



## STAGE TECHNIQUES AND THEATRE EFFECTS AS ADOPTED IN WESTERN THEATRE AND MODERN MALAYALAM THEATRE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to examine the stage techniques and theatre effects as adopted both in Western Theatre and modern Malayalam Theatre tracing the growth of the modern theatre of the West beginning with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and the birth of movements like absurdism, symbolism, expressionism, impression and existentialism and theatre formations like Theatre of Complicate, theatre debre, Theatre of Cruelty, Theatre of Panic, Theatre of Silence, Theatre of Absurd and also Epic Theatre with a mention of the plays of Shakespeare and Kalidasa. It neatly shows how the stage techniques mark both the Western modern Malayalam plays and these characteristic features distinguish them both from the conventional plays.*

**Key Words:** western, modern, symbolism, absurdism, stage techniques, realm of drama, conventional plays, lighting, narrator, director and chorus.

### INTRODUCTION

In an age of high intellectualism dominated by the methods of scientific reasoning and logic, it is out and true that men has explored the principles of nature and has harnessed the unmanageable power hidden in her. In such an age, however, genuine creative art is bound to decline and die. For all creative arts, especially literature works in a plane beyond the

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intellect and reasoning. It has more to do with the heart than to the head. As scientific technology advances, the universe expands and earth goes on shrinking and shrinking. Distance and time have been reduced infinitely. New concepts about the life on men have been introduced. There are various schools of philosophy which have their own approach towards life, especially after the two world wars and there are immense and radical progress made in the field of science, philosophy and theology have been displaced by psychology. The working of the human mind has been given new and different interpretation. It is in the light of above such facts that any branch of literature of the modern era requires critical evolution.

The growth of literature has been perennially stimulated by foreign and native ideas like borrowed by writers. The modern theatre of the west begins with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. New movements like absurdism, symbolism, expressionism, impressionism, existentialism have today as much validity as any of the earlier philosophies. Likewise, the terms like Theatre of Complicate, Theatre-debre, Theatre of Cruelty, Theatre of Panic, Theatre of Silence, Theatre of the Absurd, Epic theatre kept going on in the theatrical art. These various schools have their own great exponents and their master pieces. These plays can easily be distinguished from the plays of Kalidasa or Shakespeare which could be read and employed merely for their poetical value. But modern play should be staged for popularization as well as dramatic experience coupled with shared experience of the audience. The words of J. Michael Walton are apt quoting here: "The performance of a play is an experience shared with the spectator, at a play" (P89). Generally speaking, a modern play is nothing but a mere skeleton, if not evicted on the stage.

The postwar period witnessed, no doubt, a new development in the modern Malayalam dramatic world. In fact, the major playwright of some original dramatic experience and stage technique can be attributed to N. Krishna Pillai who is popularly known as the Ibsen of Malayalam. Falling in line with his thinking and technical experiments, A. Balakrishna Pillai started writing Malayalam plays using the dramatic techniques of western play theatre. Even if the moderns are said to have discarded the traditional stage plays as hackneyed, archaic and ineffectual, many individual playwrights like G. Sankara Pillai and playwright performers like Kavalam Narayana Panicker have shown their natural experimental dramatic experience to be found in the western experimental plays. They follow the westerners for stage techniques, even if they go for some new stage craft. The ancient traditions get combined in a new form even in the Theatre of the Absurd. The tradition of clowning goes back to the tradition of Greece. The Theatre of the absurd which is supposed to originate with Samuel Beckett including Ionesco, does find some resemblances in certain aspects in the plays of C.N. Sreekantan Nair and M.T. Vasudevan Nair. Sreekantan Nair's play Kali reflects the influence of Ionesco. The lunatic dialogue and improbable events make the play absurd.

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Pinter and *Adamon* have their dramatic technique and forte reflected in the plays of N.N. Pillai and N. Prabhakaran and a few others. N.N. Pillai is said to have enriched the stage by his bold and effective innovations Modeling his drama on western force, C.V. Raman Pillai has established force in Malayalam drama.

