

Alienation Techniques in Vayala Vasudevan Pillai's *Vishwadarshanam*

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Abstract

In *Vishwadarshanam*, people are waiting for the creation of a society based on equality, after smashing one built on slavishness, immorality and injustice. It is then that a sculptor comes to fulfill the long cherished dream of the helpless people. The characters like Adhikari, Dhanapathi and Madanan shoot arrows at the sculptor. They try to subdue him with arrows of wealth, lust and power. At last he succumbs to the temptation of lust. In this play, Vayala Vasudevan Pillai employs the technique of alienation to alert the spectator from emotional identification. The movements and gestures of the characters and the action taking place on the stage are all to enhance the effect of alienation. Vasudevan Pillai seems to correct the impression that a play is not merely verbal acting, by giving importance to characters allusive gestures and movements. Vasudevan Pillai's purpose is to enable the spectator to adopt a critical attitude towards the represented behavior of the play's characters.

Keywords- *Alienation, Expressionism, Epic Theatre, Symbolism*

Introduction

Vasudevan Pillai was an eminent theatre personality who had enriched the Malayalam theatre of the 1970s and 1980s with his profound knowledge and practical wisdom. Vasudevan Pillai believed that a better knowledge of the theatre movements all over the world would help a playwright create a form proper to the content. A play comes to be not because of the skill in choosing a plot, but in the skill in transforming a plot into a play. He employs a different style in his play *Vishwadarshanam*. In his own words, he has used “a language which is rhythmic, subtle and clear, yet evocative and a heightened prose” (42).

As noted by G. Sankara Pillai, a veteran dramatist in *Natakadarshanam*,

There are three power sources before the playwright, namely, the folk tradition, classical plays and modern trends. Anyone who has ever written a play is influenced by at least one of these elements. Thus for a dramatist who goes out in search of his own motivations, two streams of thought and movements, the epic theatre and the expressionist-existentialist theatre, and the theatre of the absurd that followed, become significant phenomena.(89)

The prologue to the play *Vishwadarshanam* creates an atmosphere of the expressionist theatre.

The call of the sacred conch is heard in the background. Loud chanting of prayers and the beating of drums are heard. The prayers of women rise...When the echoes gradually dissolve the terrific sound of a blast resounds in the skies creating an atmosphere of a noisy and bloody rebellion followed by the wailing of women and children. Then the curtain rises. (49)

From the very beginning of the play, Satyadevan, the stage manager, communicates with the audience. When he says that “what is performed on the stage is just a play” (83), alienation is clear. The idea central to Brecht's program was that of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation). In order to induce a critical frame of mind in the spectator, Brecht considered it necessary to dispense with the empathetic involvement with the stage that the illusionary theatre sought to induce. By creating stage effects that were strange or unusual, Brecht intended to assign the audience an active role in the production by forcing them to ask questions about the artificial environment and how each individual element related to real-life events. In doing so, he expected the viewers would distance themselves emotionally from problems that demanded intellectual solutions. As Walter Benjamin explains in his book *Understanding Brecht*, the starting point for Brechtian epic theatre is “the attempt to induce fundamental change” into the relationships between the stage and the public, text and performance, producers and actors.

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For its public, the stage is no longer 'the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area. For its stage, the public is no longer a collection of hypnotized test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it must satisfy. For its text, the performance is no longer a virtuoso interpretation, but its rigorous control. For its performance, the text is no longer a basis of that performance, but a grid on which, in the form of new formulations, the gains of that performance are marked. For its actor, the producer no longer gives him instructions about effects, but theses for comment. For its producer, the actor is no longer a mime who must embody a role, but a functionary who has to make an inventory of it. (2)

Thus Brecht provides theoretical justification for a politically instructive, socially responsible and formally innovative theatre. Epic theatre hence appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, a professor in the department of Theatre and Drama at the university of Wisconsin-Madison, is of the opinion that that Brecht contributes in two important ways to elaborate cultural effort to develop a distinctly Indian theatre, in India. His rejection of the dominant Aristotelian tradition of the western drama lends canonical authority to the critique of western theatrical models in India and the antirealist gestural discontinuous style of his plays facilitates their assimilation to a range of traditional Indian performance genres. Brecht's theories of epic theatre and the alienation effect evolved from this interest in eastern theatre traditions and he is therefore a particularly valuable model in the quest for modernity of tradition in India. As Brecht himself notes, the epic theatre is not all that new because "its expository character and its emphasis on virtuosity bring it close to the old Asiatic theatre" (Willet 75).

Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus act in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself so that a critical consciousness can be awakened. In this play, Satyadevan wants to develop a kind of rational thinking among the audience. This is evident in the following words of Satyadevan:

Satyadevan: Look, I forgot to tell you one thing. If you are going to continue with this narration, creation will take place behind the curtain and the play will end. A play is not a kind of story-telling. In fact, its secret lies in a delighting the audience with the performance. (61)

Brecht's Marxian ideology led him to come up with an alternative direction for the theatre that would integrate the two functions of enlightenment and entertainment. In this way theatre could provide a picture of the world by artistic means and offer models of life that could help the spectators understand their social environment and master it both rationally and emotionally.

