

A Critical Review on Post Independence Indian Drama and Brechtian theory

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To talk about epic theatre means we have to write about the father of it, Bertolt Brecht. He is one of the most influential figures in Twentieth century theatre changing forever the way we do theatre. His theatre, his plays and his legacy remain the subject of much heated debate more than fifty years after his death. Brecht was born in Augsburg, Germany, on 10 February, 1898. He started writing and publishing by the age of 16 (news commentary, poems and short stories). And had his first plays published in 1922 at the age of 24. He was married to the famous actress Helene Weigel, who was his life-long companion and co-writer/director. They set up their own company, the state-funded Berliner Ensemble in 1949. He died on 14 August at home in East Berlin.

To talk about Brecht's epic theories of drama, I want first to mention to the origin of the theatre is a composite art which involves not only playwright, actor, director, visual and aural effect or paraphernalia but also to let the audience get its aim fulfilled. As Grotowsky has opined at least a single audience is required to become a play completed. So theatre or drama is a visual literature. Theatre has from its beginning been the site of provocation and contestation. The theatre also has been exploring the talent dehumanized issues of people by its visual effect from the beginning. Thus, its motto and vision is to explore the self of man while providing entertainment is a unique quality which distinguish it from the other genres of literature. Drama has also given the privilege. In Greek a ceremony organized for people to give them education and amusement. It was then known as the tragedy. The first theorist in the whole history of European thoughts was Aristotle because of his Poetics that has documents on drama and literature in general. He categorizes literature into four types or genres: Tragedy, Comedy, Epic, and Poetry. Aristotle divides Tragedy into six constituents: Plot, Character, Theme (thought), Dialogue (diction), Melody (rhythm), and spectacle (stage aspects like light and acoustics).

Aristotle wrote the poetics, a typology and description of literary forms with many specific criticism of contemporary works of art in the 4th century BC. Poetics developed for the first time the concepts of mimesis and catharsis, which are still crucial in literary study. These points can be clarified

more and more in studying the works of the greatest Greek philosopher, Aristotle, the father of philosophy.

Aristotle's *Poetics* is an epoch-making work, a pioneering work, a work that is a storehouse of literary theories, one of the great, world-books, a book whose influence has been continuous and universal. It is an attempt to arrive at the truth. Gilbert Murray points out, **"It is a first attempt made by a man of astounding genius to build up in the region of creative art a rational order, like that he had already established in the region of the physical science."** (Aristotle on the Art of Poetry)

Aristotle's account of tragedy is intimately connected with his theory of action and his ethical theory. His *Poetics* was intended to form a central part of his extended inquiry into the nature of human action and happiness. It was his view that in tragedy, the tragic hero falls into misery through a *hamartia*, a mistake or error that results in irreparable damage to the life of the protagonist and/or the lives of their loved ones. *Hamartia* or 'tragic error' brings to the fore the fragility and contingency of human flourishing. Thus, in addition to being read as a work of aesthetics the *Poetics* can be usefully read in terms of Aristotle's ethical theory and thus ultimately in terms of his account of what it is to be a flourishing human being.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle states that all human actions are mimetic and that men learn through imitation. In particular, 'mimesis' is the distinguishing quality of an artist. For Aristotle, all literature is an art of imitation, *mimesis*. His 'mimesis' does not refer to the imitation of Idea and appearances, like that of Plato. He argues that each area of knowledge is imitation in the sense that as a human being we all learn through imitation. Aristotle thinks that all types of art are mimetic but each may differ in the manner, means, and object of imitation. Music imitates in sound and rhythm, painting in color and poetry in action and word. Aristotle compares *mimesis*, an active aesthetic process, with the process that takes place in nature. While nature moves through internal principles, art moves through organic principles like plot, action, characters, diction, and there is a unity among them. In a sense, art imitates nature and the deficiencies of nature are supplemented in the process of imitation, and art follows the same method, as nature would have employed. Thus, if a house were natural product, it would pass through the same stages that in fact it passes through when it is produced by art, they would move along the same lines the natural process actually takes. Poets, like nature, are capable of creating matter and form. The origin of nature is nature itself and the origin of art is the artist and the defining characteristic of the artist is the ability to create, through imitation, as nature does. The artist or the poet does not imitate reality but brings reality into existence through 'mimesis'. The artist or poet recreates and reorganizes already known facts and presents them in a fresh and attractive way in order to present something new.

