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Decolonization of Postmodern Drama: Audience and the Meaning

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Abstract

In this article, we have discussed how Postmodern theatre became a movement of decolonization in the world of theatre. Different approaches like the one by Brecht, where audiences were involved have democratized the theatre world by involving the audience to become an interpreter of the play, rather than just being an observer who purges themselves from emotions after the play. Boal also developed 'theatre of oppressed, giving a voice to the oppressed class. Grotowski developed Theatre for the poor, where it was not required to have a stage or any properties to do a play, while Viola Spolin's improv theatre involved the audience in the creation of a scene.

Keywords: Decolonization, Postmodern, Drama, Audience, Meaning, Democracy

Introduction

There is an inherent connection between decolonization and postmodernism as both of them believe in destroying the grand narratives and established norms. While Decolonization was a process where imperial powers were thrown out and a government of the people from the colonies were formed, Postmodernism also believes in throwing out the conventional formulas to bring in a change in how a particular literary genre is perceived. Both of them believed in the democratic rule of the people/ reader and the government/writer was not the only power center establishing the rules.

Postmodern Drama and the Audience

In a conventional sense, the audience in a drama was not given any agency of the interpretation of the play. The drama was very much dependent upon what was happening on the stage. Things like dialogues, narrative and characters were extremely important in the creation of a play.

On the other hand, the Postmodern Drama, all these things are not so important. Even the text of the play itself becomes invalid or "empty", as the audience is given an active role in the creation of the meaning.

According to Stephen Watt, "When preceded by such adjectives like postmodern or postmodernist, the drama is emptied of most of the features by which it has traditionally been recognized – dialogue, a discernable narrative, character, agon-thus potentially rendering the text so described as something of an "empty" or "self-nullifying marker".(Watt 17)

Postmodern Drama originated in Europe in the 1960s having certain features which challenged the conventions of the theatre at large, but it also reacted against the hegemony of the colonial powers targeting its use of art as an ideological state apparatus.

It can be noted that most of the Postmodernist Dramatists were against any hegemonic rule. It can also be said that these playwrights, though belonging from the upper or middle class, wanted the oppressed to have their say in the society, as well as the theatre. Although not all of them were openly socialism or communists, they wanted the destruction of elitism and rules in Drama.

Writers like Bertolt Brecht reacted against the totalitarian powers such as Nazis in Germany and other colonial powers by and large. His plays revolted against the imperialists and capitalist powers who only wanted to control the raw materials of the world for their profit.

Towards the end of the play “Man Equals a man”(1926) the war is presented as something which is fought purely for commercial aims: “If they need cotton it will be Tibet, and if they need wool it’ll be Pamir.” Even the army has no idea about what they are fighting for and whom they are fighting against, “We have not yet been informed on which country we are about to wage war. But we have been informed that it will be a purely defensive war.” We can see his angst against capitalism in these passages. (Brecht 49)

During the process of decolonization people who took over from the colonial powers and who were mostly benefited by their removal were mostly from the upper and middle class, except a few countries where the lower class got the power. But it was not just the middle class but all the classes who fought for independence.

Aijaz Ahmad says, “Decolonization, however, was no uniform matter. All classes and all political ideologies, from landowners of various sorts to fully flagged national bourgeoisie, and from the most revolutionary, had contended for leadership over the anti-colonial movements with diverse consequences in different parts of the world.” (Ahmad 18)

The people in power control history, and by controlling it the present can also be controlled. For both communism as well as postcolonialism, history is something which has to be reinterpreted and even restructured to give importance to the section of the people who are insulted and ignored to create a certain viewpoint among the people to show the superiority of a certain race or class.

Bertolt Brecht reinterpreted history in his plays but not to prove that his version of history is the reality but to signify that their version is as fabricated as his version is.

Arrigo Subiotto says,

His adaptations of past plays are a significant contribution to the re-orientation of historical thinking away from a priori transcendental truth immanent in historical events toward an understanding of the ever-changing structure of reality to influence the future structure. The standpoint Brecht takes up is no more objective than the one rejects except in so far as the process of history and possibly progress- is its objective truth, and the meaning of history, not being determined is not there to be apprehended but must continually be established afresh(Subitotto 194)

Thus, Brecht’s plays became helpful in the process of decolonization.

Vermengdungseffekt

Decolonization was not just a movement which happened to remove the colonial powers back to their huts but the main motive behind it was to bring up liberation and to give power directly in the hands of the people in large who till now were played upon and not playing, and having no say in the workings of the government. Democracy became the mode under which people wanted to form their nations. A democracy where people were not subservient to the colonial masters but had the power to influence the formation of the government.

John Mcleod says, “If colonialism had condemned millions to a life of subservience and dispossession, then anti-colonial nationalisms and political self-determination for colonized people.”(Macleod 75)

Postmodern Drama also did the same by breaking the barrier between the theatre and the audience. One of the major features of the postmodern theatre is the participation of the audience in the enactment and the final product which comes out of it. The audience is no more a passive viewer who takes away anything which is shown, but they now become an integral part of the play itself. This feature democratizes the stage breaking down its hierarchical nature where the writer is the dictator of the terms.

