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Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed: A Theatre of Marginalized People in India

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The very existence of drama in ancient Greece before the golden age of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles celebrated the essence of common folk; the people of that period assembled in the midst of open air and performed freely without receiving any benefaction from the aristocracy. Compartmentalization in drama grows into when the patronage of king essentialised with art and culture. Even Elizabethan period undermined the true voice of marginalized people, though a few characters, particularly in Shakespearean plays, were inverted themselves in the strata of marginalized; modern theatre even in 21st century debunks the voice of voiceless as it sustains itself through the grants of corporate houses. It is Brecht of Germany who undermines the rubrics and the concept of conventional dramas propounded by Aristotle in his seminal text *Poetics*. Being more radical than his predecessor, Augusto Boal with an ambition of empowerment of deprived people presented an innovative theatrical venture in Sao Paulo. Here I am trying to reallocate the issue marginalized folk in India, who practiced the Theatre of Oppressed in with a notion of bringing out true polyphonic voice of depressed the classes in our country. In this dissertation the activities of *Janasanaskriti* and of Budhan Theatre will be explored to show how people of marginalized community of India are being empowered to break the oppression imposed on them through the agent of society.

German playwright Bertolt Brecht denounced the dramatic rubric of Aristotle, who theorized the framework of drama in his seminal text *Poetics*, since he replaced plot with narration. However, being more radical than Brecht, August Boal a chemical engineer by profession, conceptualized the framework of Theatre of the Oppressed; it was based on the pedagogy of Oppressed by Paul Fieire. In the Arena theatre of Sao Paulo, Boal never called himself a dramatist rather a practitioner of the Theatre of Oppressed, and it is an umbrella like dramatic practice, comprising of Invisible Theatre, Forum Theatre, Newspaper Theatre, and Legislative Theatre. Boal, in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, clarifies the very creed of his theater as he says:

“ Theatre is the most natural form of learning, and the most primal, since the child learns to live by means of theatre, playing, acting characters- and through the other arts, looking at himself and panting sing and dancing. It is true that this learning this apprenticeship, utilizes the prevailing social structures and ethical values of each society as it is there Theatre of the Oppressed. “(Boal117)

As a trend setter Boal incorporates various innovative techniques, concepts and even forms with neologism in Theatre of the Oppressed.

In Greek tragedy chorus played an important role in bringing out necessary information, even protagonist had to rely on it; American dramatists in twentieth century introduced the concept of narrators in their respective plays. In Theatre of the Oppressed, August Boal familiarized us with a new dramatic technique known as, Joker System, originating from the

game of card in which joker plays a temporal role by substituting for other, misguiding players purposefully and even facilitating the tempo of the game. For Boal, appearance of new system does not arise out of vacuum rather social impetuses and prerequisites demand of such innovation, performed by dramatists. The appearance of three witches in *Macbeth*, a mass protest in *Coriolanus*, and the appearance of a ghost in *Hamlet*, were the needs of time, since it was essential to pacify the frenzies of Elizabethan audience; Shakespeare craft fully succeeded in inventing so. The role of the Joker in Theatre of the Oppressed is polyvalent; he is a facilitator as well he is problematic. Joker here plays a role of moderator who interrupts the course of action by asking characters others solution, he poses an audience to silently keep strict vigil on action, and even it is a Joker who participates in the action. Rather Joker in the words of Boal is a magical reality, who invents magic Walls, combats ,soldiers ,armies .As he says ,”To fight, he invented weapon; to ride he invents horse; to kill himself ,believes in the dagger that does not exist.” (Boal 182) It would be better to say ,Joker plays a role of presiding officer in Boal`s Theatre of the Oppressed. Contemporary world has witnessed and has been witnessing the development in socio-political level and emergence of various phenomena, relating to the needs of globalized earth. The practice of democracy demands special acknowledgement, ensuring the empowerment and participation of mass; especially the participation of those who remain aloof or forced to be alienated from the world of happenings. In Theatre of the Oppressed spectator actively participates in the action, replaces the characters and provides necessary suggestions. Therefore spectator becomes the actor and the borderline between spectator actors gets blurred. Here Boal has coined a term “spect-actor”, exploring the duality of human existence in temporal space, since he felt the need of fluidity and flexibility of theatre and through it, he performed, proved and established the fact that in the space of constant flux; audience utilizes the utility of fluid space. It would not be possible within the rigid periphery of conventional theatre which deplored the complexity of oppression and different formats. Stylistic eclecticism in the Theatre of Oppressed is another important aspect of departure from traditional theatre; as Boal points out:

“With in the same performance, we ranged from the simplest and most “soap opera”-type of melodrama in the style of the circus and Vaudeville.”(Baol126)

Stylistic eclecticism poses as stylistic relief for spectators, since it incorporates various kinds of folk culture and popular culture randomly in a particular play. Here again such technique enshrines the spirit of democracy through participation.

Bakhtin`s concept of “carnavalesque” would be an ally for those who practice the Theatre of Oppressed around the world, since oppression is itself justified as social phenomena rather than a product of ideology.