In the case of drama, tragedy, Aristotle's words in the *Poetics* have set the standard, to the extent that there has in the western world not been any theory of the drama, or discussion of its structure and inner workings,

without reference to Aristotle – in all periods where his book was known. His short book is somewhat the stage on which all such thoughts have been acted out. It is adequate to regard all western theory of drama, as comments on Aristotle - little more, but sometimes less, in the sense that his thoughts are repeated without much comment at all. Tragedy, for him, is regarded as the highest poetic form

In the Poetics, Aristotle defines the tragedy as **“the imitation of an action, serious, complete, and certain magnitude; in a language beautiful in different kinds of through actions and not narration, and through scenes of pity and fear bringing about the catharsis of these (or such like) emotions** (J.W.H. Atkins 85). “According to Aristotle, this definition conveys a lot of implications: it falls into two parts. This first part, from “The imitation of action and narration”, is concerned with tragedy as one of the imitative arts, and points out its medium, objects, and manner of imitation. The second deals with the function and emotional effect of tragedy.

First, Human action is the core of tragedy: it is the object that tragedy imitates. It should be serious and complete. Here, Humphrey explains the word serious as meaning **“weighty”** or important or real. Second, tragedy presents its action on the stage by the actors in front of the audience. Finally, on the bases of its medium, it employs different kinds of embellishments in different parts such as verse in dialogue and song in the choric parts. Here, tragedy is a form for showing, not for telling or narrating. Tragedy imitates ‘actions’ and its plot consists of a logical and inevitable sequence of events. The action it imitates is its plot. The action must be a whole; a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end.

The soul of tragedy, as Aristotle famously says, is the plot. This would seem to be one of the most important ideas in the Poetics. Aristotle says that the plot is the first principle, the primary thing, the fundamental thing, **“the soul of tragedy to speak.”** He goes to the extreme extent of saying that **“Tragedy is impossible without plot, but there may be one without character”** (Zachariah Rush 52). Tragedy is not an imitation of men, but men in action. Action implies a process, the process of change from happiness to misery and every such action is made up of a number events and incidents. Plot is, therefore, the organization of such incidents and events that make up the action of a tragedy. Moreover, the action is not a purely external act, but an inward process, the expression of a man’s inner self, of his thoughts and emotions, in short, of his mental process. Indeed, Aristotle lays great emphasis on the probability and necessity of the action of a tragedy. No incident or character should be superfluous. The events introduced must be such as are probable under the circumstances. Similarly, Aristotle emphasizes unity of action; he is against plurality of action as it weakens the final effect of the tragedy. Therefore, Aristotle couples organic unity of the plot with the principle of both the probability and necessity. The plot must deal with one action, both incidents and situations that is possible according to the laws of probability and necessity. Epic is one of the oldest and widely popular poetic genres in the world. Epic is a traditional form of narrative poetry that portrays heroic deeds of great heroes in a war or adventure and the intervention of Gods and Goddesses on human life. This is a very long poem that uses elevated or majestic language- meaning formal language. Culture and history of a nation or race is often reflected in an epic. For example, Greek poet Homer’s great epics (Iliad and Odyssey) are vastly based on Greek mythology and thus it reflects the Greek culture. Moreover,

Epic can also illustrate the founding of a nation. Almost every language in the world has its own epic like Iliad and Odyssey in Greek, Ramayana, and Mahabharata in Sanskrit, Beowulf In English etc.

There are three essential points to understand Aristotle's idea of drama: Imitation, Action and Catharsis. The whole thrust of Aristotelian theatre, dramatic theatre or illusory theatre as he terms, is depended or intended to emphasize on emotion appeal and catharsis thereafter. It manages to release their suppressed emotions where they in the peace of mind "all passion spent and gone". Thus Aristotle's notions of character and plot was critiqued and aimed at by Brecht whose central aesthetic of drama is depends upon the notion that no fortune is inevitable.

Man's fate is not preordained but manmade hence it is alterable.

A German theatre practitioner, theorist, poet, social reformist and art connoisseur Brecht had the first hand experience of the two World-Wars (1914-19 , 1949-45) and their dehumanized effect on man and society ,the great economic depression of 1930 , emergence of despotism (Hitler and Mussolini) and unemployment among working class, etc.