In modern times, there have been great advances in stage machinery. The success of a play depends upon the stage-effects which can be achieved by the employment of artificial means. As Julian Hilton rightly points out,

*“Theatre is a complex aesthetic machine, dedicated to the representation of the imaginable through performance. The performer and all the apparatus of staging.....set, lighting, costumes, effects..... are components of this machine driven by the collective imagination” (P 158)*

A modern play has no well-constructed plot or even a theme. Another characteristic feature of a modern play is the total absence of sensible dialogues. In fact, there is total absence of communication of all things. Brook says, “Keep the audience in mind at all times; you are making it happen for them” (Kerr 78). In the modern stage, the aesthetic and dramatic effects are not felt by the audience on a holy. Rather each individual made in his or her own way to what is presented on the stage. In the words of Badal Sincar,

*“The demand of the spectator in the new theatre is not an illusion of reality but of reality itself, the reality of the presence of the performer” (P 26)*

Play as literature can flourish only when the conditions of life are fertile to it. In the case of dramas, the Greek theatre flourished in an age when the plays were a part of the temple festivals. So is the case with the Elizabethan and theaters of the Gupta period. Ibsen popularized realism in modern drama. Bernard shaw gave a spurt to problem plays. But then these were more a means of propaganda and social criticism. The modern theatre can no longer be the same as the ancient ones, as a result of the highly sophisticated developments in the field of stage techniques. Moreover, it is no longer possible for a modern man to spare a whole drama to be watched in the theatre. The modern man has more advantages and more profit in presenting films in the theatre.

Still there are professional theatres and radio plays. As such, considerable experiments in plays can be noticed. Even the dance drama of Kerala which is fully associated with the temple has been uprooted from its soil and presented otherwise. Any portrayal of it or bowdlerised forms are to be presented on the screen. The fate of both the modern European

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drama and the modern Malayalam theatre has to be seen. Indian English plays by Tagore and Sir Aurobindo still remain to be read in books and not to be presented on the stage. As is known, in modern literature as well as other fine arts, human experience cannot be expressed through the traditional methods and media. The artists are found using several techniques to express the experiences. The post war human experiences are rootlessness, fragmentation of the human mind, lack of continuity and lack of communication. In an age of electronics and computer technology where science has invaded into the province of art and literature, the art of cinematography has totally eclipsed the traditional dramatic forms. The art of cinema is not a real art. In other words, it is a form of industry though there are rarely films of pure art value. The purpose of modern drama is to express the contemporary human experiences like horror, disgust, disillusionment, lack of an orderly mind and perverted human experience. The literature of Canada may be taken as a clear illustration for all this.

Any work of art is conditioned by the again in which the artist lives. It is his duty to express the life he sees around him. Undoubtedly there may be a few exceptions. But in general art is for the ordinary man. The present day, man finds himself caught within a whirlpool from which there is no escape. He finds no redeeming love. Each man is concerned with himself. There is no communication and no sharing of experiences. More than ever, he is dominated by the sense of danger, horror, threat and moreover, the annihilation of the world. Man has lost his sanctity. His life is worse than that of an ordinary worm. Machine rules him. Technology controls him and dominates him. In such conditions, plays are bound to change from the original nature. Thus, one can find in the new plays irrespective of any region all these experiences both in themes and ideologies.

What is generally agreed is that absurd plays represent the suffering man, doomed to suffer for having been born. In Becket's *Happy days*, Winnie maintains herself with dignity the metaphysical honor in enduring worlds absurdity. She accepts imprisonment without a trace of bitterness, despair and self-pity. The absurd plays have no beginning, no middle and no end. The relationships are unsure and inexplicable. The motivation for speech and action is governed by a meaningless reflexion. Ionesco's *Amedee* depicts a marriage in which love is literally dead and has remained as an embarrassing corpse in the bed room. As mushrooms sprout from the walls atmosphere displays ludicrous insanity. When Camus talked of the absurd in the Myth of Sisyphus, Alvarez remarks, he (Camus) meant "a life lived solely for its own sake in a universe which no longer sense because there was no God to resolve the contradictions..... (Alvarez 13). Many Malayalam playwrights sport with the technique of absurdism. C.N. Sreekantan considers the stage as a theatrical medium and not a literary plat form. His play *Kali* dips its audience into the absurd with its mysterious growth of an idol.