When Satyadevan tells Adhikari, Dhanapathi and Madanan, “if you have something to say, speak it distinctly and dramatically so that even those sitting at the far end might be able to hear it” (67). The aim of the playwright is to make the audience participants as well in the play, for a play is one in which the dramatist, the stage and the audience rise to the same level of imagination with a mutual understanding and inquisitiveness for a full enjoyment of the performance. Thus Vasudevan Pillai emphasizes that the participation of the audience is essential in this performing art. The element of alienation can be seen in all stylized performances. This is a peculiar style of dramatization where the audience do not identify with the characters. They realize that it is not characters who perform but actors, and their participation is ensured.

Alienation helps to prevent the identification of the audience with the characters, and increases their sense of discrimination. The props they use are more symbolic than flamboyant. Stanislavski taught that the way an actor carries a prop or wears a costume can give an audience significant information about the details of the character’s life. Thus the dialogues and actions are more suggestive.

Towards the end of the play when Madanan drags away Sreekala for his sexual gratification, Uthaman and Satyadevan come along the way of emotional identification of the audience. Thus Vasudevan Pillai employs the method of interruption, devised by Brecht, in order to break our identification with characters. Thus he arouses astonishment rather than empathy. It is the perception of the dramatist that the play does not require an audience who identify with the characters at the peak of their emotions, is asserted with the dialogue between Satyadevan and Uthaman:

Uthaman: (intolerably) Wow! Are you so heartless? How could you gleefully look on when a hawk mangles a dove?

Satyadevan: (laughing) You, idiot! Isn’t it a scene that I contrived that they act out? Have you forgotten it so soon?

Uthaman: Oh! I just forgot that! I was tempted to jump in and save her. I didn’t remember that I too am part of the audience.

Satyadevan: (laughing) If the audience are overwhelmed by a surge of emotions how can they enjoy it? (83)

Thus Vasudevan Pillai considers interruption as an element for producing the effects of alienation. He wants the spectator to have an enlightened vision of the world and succeeds in conveying to the audience what he wants to say through the technique of alienation.

In his preface to the play, Sankara Pillai comments that:

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The playwright has tried to present here in ‘the language of expressionism’ the play performed on the stage of time. Worn-out plots and hackneyed techniques would only arouse contempt in discerning audience. (46)

In *Vishwadarshanam*, the whip, money bag, and the red flower are revered objects that give Adhikari, Dhanapathi and Madanan, the tempting deities in the play, ecstasy and bliss, and fill them with frenzy. These three objects symbolize their perverted character. Adhikari has learned only how to swing the whip and make others obey him, and he is merely a brute enjoying power. Dhanapathi, on the other hand, believes that there is nothing that money cannot buy, whereas Madanan loiters always smelling a red flower. They symbolize the dark and evil forces in society.

In order to prevent the audience from bothering about the mere development of plot, Vasudevan Pillai uses songs, slogans and speeches to interrupt the action and comment on the theme in the play *Vishwadarshanam*. For instance when the sculptor enters people shout, “Long live our sculptor! Long live!” (53).

Another instance where we can find the technique of expressionism is when the loudspeaker extols the sculptor and sings his praises- “here comes our respected leader that the humanity has been restlessly waiting for. He is the protector of human conscience...” (52).

One more occasion is when the crowd sings and dances merrily the moment when the sculptor enters:

Our sculptor, maker of a new age,
A sculptor seeking divine secrets,
A sculptor generous and courageous
A sculptor driving away birth and death. (74)

In *Vishwadarshanam*, performance becomes a discussion about social conditions with the audience. It allows the viewer to step back and see the play for what it is, a group of people acting and interacting with a set, props or one another. Characters and incidents from ordinary life, from our immediate surroundings, being familiar, strike us as more or less natural. Alienating them helps to make them remarkable to us. Thus the play bears testimony for the influence of Brechtian vision on Vasudevan Pillai. Even though he imbibed all these influences into his own dramatic vision, he never deviates totally from his own culture. NissarAllana observes that:

After independence, when the meaning of culture and tradition needed to be interpreted in a modern context, in evolving a new identity, Brecht’s use of elements that already existed in the folk theatre tradition brought about a wider awareness of the possibility that such elements could become part of the modern idiom in the Indian context...In India there was already an awareness of the importance of

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discovering a link with tradition, and Brecht's theatre soon became exceedingly relevant. (2-3)

Thus the dominant impulse within the Brecht movement has thus been toward an indigenization that makes the aesthetics of his theatre widely accessible to Indian audiences.

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