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## **Indigenizing the Brechtian Theory of Epic Theater: A Case Study of *Nāga - Mandala***

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The great Greek philosopher - theoretician Aristotle dictated the terms and conditions for the creation and production of a play for more than two thousand years in the West. His principles and theories remained unchallenged till the emergence of Bertolt Brecht, the German poet - playwright - theoretician who did not only question the authority of Aristotle but also proved his credentials beyond doubt. He questioned the relevance of the 'willing suspension of disbelief' and created the aesthetics of his own where catharsis is never the end of a theatrical performance. In a letter entitled 'Shouldn't we Abolish Aesthetics?' addressed to Prof. Fritz Sternberg, Brecht declared that the new theatre was meant for a 'different' audience and that new pieces 'are not going to satisfy the old aesthetics; (rather) they are going to destroy it' (1979: 22). Moreover he outrightly denied the fact that this 'radical transformation of the theatre' (1979: 23) was not a result of his whims and proved that it was the need of the hour. Finally in an extensive article entitled 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre' which he wrote as 'Notes to the opera ***Aufstied and Fall der Stadt Mahagonny***' in 1930, Brecht explained the difference between Dramatic Theatre and Epic Theatre and the latter's positive effect on the minds of the audience and upon the society at large.

Instead of the systematic, causal and linear progression of events in the traditional Dramatic Theatre, Epic Theatre aims at the episodic narration of the events in a curve which inspires the audiences not to willingly 'suspend' their 'disbelief' but rather to observe and raise questions at

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the prevalent situation. The audience, thus, is expected to function as an active participant in place of a passive spectator who used to forget things the moment s/he came out of the theatre because the aim of the traditional Dramatic Theatre was to arouse the cathartic emotion, 'clam of mind, all passions spent.' Brechtian Theatre, essentially non-Aristotelian, advocates repeated disruptions in order to avoid a linear progression of action on the stage.

Without ever negating the presence of the elements of entertainment in theatre as a binding force, Brecht used theatre as an instrument to instruct the common public and to achieve certain socio-political ends. In order to achieve this 'alienation effect' (*verfremdung*), Brecht suggested the use of white lights in the theatre, half-curtains on the stage, anti-hypnotic music and simple language instead of the figurative and bombastic one as is evident from the following words of Walter Benjamin, a noted critic on Brecht :

The songs, the captions, the gestural conventions differentiate the scenes. As a result, intervals occur

which tend to destroy illusion. These intervals paralyse the audience's readiness for empathy. (1984 : 21)

Brecht also advised to adopt various episodes from history, myth and folklore to achieve the effect of 'complex seeing' which cultivates a sense of detachment among the audiences.

A very interesting point in this regard is that all these conventions have been present and extensively used in most of the folk forms in India as K. Shivram Karanth's protest in the following lines against the changing face of the *Yakshagana* form speaks for the real spirit of folk theatre :

Nowadays we find such directors who in their wish to make their characters contemporary, forcibly introduce politics in (their productions). Social issues are raised,

characters like Rama-Ravana-Duryodhana are made to comment upon such popular topics as family planning, right to speak, and socialism etc. Then the position of these characters becomes very awkward and unreasonable.  
(1973: 62)

This shows that flexibility and adaptability are the forte of Indian folk theatre but these things were neither ever theorized by anyone nor were used as definite techniques to achieve or arouse any specific effect or emotion.

Although the Brechtian influence on Indian theatre is easily discernible immediately after Independence, it was around 1960s that a new wave of using the indigenous idioms and symbols in order to produce the Brechtian effect began. Girish Karnad who had already written two plays **Yayati** (1961) and **Tughlaq** (1964) also felt attracted towards the rich tradition of folk theatre in our country. The award of the Homi Bhabha Fellowship (1970-72) for creative work in the folk theatre enabled him to research well upon the potentialities of folk theatre and he discovered that the techniques used in folk theatre have a strong critical base and if used in a modern play properly, are capable of producing Brechtian effect of desired 'alienation' through 'complex seeing', as he writes :

And it must be admitted that Brecht's influence, received mainly through his writings and without the benefit of his theatrical productions, went some way in making us realise what could be done with the design of traditional theatre.  
(1994: 14)

But it does not mean that Karnad invented or added anything new in the folk form rather by observing the folk theatre from a different standpoint, he realized that various conventions and devices like narrator-on-stage, use of the masks, structure of the stage etc. were very much present in the traditional folk theatre as he again adds:

There was therefore no question of arriving at an alienation effect by using Brechtian artifice, What he (Brecht) did was to sensitize us to the potentialities of

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non-naturalistic techniques available in our own theatre.  
(1994: 14-15)

Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Badal Sircar in Bengali and Chandrashekhara Kambar in Kannada were also involved in experimenting on the same lines. So Karnad too decided to convert this theatre of mass into the theatre of class i.e. to make folk theatre a vehicle of intellectual edification.