Symbolism leaves a freer play to the imagination of both the reader and the playwright. It aims at breaking down the barriers both physical and psychical, between the conscious and the unconscious and between the inner and outer world. In the expressionistic drama instead of a well-knit plot, one finds a pageant or pilgrimage like structure, a loosely connected series of images or situations. Expressionistic plays in Malayalam have similarities with the western expressionistic plays. The portrayal of men in an industrial society shows human idealism defeated again and again by the progress of technology. Stage techniques include pause, action, gesture, stage setting, sound and lighting. Gesture is a necessity to a play. The vibrancy of the actor kinesthetically reverberates in the audience. In the words of Gloria Brim Becker man, "It is through the encounter of one actor's projective energy with that of another that the audience becomes aware of the vital force that sustains the dramatic situations" (P 29)

In Beckett's *Not I*, a woman called Mouth, represented by a pair of lips, pours out a story to a mute auditor. From time to time, the auditor gestures but always in a non-committal manner. In the play, the auditor stands in for the audience. Audience sees a slightly fictionalized state of direct presentation. The political reality of the world can be changed through alienation technique. Brecht is concerned with the actor's projection. The Brechtian actor stands outside the action, demonstrating that action to the audience. He does not adopt another's facial expression erasing his own. Malayalam plays written by G. Sankara Pillai combine in themselves an exploration of the scope of the stage and the new concept of drama expounded by Brecht. He has also undertaken a systematic programme for raising, the artistic level of the local stage. In the play, *A Man's a Man*, Brecht has extended the idea of a character by the use of a mask. According to Michael Walton, "The mask must only return to the stage to restore expression-the visible expression of the mind and must be a creation, not a copy" (P 23). The idea of the actors art, based on a worship of a mask, gesture and movement, is indissolubly linked with the idea of the force. In Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for ALL Seasons*, there are devices that produce alienation effects. The baskets of props and costumes are lowered from the flies. The common man, a chorus figure, joined in the action, plays various roles changing his costumes time to time in front of the audience. He addresses the audience directly. He introduces the scenes and provides a humorous commentary providing continuity. In Arden's *Sergeant's Musgrave dance*, all the characters face the audience, acting as if they are the platform of a public meeting. The speeches are delivered straight but to the audience. There has been a great advance in stage machinery these days. According to David Bradby, Philip Thomas and Kenneth Pickering,

*"Any director when he comes to stage a play, must assess the setting specified by the playwright and re-interpret it, using the scenic means at*



*his disposal, in the light of the effect he wishes to have upon his audience”  
(P 18)*

The modern plays’ settings leave the audience mesmerized. They do not feel the need to understand the language to appreciate the play. In order to show the sailors in *The Hairy Ape* as caged animals, prisoners and robots, O’Neill calls for an expressionistic setting:

*“The treatment of this scene, or any other scene in the play should by no means be naturalistic..... The ceiling crushes down upon the men’s heads. They cannot stand upright. This accentuates the natural stooping posture which shovelling coal.....and muscles have given them. The men themselves should resemble those pictures in which the Neanderthal man is guessed at”  
(The Hairy Ape 5)*

