



Theatre in the age of Philistinism(The spectator as Subject)

- Professor.L Thomaskutty

Performance studies is preoccupied with spectatorship as an all-pervasive features of contemporary life. Spectatorship is considered an independent activity rather than a secondary or interpretative one. The spectator is an active ,individual subject, not a member of an audience-as-community. The Spectator is indicative of a more fractured or pluralistic understanding of reception. The role of the spectator is primary factor of a performance. From the ancient Indian/Greek drama to the contemporary performance, it has been the key factor .Both Bharata's and Aristotle's dramaturgy gave much importance to them. The central concepts of Rasa and Catharsis are rooted in their emotional response. Bharata insist that the true spectators must have creativity like writers, but with different function. That may lead them to the ultimate goal of aesthetic communication. In other words, spectators could attain ultimate bliss ,Rasa through *Sadharaneekarana*, the total psychic involvement in action. This is very close to Aristotle's Purgation. After all the whole society become purified from all evil thoughts, and attain a healthy ,generous and good tempered ideal. In short,the real function of performance is nothing but to create an ideal society ,by indirectly influencing and purifying its members ,spectators .In other words the action that takes place in the theatre is political and its main target is the spectator.

The spectator is not an unchanging being who has permanent traits irrespective of hi/her space and time. As we know every performance happens in a specific time and space. The ideal, theoretical spectator can't exist anywhere in a performative context. He is not a closed entity. Thus while discussing the spectator; the cultural context must be taken into account. Only the can we look at the role and cultural politics of globalized contemporary theatre.

Most of the performance begins in connection with religious rituals;they were part of prayers and offerings to God's and Deities.The well being of the whole society was their aim. In such rituals/folk plays there were no separation between the actor and spectator. Everybody became parts of those mass practices. This inseparable activity exists only in a particular cultural contexxts,that has itsown socio-cultural values and identity. Those events were periodically repeated and affirmed their own identity among its members.Their ethis ,customs,even the laws were conveyed and affirmed during these festivals. That was the way politics was put into practice in ancient times.

In later sophisticated theatres, spectators and actors are clearly separated.

Their expectations and duties were changed greatly. Apart from the role of participants, they were separated into donors and receivers. Performers, from

An unknown community presents their play in front of a static folk, those are totally ignorant about the strange stories to be enacted. The curiosity of spectators follows each and every scene till the final revelation. Their objectives may be to teach spectators either moral or ethical values. They also intend to generate a loyal and obedient public.

European modernism, especially after Henric Ibsen directly proclaimed its intention as basically sociological. They deliberately chose social problems as themes for the artistic narration. They wished to change the conventional social practices, such as exploitation, inequality, brutality of authorities etc. These theatre practitioners imagined themselves as the herald of social changes. They taught their spectators and inspired them to strike against injustice. The next phase was that of committed political theatre. Eugin Piscator and Bertolt Breht are notable personalities associated with it. They were the founders of Epic/Dialectical theatre, which vehemently use theatre as a public space Ideological discourses. They did much experimentation both in ideology of presentation and within the performances. They considered spectator as an active participant, who had the right even to question and to change the performance. They believed that the theatre was a catalyst for revaluation. The role of the spectator was problematical again. In the case of Augusto Boal, spectators were not mere viewers or witness, but Spect-Actors. The oppressed people jointly stood for a common cause, that is social change. Even if the intention and way of approach of the above theatre were different, one thing is almost similar; the concept of spectator. He is ready to change irrespective of his socio-political and cultural context. This slip-up creates a deep and unsolvable crisis in the field of performance studies. In my humble attempt, I would like to invite the attention of theatre scholars and practitioners towards this fundamental issue.

In the period of Globalization, role of spectator is drastically changed. The concept and nature of Identity of a spectator becomes more complex and complicated than ever before. He is in the midst of multiple notions, tastes and cultures. He is compelled to be in a transcendent, multi-cultural/inter cultural/intra cultural state of being. He is unable either to completely give up his/her own traditional milieus or to accept the fast and furious mass culture into which he/she entered. Finally he has had a single faceted identity, that of *Customer*. In fact, the whole society changed into a post modern condition consist of individuals who have lost their inner relations. They are the spectators of today. In the real sense, we can't consider this group of individuals as a single cultural unit. In other words they haven't specific cultural/aesthetical contexts. As Jean Baudrillard observed, instead of causing communication, (theatre of globalization) exhausts itself in the act of staging of meaning. By which they can erase both the role and cultural identity of spectator in order to make him impotent and apolitical, in the service of authority.

The viewers are just like the customer in a multinational mall. The mall is ready to serve and satisfy the needs of customers. Its goods will be well arranged and attractively displayed. The customer can enjoy as per his taste and his pocket. His /Her participation is negligible. Thus the contemporary global theatre is paradigmatically shifted from its function, practice and even marketing techniques. (Post modern theory is like the Toyota of thought; produced and assembled in different places and used everywhere- Stephan Connor, taken from Brian Singleton's article.) Since the entertainments industry become a vast income generating field, lot of professionals, technicians, managerial personalities are essential. A number of non-artists and professionals are actively involved to assure the accuracy and perfection of these productions. Thus the main object of the production changed into profit over spectator/customers. They practice not the language of theatre but that of money. On the other hand Spect-Customers have very few intentions such as of a lazy entertainment during their home out. They are least bothered about theatre and its society. More over they become more conservative consumers, and stood against any revolution, which may threaten their peripheral security. Ultimately these spectators wish to protect the existing system and its hegemony. They use each and every technique, extravaganza to beautify their products. These alien cultural products create a labyrinth of carnival and swallow its customers. In other words we are in a heartless materialistic period of philistinism.

The history of Malayalam theatre is almost similar to that of the rest of the world. We have Folk/Classical ?Modern theatre traditions, Kerala Peoples Arts Club, fraction of Indian Peoples Theatre Association initially politically committed theatre activities all over Kerala. Thoppil Bhasi's Popular play, You made me a Communist' bags great acclamation due to its committed stand against social injustice and for the urge to change society. Plays of Cherukadu, K.T. Muhammed, S.L. Puram Sadhanandhan, P.J. Antony, N.N. Pillai, K.J. Baby, P.M. Taj, etc shared this approach. At the next point our well known play writers like Kavalam Narayana Panikker, G. Sankarappillai do their experiments with folk elements. This *Thanath Natakavedi* (Indegenous Theatre) was the first attempt to create an anti colonial performance. Last few decades theatre in Kerala largely depend not in written texts rather than improvisations and free adaptations of stories and novels. In between lot of theatre students come into the field with professionalism and technique. Most of them have got opportunities to participate in foreign theatre companies.

Normally their affinities and predicaments are similar to that of global rather than local. As a result of contemporary spectator in Kerala tends to be a customer, who haven't any role in performance, especially after the state sponsored performances like International Touring Theatre visits, International Theatre Festival of Kerala, 365 plays projects and other sponsored programmes. Obviously those performance were valuable and perfect. There have been a lot of pain and effort behind them. Those events gave much inspiration to our theatregoers, I appreciate those opportunity to introduce foreign performances to our local spectators. But theoretically speaking I have my doubts on the changed role of spectators.

For better future of theatre, who are equally talented as performer should be restored along with his own cultural/aesthetical identity. Of course ,there are Financial implications ,but plays have their own great social function in history. Even today ,after Covid-19,I believe ,the theatre can sustain its challenge of all kinds of hegemony .Our performances should can provide a way out from our materialistic life only through the great pillar of the theatre, the wise spectator. The spectator has today replaced the disappearing author and therefore we have to expand our understanding of spectatorship empirically, theoretically and methodologically.