-There are some principles were shaping Brecht's dramaturgy:

-Message or knowledge is the true liberating forces of man's suffering.

-Marxist philosophy of life; man is the product of socio-economic forces instead of his fate or God

-Existence is the combination of dialectical views (innocence vs. experience, nature vs. culture, religion vs., materialism, proletarian vs, bourgeoisie, etc).

-Narrative is more effective to understand the life on stage than representation.

Epic Theatre:

"Epic theatre" is a term that Brecht is associated with .As we know that Brecht was influenced by the work of Erwin Piscator who was an established German director. During the 1920s and 1930s Piscator was involved in the creation of new theatre forms .He (Piscator) was the first person who invented the phrase "Epic theatre" .It was the term Brecht was looking for that would include the type of theatre . The purpose of the theatre thus was not to imitate life but to educate the audience.

From his late twenties Brecht remained a life-long committed Marxist who, in developing the combined theory and practice of his 'epic theatre', synthesized and extended the experiments of Erwin Piscator and Vsevolod Meyerhold to explore the theatre as a forum for political ideas and the creation of a critical aesthetics of dialectical materialism. Brecht's modernist concern with drama as a medium led to his refinement of the 'epic form' of the drama. This dramatic form is related to similar modernist innovations in other arts. With Brecht the same montage technique spread to the drama, where the old Procrustean plot yielded to a more 'epic' form of narrative better able to cope with wide-ranging modern socio-economic themes. That, at least, was how Brecht theoretically justified his choice of form, and from about 1929 on he began to interpret its penchant for 'contradictions' in terms of the dialectic. It is fairly

clear that in Brecht's case the practice came before the theory, for his actual composition of a play, with its switching around of scenes and characters, even the physical cutting up and sticking together of the typescript, shows that montage was the structural technique most natural to him. Like Hašek and Joyce he had not learnt this scissors-and-paste method from the Soviet cinema but picked it out of the air.

Moreover; The term "Epic Theatre" is now widely use to describe the style and techniques popularized in Germany after World War I by directors like Max Reinhardt, Erwin Piscator, and (most especially) Bertolt Brecht. This style flourished in the left-wing theatres and cabarets of Berlin during the ill-fated German "Weimar Republic" of the 1920's and early 30's; although the rise of Hitler's Nazi Regime choked off its development after 1933, when Brecht and other epic theatre practitioners were forced to flee persecution and arrest by the Gestapo, the style spread to the U.S. and Great Britain, and returned to Central and Eastern European theatre after the end of World War II.

Influenced by the horror of World War I's human cost, by the suffering of the middle and lower classes during the postwar recessions of the 1920's and the Great Depression of the 1930's and by the teaching of Marxism, Brecht and his fellow epic theatre artists devised a set of staging and acting techniques meant to teach their audience to criticize the injustices and inequalities of modern life. Two keys to their technique are the notion of "theatricalism" and the concept of the "distancing" or "**alienation effect**".

The first theatricalism simply means the audience aware that they are in a theatre watching a play. Brecht believed that "**seducing**" the audience into believing they were watching "real life" led to an uncritical acceptance of society's values. He thought that by keeping stage sets simple, showing exposed lighting instruments, breaking the action into open-ended episodes, projecting labels or photographs during scenes, or using a narrator or actors to directly address the audience, a production would allow an audience to maintain the emotional objectivity necessary to learn the truth about their society.

The second key to epic theatre, the "**distancing**" or "**alienation effect**" in acting style, has these same goals. Brecht wanted actors to strike a balance between "being" their character onstage and "showing the audience that the character is being performed." The use of "quotable gesture," (the employment of a stance, mannerism, or repeated action to sum up a character), the sudden shift from one behavior to another to put the audience off-balance, and the suggestion of the "roads not taken" in each moment of a character's decision-making are all the means to the didactic end of teaching us to criticize the society we see onstage in Epic Theatre. Brecht later preferred the term **Dialectical theatre**, to emphasize the element of argument and discussion

I'm sure that Brecht theory has to be useful. I think we are close enough from Brecht as to be able to see him in his own context and thereby understand something about theatre's recent history that has affected the way we do theatre today.