Rejecting the classic Aristotelian thought that a play should purge the audience from all the emotions, Brecht by starting the Epic Theatre created a theory that a play with its actors and actions should not affect the audience emotionally but provoke rational self-reflection and enable them to have a critical view on the actions which happened on the stage. He wanted them to recognize and think about the social injustice which is happening in society.

For this purpose, he used the “*verfremdungseffekt*” or the alienation effect to disconnect the audience with the emotionally with the play. To do that, they used methods such as direct address by an actor to the audience, showing play cards and suddenly breaking into a song etc.

By doing this he reminded the audience that a play is a representation of reality and not the reality itself. By highlighting the constructed nature of the theatre Brecht wanted to convey that the reality is equally constructed as such, was changeable.

Theatre of Oppressed

Augusto Boal was a Brazilian writer and director who founded the “theatre of oppressed “. According to him, the governments use theatre to propagate its oppressive system. They don’t like to hear the reactions of the audience but want to dictate terms by feeding the audience with the ideology they want them to believe in. Boal on the other hand wants to involve the audience and give them the chance to express themselves and to perform actions which are socially liberating. To remove the differences between spectator and the actor he coined a term called ‘spect-actor’

Kees Epskamp says,

“Boal explored areas Brecht had not touched. The former regards the making of theatre as a laboratory situation in which the participants can prepare themselves by means of theatre games to deal with future social interventions within the community or within the society as a whole. In this didactic approach the results are less important than the process.” (Epskamp 13)

He also started “newspaper theatre” to make people aware of the local problems, and forum theatre to teach illiterates how to read and write. In invisible theatre, the actors perform certain common roles and the audience joins in between.

Need for Poor Theatre for Decolonialization

Jerzy Grotowski was a Polish theatre director who started theatre laboratory and the concept of poor theatre. He removed all the props to cut down the expenditure as he believed that the theatre should not be like the movies and it should stick itself to the roots of theatre which is the relation which an actor and spectators share. Thus, it doesn’t need anything except their acting to do a play. By doing this he was able to bring out the theatre to the reach of the poor as now money couldn’t become a problem.

Stanisław Wyspiański’s *Akropolis* was the first complete realization of Grotowski’s Idea of poor theatre. He involved the prisoners of the concentration camp as actors and to perform the play he created the structure of a crematorium around the audience while acting out stories from Bible and Greek mythology. This conceptualization had particular resonance for the audience in Opole, as the Auschwitz concentration camp was only sixty miles away.

Improv and Audience involvement

One of the varieties of experimental theatre which improved the interaction between the stage and the audience is 'improv' which was started by Viola Spolin in the U.S.A in the form of classroom games in the 1950s, and later on, evolved into a form which could be performed in front of a live audience.

Avik Gangopadhyay says,

Improvisation theatre allows an active relationship with the audience often absent from scripted theatre. Frequently improv groups will solicit suggestions from the audience as a source of inspiration, a way of getting the audience excited and involved, and as a means of proving that the performance seems so effortless and detailed that those new to improv are convinced it must have been planned. (Gangopadhyay 280)

It is also important to point out the structure of the theatres in the experimental theatre in comparison to the earlier ones.

Vieux- Colombier

In the conventional theatre, the stage is very much divided from the audience making a gap between the play and the audience. It is always on a platform above the sitting audience and the audience looks in front. This divide signifies the difference the world of plays and reality, where an actor enacts a play and an audience watches it and they are fixed in their roles.

In experimental Postmodern theatre, not just the way the play is played but even the architecture of the stage is such that there can be easy communication between the actors and the spectators.

This kind of experiment called "Vieux Colombier", was started earlier in 1920 by Jacques Copeau.

James Roose Evans say,

Jacques Copeau started his school of Vieux-Colombier with the most rudimentary equipment. Their workroom there was a large hall used normally for storing surplus barrels of wine. No distinction was made between stage and auditorium. The floor was given a coating of cement on which was drawn a vast network of lines forming geometric patterns necessary for their work, providing a play of directing lines which helped to maintain a perfect harmony in the various groupings. (Evans 77)

Theatre of Cruelty

Anthony Artaud also proposed to abandon the 'present-day architecture' and to create a stage taking some hangers and barn, which shall be reconstructed according to the process by which have culminated in the architecture of certain churches or holy places, and certain temples in Tibet. He explains his theatre of cruelty as,

The Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigour and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. (Artaud 66)

Later, on the stage was enclosed from all around by the chairs of the spectators so that they can easily jump into the performance whenever the actor wanted.

Conclusion

Through all these examples of Theatre activists in the Postmodern period, we can say that Theatre became more and more dialogic, hence more democratic, rather than being centred around the stage without the active involvement of the audience. The audience was now more involved, as they had to think, interpret, and get inside the action sometimes.

Hence, it can be said that Postmodern Drama was a big part of the decolonization process, not just in the world, but in the genre of drama as well.

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