**Naga - Mandala** (1988) is the second folk drama (**Hayavadana** being the first) which demonstrates Karnad's invincible interest in folk theatre. Written during his stay at the University of Chicago as a Visiting Professor, the play is based on two folktales from Karnataka which were narrated to him by the poet-scholar-guru Prof. A.K. Ramanujan. This play was first performed by his students at the University of Chicago and then by an important regional American theatre company called the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis. The play bagged the Nandikar Award in 1989 and the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992.

Built like a simple love triangle with two plain Acts and Prologue in the beginning on a story-within-a-story pattern where each character is an entity in itself and each episode exists for its own sake, the play successfully retains the essential qualities of a 'once upon a time....' tale. Two interesting folktales (the number becomes three if we take the Prologue portion into account) are mixed together in one plot in such a manner that they seem one and virtually complement each other. The reason which occasions the narration by Story is fascinating for it helps retaining the curiosity among the audiences. Man cursed to die if he does not remain awake through that night, provides the play an altogether unique beginning. Being a playwright, Man is accused so for boring his audiences till they 'fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs' (1994: 23) and Story, who had run away from her possessor's mouth, needs an audience. So both of them agree to help each other. By introducing this episode as the Prologue, a device which Karnad again uses in **The Fire and the Rain** (1998), he emphasizes the fact that the transmission of the stories from one generation to the other is an inevitable part of Indian tradition. It is the listener's responsibility to spread the story or the song widely.

So full of the Indian folk conventions, the play conforms to another popular belief that the Flames (like Dolls in ***Hayavadana***) go to some desolate place outside the village to talk about the family affairs when they are put off at nights and the family members go to their beds. Inclusion of the characters of the Prologue into the fabric of the play is a daring experiment on the part of the playwright. Although their roles as the characters in the play are insignificant, they become important when they assume the role of the spectator-critic by the end of the play. Use of the dream-sequence for Rani as a device to console herself serves as the objective correlative to her troubled mental state. Once Naga starts visiting her, she stops dreaming at all.

There is no doubt that Karnad has simply narrated the story and like a tactful story-teller in Brechtian tradition, finishes it without suggesting any solution to the issues raised therein. The first question which perturbs the readers/spectators is the reasons for Rani's suffering. She is brought home by her husband, Appanna when she attains womanhood. But he proves to be a callous husband who does not love her and keeps her at home as an object to decorate it. He leaves her all alone behind the locked doors and comes only once a day to bathe and take lunch at noon, otherwise he spends his whole night and the remaining part of the day with a concubine. Rani talks to herself and narrates a story of another Rani (that is a Queen) in clutches of an eagle who shows her a pleasant dream of taking her to a magic garden 'beyond the seven seas and the seven isles.' She remembers her parents and then sobs. The story which Rani narrates to herself depicts her psychological state well. There is no one around to listen to the kind of life she had lived at her parents' place. She is frightened at nights and cannot sleep a single wink but her husband does least bother about it and advises her 'just keep to yourself' and leaves.

Kurudavva, 'a female Tiresias of sorts-a village woman old and blind' as Rajinder Paul calls her in his review of the play published in ***Theatre India***, comes as a great relief to Rani. She is really worried about her not because Rani is the daughter-in-law of her late intimate friend but because she knows Appanna well who, according to her, 'should have been born a wild beast or a reptile' (1994: 29)

but 'by some mistake he got human birth' (1994: 29). Her magical roots provide Rani a happy married life. But her loveless husband remains the same unfeeling and rigid fellow during the daytime who again at nights, becomes the most feeling lover. Rani does not know how to deal with these two selves of the same person in the same house at different hours. Her life is nothing more than a prolonged wait for the other when one departs and her persona is nothing more than a tortured self, as she utters in clear words in Act II :