I think that one of the key aspects of Brecht for us today is that his theatre gives us an insight into a period in which there was a passionate commitment to

theatre as an agent of social change. This was a time, the first half of the twentieth century, the pre-television era, when theatre played a much more vital social role than it does today. In a sense we can study Brecht like we do classical Greek theatre and Shakespeare as one of theatre's high points, at one of its most intensive periods of change.

Some objectives of Epic Theatre:

Epic Theatre assumes that the purpose of a play, more than entertainment or the imitation of reality, is to present ideas and invites the audience to make judgments on them. Characters are not intended to mimic real people, but to represent opposing sides of an argument, archetypes, or stereotypes. The audience should always be aware that it is watching a play, and should remain at an emotional distance from the action; Brecht described this ideal as the "**Verfremdungseffekt**" — variously translated as "**alienation effect**", "**Defamiliarization effect**", or "**estrangement effect**". It is the opposite of the suspension of disbelief: "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from epic theatre: the engendering of illusion" (Colin Councill 44).

Epic Theatre was a reaction against other popular forms of theatre, particularly the realistic drama pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavski. Like Stanislavski, Brecht disliked the shallow spectacle, manipulative plots, and heightened emotion of melodrama; but where Stanislavski attempted to engender real human behavior in acting through the techniques of his Stanislavski System, and through the actors to engage the audience totally into the world of the play, Brecht saw Stanislavski's methodology as producing audience escapism. Brecht's own social and political focus departed also from surrealism and the Theatre of Cruelty, as developed in the writings and dramaturgy of Antonin Artaud, who sought to affect audiences viscerally, psychologically, physically, and non-rationally

Popular conceptions of Brecht:

Brecht is best known for the creation of a new kind of theatre which he called Epic Theatre and for the plays that continue to be studied and performed today. He is famous for reading and absorbing Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* for being a communist who never actually joined the party, for developing a political theatre that was designed to change society by changing the way people thought. He is famous for going into exile when the Nazis came to power and spending the war in America. He is famous for writing songs with Kurt Weill, and poetry. He is famous for his multiple affairs, his marriage to Helene Weigel, his broken promises to heartbroken lovers and his early death.

In the early days of his career in the theatre Brecht was motivated by a desire to modernize German theatre - to free it from virtually everything that came before him. This was the stolid classicism of Schiller and Goethe, Romanticism, Naturalism and Expressionism. He experimented with the formal aspects of theatre, drawing on avant garde techniques of collage, montage, titles, the documentary and photo-journalism. He set about creating a theatre for the modern age which would represent the modern age and its subjects in a much more vital and realistic way than the stupefying dramas of bygone eras.

Brecht called his modern theatre the Epic Theatre and this was to be the theatre for the modern, scientific era. It was to be analytical and be primarily concerned with analyzing the social relations that determine action in bourgeois society. It was to be the 'theatrical style of our time', the dramatic form which corresponded to 'the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time' (Brecht 1884). It was not located in an idealized future, but the gritty present where the enemy was the military, the church and the bourgeoisie. It would be a theatre that was addressed to reason rather than empathy and to the common man. For Brecht, the radical transformation was from a nineteenth century bourgeois world view to a twentieth century scientific one, from which perspective the artifacts and philosophical tenets of the past appeared old and in decline. The belief in the progress of history, fuelled by the Marxist notion of the march of history, is evident throughout Brecht's writing. He is in this sense a man of his times. The modernist belief in progress went something like this. This idea of progress as possible, probable or necessary was rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole (Lyotard 1986).

From his position on the left of politics, Brecht's dramatic theory reflected this certainty at the same time as it set as its goal, that the proletariat would enjoy the profits of progress. Theatre would be at the forefront of social and political life, the privileged scene of the social life of the period. It would represent the political consciousness of the age and its social conditions. The ideal 'conscious experience' for Brecht was class consciousness and he later nominated one of his actors, Ernst Busch, as 'the first great characterization on the German stage of a class-conscious proletarian' (Eddershaw 1996) Rather than the classical or romantic hero, the actor would now depict the proletarian subject who was the anti-romantic, comic hero of epic theatre.