Malayalam playwright Kavalam Narayana Panicker attaches greater importance to the stage potential of the plays that to their literary perfection. He wants the plays to be staged to the accompaniment of instrumental music because of their structure is based on rhythmic patterns different from naturalistic or logical sequence of events. Lighting is another device used in the modern plays. As Francis puts it, “Stage lighting is a fluid selective atmospheric dimensional illumination appropriate to the style of a particular production” (P 15). The stage lighting can also take on the role of scene-setter. In Beckett’s *Not I* the tiny pinpoint of light that encircles the mouth contrasts with the less sharply lit figure of the Auditor. Both are set against total blackness so that nothing else is seen. Many Malayalam playwrights make use of this device. The use of light in a variety of combinations would eventually become equivalent to the orchestration of musical instrument. The return of the open stage has renewed the art of design. Putting a theatre on the road, has always been a kind of dream for every company manager. During the post war period, the idea of bringing the theatre to the people propped. What is called for is a Writer’s Theatre, nor even a Director’s Theatre, but an Audience’s theatre. Everything can be displayed on the open stages. The audience does not see the bedroom but stage. The atmosphere of the bedroom can be created by the actors by their acts. Berlin great plays were enacted in the streets. “Mudiyettu” is a Kerala art form performed in the open stage. In this art form, the central figure ‘Kooli’ appears in a clownish costume. Her actions appear ridiculous to the core. This ridiculous form can be reflected in ‘Comedian dell Arte’. ‘Kathekali’ is an art form of Kerala that can be performed in the theatre as well as in the open stage. Throughout this performance, the same equipment serves for all the varied scenes. There is every consideration of the mechanical stage effect. The stentorian drums and other musical instruments add to its weirdness.



Improvisation is used in this art form, in imitation of the Western type. The actor perfects his action by rolling his eyes and vibrating facial muscles and finger tips. The performance opens with relentless drumming. The origin of this art may be traced to the “Kudiyattam” prevalent in Kerala at the occupation of the chakkiyar caste referred to in the Silappadikaram, a great Tamil epic composed in the second century A.D. Grotowski and his actors have gone on experimenting with the human organism to find new combinations of spontaneity and artificiality. According to Grotowski, it is the true lesson of the sacred theatre; whether we speak of the medieval European drama..... or the Indian kathakali.... that what is elementary feels what is constructed and vice versa, to become the real source of a kind of acting that grows” (P 222). Gestures have an autonomous meaning distinct from words. Thus, the literary text loses with supremacy and makes way for a total theatrical art. ‘Street Theatre’ has almost become a necessity. The chance to experiment is the essential condition for creativity. The different kinds of theatre depend on different kinds of audience. In the words of Clive swift, “The more ‘experimental Theatre’ that’s brewing the better, on the shop floor of theatre, the sky’s the limit” (P 67). The street Theatre is one of the forms of epic theatre. Peter Schumann has expanded this art form. Schumann has brought him Bread and Puppet Theatre to New York. Schumann makes his performance something of a ritual by passing a loaf of bread that he has baked himself round those who have come to watch. The outstanding elements in his production are the giant puppets upto fifteen feet high, created by actors standing on stilts and wearing, huge masks. Street plays in Malayalam have certain similarities with Schumann’s theatre. The street plays aim at immediate solution, inducing an idea in the mind of the people. Such a play is an analysis of the relatives of life. The street players put on the garbs of diversity representing the life’s diverse fashions.

In modern times, prominent Malayalam playwrights are said to have contributed works for the street performance. G. Sankara Pillai has given the street theatres a new dimension. His street plays in Malayalam are creative and unique. One of his plays starts with a procession. A group of actors, one pillar, rope, hanging pot in the shelf of coir appear and move in the procession accompanied by the drum-beat. It fascinates the crowd of audience. One of the features of this procession is to excite the common people indulged in different occupations. Street players make steps according to the rhythm and sing songs. Their movements and the music mesh harmoniously in the fabric of the play. The street players brave all odds to sustain their work as an experimental theatre group. They are not concerned with the form but the inner principles which govern the movements. These principles are a gift of centuries and have been tested by generations through trial and error.

