhythmic but not truly poetic. Still, the audience enjoyed them, clapping and shouting their appreciation. (175)

In Parsi theatre songs are used as Shakespeare uses songs in his plays. But the playwrights of Parsi theatre use songs by focusing the Rasa theory of Indian Aesthetics in their mind. Parsi theatre also uses background music in order to produce aesthetic pleasure or Rasa in the play. The use of background music helps directors in two ways. First of all it helps to produce Rasas on stage and second it helps the directors in creating the illusionary reality on stage. The technique of using background music in the play has been borrowed from Indian folk theatre. Thus, Parsi theatre presented a new kind of theatre in India. They neither presented pure Western theatre nor presented pure India folk theatre to the audience. They were experimentalists at many levels – thematic as well as technical parts.

In the end, it can be said that, Parsi theatre is the first commercial theatre introduced in India. It has opened a new way of presenting a play on stage. The major achievement of this theatre

is the use of deep and shallow scenes. Shallow scenes gradually started to dominate over deep scenes because it contained the comic scenes which appealed the Indian audience. In India this kind of theatre was practiced by Parsis and Muslims and later on used by Hindu playwrights. They introduced secularism as an essential part of the play. It opened a new scope of the performance of plays in proscenium theatres. Later on these Parsi playwrights started writing the scripts of the Bollywood. Thus proscenium theatre and the Bollywood are the outcome of the gradual development of Parsi theatre.

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