“To Bakhtin, a literary work is not a text whose meaning are produced by the play of impersonal linguistic or economic or cultural forces, but a site for the Dialogic interaction multiple voices, or modes of discourse each of is not merely a verbal issue, but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants that are specific to a class, social group and the speech community.” (Abrams62)

Bakhtinian dialogism incarnates as the new avatar of marginalized who recognized the Theatre of Oppressed seems to be a platform of getting relief from the conventional theatre which received patronage from royal coiffure, and it is being endorsed by business houses. Therefore, in the implicit or explicit way the capitalistic society undermines the amenities,

necessities, and prosperities of marginalized people around the world and invisible practice of the Theatre of Oppressed in India poses as a vehicle of voiceless people –what I would like to expose in this dissertation. Boal scrutinizes the whole process of globalization and reaches into conclusion based on the social discourse of Bakhtin; here Boal essentializes globalization with monologue and it could be countered by dialogue. As Boal says in *the Aesthetic of Oppressed*:

“...globalization craves for monologue: to combat globalization, we need dialogue, in unions and in church, in the science and in the arts, in the solitudes of the psychoanalytic couch and in the multitude gathering of theatre of street” (Boal74)

Practice of Forum Theatre, one of the potent branches of the Theatre of Oppressed, exists till date. Here I like to explore the activities of **Janasanaskriti**, one of the longest and the largest surviving institution of the world; hence Boal admitted that it was considered to be a chief organization of his methodology apart from his native Brazil. **Janasanaskriti** started its journey in 1985 near the outskirts of Kolkata under the leadership of Sanjoy Ganguly; he started the practice of Forum Theatre in 1991 by adopting the aesthetic of Theatre of the Oppressed. It is also to be noted that this organization is marked as an only organization which practices theatre in rural India, spreading its branches all over India. Members of **janasanakriti** belong to the so called lower strata of society, comprising of marginal farmer, rishwa puller, fisherman, domestic help, etc... Since its inception it has been ensuring the participation of underprivileged, and makes them empowered through participation in various burning issues of society. *Gayer Panchali* (story of the village) much acclaimed performance of **Janasanaskriti** based on the collage of happenings of an obscure village, locating “far from the madding crowd”, which is 70 km away from Kolkata, problematizes issues of real life of village folk. Through performance of this play, course of action requires the participation of “spect-actors” since they have been experiencing various forms of oppression, lurking behind their day to day lives. Village folk usually oppressed by doctors, rich farmers, and others is presented and asked them to provide a solution of particular reason of oppression. *Gayer Panchali* (story of the village) also exposed the rural politics and its worst form. Nevertheless, the performance of it received great anticipation from rural folk, particularly women folk for whom formal training of theatre was the ‘desire of the moth for the star’. When a character of this play received a brutal treatment from a political leader, a woman came forward, participated in the course of action, and gave a specific suggestion so that the menace of ruthless politics came to an end. The atmosphere created by Theatre of the Oppressed ensures participation in a democratic way, Sanjoy Ganguly mentions much about a play on the exploitation of girl and womanhood; namely *Sonar Meye* (the Golden Girl) in which Amba, a protagonist of this play becomes a victim of domestic violence. Therefore, it invites ‘spect-actors’ with a sharp ground of debate. Sanjoy always narrates an experience of Jaipur in Rajasthan- performance of *Sonar Meye* was going on near the adjacent central market of the city, Sima Ganguly was playing the role of Amba, narrating his agony inflicted on her because of the barbaric dowry system, and in the meantime a, small shop owner watched it and participated in that play, endowing a specific suggestion so that the brutality of dowry came to an end. The role Joker initiates an important role by inviting a debate on the issue, alternating different solution, and of course mediating between actor and spectator. International festival of Forum Theatre under the nomenclature of *Muktadhara* was scheduled to Kolkata in 2004, inviting various groups from different states like Orissa, Gujarat, Delhi, and Tripura and including international groups of Forum Theatre. The Hindustan Times, Kolkata live reporting the event as:

“This is theatre at the grass root level, medium for Theatre of the Oppressed to the voice problem and fine solution. The style is unique. Spectators during the play come upon the dais and offer solution to the problem posed by actor”

Traditional folk culture *Gajan*, a practice of penance by the people of lower caste to celebrate the spirit of Lord Shiva, and folk dance *Raibesh*, a dance form of foot soldiers were infused into the play to ensure the participation of multicultural activities, especially the culture of marginalized people. Such approach is defined as stylistic eclecticism comparing with that of comic relief, relieving stress of spect-actors who experienced it during debate in the middle of play. So **Janasanakriti** ushers the development of Theatre of the Oppressed in India. One of the exponent of Forum Theatre of Canada, Brian Brophy observed:

“with the advantages of performance techniques from Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed arsenal Janasanakriti illuminated the culture of silence by throwing light into the far reaches of rural and urban India. Giving voice to the voiceless” (Brophy 12)

The very concept of the Theatre of Oppressed and its branches influences the community theatre; concept of Budhan theatre at Chharnagar in Gujrat seemingly correlates with it. The Budhan Theatre Community worked with *chharas*, a nomadic tribe of Gujrat, has been treated as a criminal notified tribe since 1871. Historically, it is proven that stigma on *chharas* as criminal was fabricated since the British did not trace them out because of their nomadic nature. Since its early journey Budhan Theatre has tried to depict the problem and obstacle of *chharas* community, it explores the way of their empowerment. In 1998, *Budhan*, a play was performed by this group based on the story written by eminent author turned social activist Mahasweta Debi, highlighted the death of Budhan Sabar under police custody in Purulia district of West Bengal. Budhan Theatre group exposes the plight of marginalized people and entails the process of empowerment, it is proven while it performed on the premises of Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad; therefore this theatre community somehow works as forum for common people of marginalized *chharas* which denude their exploitation, anticipation and aspiration through it.

A theatrical venture of Boal, somehow, becomes a movement across the world of that section of society; it influences the rest of the world with its appeal for the cause of marginalized in any field of human territory. **Janasanakriti**, the longest surviving organization of the Forum theatre, has successfully practiced it in the rural area. Through this paper I have focused on unique features of this theatrical idiom in the social context of India, here **Janasanakriti** and **Budhan Theatre** at least creates awareness among the people of the marginal section of society, not only the marginalized people, but a marginal culture of Indian has come in the limelight of the literary circle.

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