All these days I was never sure I didn't just dream up these nightly visits of yours. You don't know how I have suffered. When I saw your scowling face in the morning, I would be certain everything was fantasy and almost want to cry. But my real anxiety began as the evening approached .... What was there to see after all? The same walls, The same roof .... The chorus of crickets spreading from one grove to another - it is night. Now he will come. Suppose he doesn't tonight ? Suppose the night queen bush does not blossom ? Suppose it's all a dream ? Every night the same anxiety.  
(1994: 50)

But the fruition of her relationship with Naga results in a greater calamity as she becomes pregnant and her real husband puts her to the snake ordeal before the village elders in order to prove her purity. Although she succeeds with the help of Naga, this test gives birth to so many questions. Is she now sure of Naga assuming her husband's form and visiting her at night ? If at all, she had cultivated a relationship with a stranger knowingly, will it be considered a crime keeping in view her husband's treatment with her ? If the village elders agreed to put Rani to test, why didn't they raise their voices against Appanna's well-known relationship with a concubine ? Was Appanna in a position to question Rani's integrity when he himself did never behave like a faithful husband ? Does a relationship become illicit when it is initiated by a woman ?

Karnad does not raise these questions explicitly in the play partly to save the sanctity of being a mere narrator and partly due to his adherence to present Rani as a character in a folktale and not as a modern heroine belonging to the twentieth century dramatic world. But her

insufferable suffering is in itself a protest against the patriarchal rules where only a woman is always expected to prove her chastity. Moreover none of the village elders does ever interrogate Appanna for not establishing marital relationship with his wife so far. Karnad's understanding of the suitability of the energetic folk theatre form to raise pertinent questions against such illogical practices is witnessed in this play.

Karnad is most innovative regarding the ending of the play and appears to be more Brechtian than Brecht himself as he does not remain content by simply suggesting a 'vague' ending, he rather suggests three possible endings and leaves every option open to the readers/spectators to decide on their own. Man/playwright does not agree to accept the conventional type of ending suggested by Story as ' Rani lived happily ever after ....' instead he demands clarifications regarding 'Kappanna's disappearance,' the 'miserable' life Appanna is condemned to lead, Rani's own 'anguish' and cobra's place in the whole state of affairs. Story puts aside the first three as something 'taken for granted' and continues with king cobra. Cobra sees Rani sleeping 'in another man's arms,' 'in another man's bed' and gets annoyed. He resolves to kill her to make her 'mine (his own) forever' but is unable to do so as is evident from his own words :

No, I can't. My love has stitched up my lips. Pulled out by fangs. Torn out my sac of poison .... Yes, this king Cobra is now no better than a grass snake. Yes, that is it. A grass snake. A common reptile .... I thought I could become human. Turn into my own creation. No! her thighs, her bosom, her lips are for one who is forever a man. (1994:61)

He is conscious of his incompleteness and imperfection as he can neither be a human being nor does he remain a poisonous Cobra any more. These twin selves of his personality get mixed up in such a manner that he is incapable of doing anything and therefore, commits suicide by strangling himself in Rani's tresses. After narrating this probable ending, Story disappears.

But Flames reject this unhappy ending and are adamant to 'end (the story) happily for a change' (1994: 63). Man/Playwright tries to justify it by defining 'death' 'the only

inescapable truth' but Flame 1 sharply reacts to it and puts a counter-question :

Then why are you running from it ?

(1994: 63)

All of them expect from him to proceed for a better ending. Man finally succeeds in bringing a happy ending to the play. He narrates how King Cobra assumes th form of a tiny snake and enters Rani's tresses to remain there forever and when Rani discovers it, she too provides him a fair shelter there.

Out of these three probable endings where the first two are suggested by Story herself and the third one by Man/Playwright, the first one is by all measures the most suitable ending of a folktale because the folktales generally end abruptly leaving behind many unanswered questions. The third one is the most unnatural and impractical of all of them as it can only be a fanciful idea that a woman can keep a living snake all the time in her tresses. It is only the second one which is really capable of satisfying the audience. Flames' allegation that this one is also 'unhappy' can not be accepted in entirety as when Rani discovers a dead Cobra falling from her tresses she insists on it ' to be ritually cremated' and demands that her son will 'perform the rituals to commemorate its death' 'every year on this day' (1994:63). This is how she ensures a proper *shradha* according to the Hindu religious laws to Naga which he actually deserved being the real father of Rani's son. It is neither an utterly unhappy ending nor is improbable.

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