In the words of Charles R. Lyons, “Theatrical performance depends upon the concrete presence of the human actor. When the actor appears before the audience, both his character and the scene he inhabits assume a strong sense of objective reality” (P 9). The play is

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nothing without an audience. The actor employs certain techniques to give the audience its stimulation. Pause, action, gestures, stage setting, sound and lighting are sought to capture the attention of the audience. Pause is an effective device employed by an actor. He makes use of the dramatic pause in his dialogue. "The value of the pause in acting is priceless" (Seymour 89). The purpose of the pause is to clarify a situation in the mind of spectators. As a result, the audience can get sufficient time to grasp the full meaning of the lines of the actor. The opening scene of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* illustrates the point:

*Peter enters from the door on the left with a paper and sits at the table. He begins to read. Meg's voice comes through the kitchen hatch.*

*Meg : Is that you, Petey?*

*Pause*

*Petey, is that you?*

*Pause*

*Petey: What?*

*Meg : Is that you?*

*Petey: Yes, it's me (The Birthday Party 9)*

The play starts with silence. The tension is retained until line six, with Petey's 'yes, it's me' and Meg enters the stage. "The pause is a pause", he (Pinter) says, "because of what has just happened in the minds and gusts of the characters" (Katherine 92). Quietness is the key word for Pinter. In modern Malayalam play also, pause is frequently used to suit the situation. Action is capable of producing more effect on the spectators than that of dialogues. Pause is used in between dialogues and actions. Silence is more communicative than speech. G. Sankara Pillai's play *Thaavalam* begins with actions interposed with pauses. The action broken up by pauses discloses the actor's emotional crisis. For example, a scene in marlin vale's *The Two Mrs. Carolls* contains passage of pure actions. Geoffrey caroll shuts the window, examines the liquid finds that it is the poisoned milk that he gave his wife. Panic seizes him, when he realises that his wife knows about his action. He makes the room look like thesceneof burglary. Taking a silk scarf, he moves slowly to Mrs. Caroll's bed-room. 'Pause' has another advantage of creating the feeling of suspense in the mind of an audience. Pause provides sufficient time to the audience to grasp the meaning behind the action. Actions like sweeping, moping, folding the bed are linked with the theme of the play. The only freedom enjoyed by the imprisoned ones is sweeping. Action can be shown in two ways. Action doing according to the context is one method. Sweeping is a good example for this. Another is action by means of improvisation technique. That is, acting as if sweeping. For example in the beginning of the play, *Ethanum Kuranganmerum Oru Katteliyum* (Some monkeys and one rat) by Kandachitra Babu, gestures of the apes on the stage with the movement of the hands and facial expressions:

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*“Act (steps down to the river feels cold takes water in hands – tries to sip it” (P 89)*

The actors act as if they enter the vineyard and start picking grapes. They fling the pebbles back thrown at them. In G. Sankara Pillai’s *Karutha Daiyathe Thedi* (In search of Black God), actors themselves create the scene of Jungle, mountain and rivers, with their bodily movements and gestures. Kandachitra Babu’s *Bhootha than Kunnile Daivathar* also is action-oriented. When Daivathar asks Desappan to take axe,

*“Dasppan acts as if handing over me.....” (P 66)*

These can only be done through gestures, ‘Movement’ in dramatic space habits iconic function. Walking across the stage, standing still, and increasing or decreasing the distance between two characters acquire the signifying power of the movement. A character, who sits down in a chair in Pinter’s *The Basement* indicates that he has occupied the room. In the words of John Russel Brown, “Pinter uses postures and movement with unavoidable directness, with inventiveness, controlled complexity and with ambiguity” (Brown 60). The beginning of Pinter’s *The Care Taker* is full of movements. Mick sits alone on the bed. He observes each object in the room. Awakened by the voices outside, he goes out closing the door. The door opens and Aston and Davies enter the stage.