He was a dramatist, a director, a dramaturgy, a poet and a theorist as well as an engaged and committed intellectual who had a wide circle of artistic and intellectual friends. And his first great success *The Three penny Opera* in 1928. His most famous plays were written in exile: *Mother Courage*, 1941 in Scandinavia, *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *Galileo* in 1943, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1948.

Brecht the dramaturgy, and theorist who documented his theatre practice, analyzed it and presented it variously as a model of the performance building process, e.g. the 'Modelbucher', and as a description of acting, a statement about the social and political purpose of theatre and dramaturgical observations of the new style of acting - 'A Short Organum for the Theatre'.

As a theorist, he is most associated with the creation of a new mode of theatre known as Epic Theatre and the acting techniques of "**Verfremdungseffekt**" and "**Gestus**" (bodily expression to social problems) requires intelligent audience and stage crafts like stylized performance, use of music and dance, chorus as a narrator who also comment over the incidents, unnatural/harsh lighting and odd sound, captions, slides projections to suggest the next incident going to happen to dispel what S.T. Coleridge has coined "willing-suspension-of-disbelief syndrome" (Mohit Kumar 178). Epic theatre introduced the parable form to modern theatre, the construction of a tale set in a different time and place that refers to the contemporary situation. The

parable is a simple tale that communicates a moral point, as in the Biblical parables, or political point, as in Brecht, music and titles and the fragmentation of the story or fable into episodes.

Ghasiram Kotwal:

This play set in the late eighteenth century. G.K. recounts a power game (Nana as a chancellor of Peshwa-ruler and Gashiram, the chief of police of Poona) played out in terms of caste ascendancy in politics. The work draws on several Maharashtra folk styles and has an obvious relevance in context of individuals playing the game of politics, taking advantage of situations, rising to powerG.K. enriches this play, (Gashiram Kotwal) with music and seeks to explore the political hypocrisy and social immorality by juxtaposing the Lavani (love songs) and Abhanga (devotional song) in the single play text. It is also the dramatization of individual struggle with social forces and the downfall of a man in society which has enchained the man. The playwright has intended to portray the conflicts between a man and society. Instead of glorifying man's desperate struggle, he seemed to suggest the nature of social function in terms of relation. Accordingly, he did not create any particular historical character or figure rather than put the whole conflicting situations before the eyes of the audience.

For non-emotional approach to theatre (drama) G.K adopted the folk form especially its dance and music and they are so rich in the play that sometimes they seem to diluting the social message of the play. Its history invokes the participation of the audience in making of play, and provides the multi-viewpoints.

The power of Ghasiram, who was poor and was working as an assistant to the prostitute Gulabi ,dancing and singing when she was busy with flirting men of high cast(Brahman or powerful like Nana).This position as Brahmin does not enable him to be respectable. Thus, the play deals with the story of transformation of a simple Brahmin from Kannauj to a chief of police of Poona and a veritable monster who was prosecuted by society and the system who had created. The recurring themes of the play are ; casteism, gender inequality, sexuality, violence, corruption in politics and morality, struggle of a man against society.

The basic structure of the play is a human wall which is basically a singing and dancing chorus, impersonally commenting on the episodic developments. But it also breaks into smaller tableaux, grouping and regrouping endlessly. The human wall ceases to exist when its back is turned to the audience. The Sutradhar or Narrator interposes in the proceedings to keep the audience abreast of things, the actors switching parts with perfect timing, a touch of opera with verse, music and prose fusing into one another in a strange, compelling alchemy. The ballet, blending with the traditional folk dances, sets the mood and tempo of the decadent and bawdy era. Thus, the human wall serves as an excellent symbol of the mechanism of secrecy, hiding and revealing happenings by human devices. It is the wall again that as the singing chorus uses the chant of saints' and gods' names as yet another screen of complacency or consolations cast over the yawning horror of corruption and tyranny. While the tortured Brahmin groans, the Brahmin line chants the gods' names and drowns his screams. I think Tendulkar wanted to experiment with the musical, or he felt that the folk musical could give history just bit of deglamorization that he needed

for his subject. We can notice that Ghasiram starts with a theme, and then comes the specific "story" or incident which is historical. The fall of Ghasiram, as Tendulkar shows so effectively, is too often regarded by the people as a political relief and it is the powers that take advantage of that delusion to tighten the stranglehold of their power.

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