‘Improvisation’ is essential to all plays. Improvisation uses bodies space. It uses all human sources in order to produce a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation or a character. To quote Anthony Frost;

*“Improvisation is not just a style or acting technique; it is a dynamic principles of operating in many different spheres, an independent and transformative way of “being and doing” (P 13)*

It has changed the shape and direction of theatre. Sometimes, a play employs huge masks to express an idea. The mask shows the audience what it is seeing and it does with the whole body the mask is a frontal medium. In the words of Michal Walton,

*“Masks carry conviction when he who creates them is an artist, for the artist limits the statements which he places upon these masks. The face of the actor carries no such conviction; it is over-full of fleeting expression – frail, restless, disturbed and disturbing” (P 21)*



In *Bhuthimanaya Kazhuthe* (The Wise Donkey) by Kandachitra Babu, the characters are oxe, cock, donkey, dog etc. So actors should definitely wear masks.

As in western drama, different stage levels are used in Malayalam drama also. Different acting levels can universalize the content of the drama. In *Guha* by G. Sankara Pillai, the playwright himself gives a neat description of different stage levels:

*“A Cave hidden in darkness. At the corner, there is an elevated place. Parallel to it, there is another place where three people are playing chess”*  
(*Thaalavam* 29)

Objects used on the stage enhance the situation of the play. For example, a dagger and cross, blue and white back curtains are such tools in the play *Visudtha Papangal* by P.M. Antony. Throughout the performance of the play, the audience must be completely absorbed in stage images. They should grasp the inner space meaning of the play. This is achieved through stage setting.

Another feature of modern Malayalam plays is the non-correction between successive scenes. To achieve this, flash-back technique is employed. K.T. Mohammed has adopted the above technique in his plays. A complete change of scene can be obtained merely by re-arranging a few screens. In J.B. Priestley’s *Time and Conveys*, action alternates between the past and the present. The character Miss Key recollects her past life in the second act whereas the first and third are continuous. Similarly, a character named Panicker, in the play *Padippura* by Narendra Prasad, is depicted as a middle-aged man in the first scene. As the play proceeds his boyhood and youth are revealed to the audience through flashback. Stage settings also change in tune with the events.

Another notable novelty of a Malayalam drama is the participation of the director, narrator and the chorus. These methods have been borrowed from Western Theatre Chorus can create different stage images through the performance by its moves and gestures and actions. For example, the director, the actress and the chorus play their important roles in the play *Sauparnika* by R. Narendra Prasad. The technique of presenting the director on the stage time to time creates an Alienation effect. The spectators feel that they do witness a play. Brecht’s alienation effect theory has influenced modern Malayalam dramas. Light plays a vital role in the creation of stage imagery. It established visibility. It can produce realistic effect, compositional effect, mood and plastic quality. The use of effective lighting can charm the elaborate sets. As Frank M Whiting puts it, “Lighting can give a fluid projection of colour and form that is dynamic and moving pattern that can change to fit varying rhythms of dance and drama just as music does” (P 208). The ultimate object of stage lighting is to

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create the illusion of mental association and strong feelings rather than to reveal or hide the visible demands of the stage. The imaginative use of light can create an atmosphere which will haunt the memory of the audience. Light expresses illusion also. Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* is to be taken up as an illustration. Lighting plays a prominent role in the play *Swarna Simhasanam* by R. Narendra Prasad. The opening scene begins in utter darkness Krupanan enters the stage carrying a lighted lamp. The scene echoes thunder which is accompanied by lighting. Lighting puts out the lamp, leaving the stage again in darkness. The man is visible to the audience in the light emitted by the intermittent lighting. In the course of the play, the centre of the stage is lighted in blue. When the light comes, audience can see a big golden throne exactly at the center of the stage. The effect of lighting the stage is well illustrated by Eugene Ionesco in his play *Amedee*. In short, the use of the stage techniques has become a conspicuous feature of the works of modern playwrights.

To conclude, aspects like absurdum, symbolism and the stage techniques mark both the western and modern Malayalam plays and these characteristic features distinguish them from the conventional plays. These plays have given name and fame to the respective writers in the realm of drama.

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