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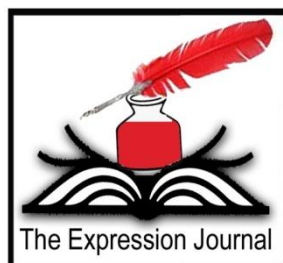
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HASHMI'S STREET THEATRE: *MACHINE* AND *AURAT*

Bharti

B-16/A, Ground Floor, Near J.V.T.S Garden

Chhattarpur Extension, New Delhi-110074

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Abstract

When the street theatre evolved in post-revolutionary Russia, changes were not only seen in the place of dramatic action but also conception, production and presentation. Street theatre is essentially political, thematically dealing with the day to day survival issues of common man and current political occurrences. The spontaneity of incorporation of topical issues keeps the audience engaged with the performance and encourages them to join the play at the end. Generally, the sufficiency of street theatre is measured against the factor if one is able to get the political message across to the audience, while the aesthetic elements and performative aspects are not given much importance. It was Safdar Hashmi, the founding member of *Jana Natya Manch* (1973), who was of the view that theatrical abilities should be a part of political street theatre. In order to enhance the aesthetic appeal in the street theatre performances, he worked on combination of musical language, rhythmic movements and suggestive gestures in his plays. The term paper will be an insight into these aspects of politicisation and aestheticisation of the street plays by Hashmi, such as "Machine" and "Aurat".

Key-Words

Street theatre as political, representation of common man issues, Jana natya manch, street play 'machine' on the herig factory incident, the play 'aurat' against patriarchy.

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Susan Bennett in *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, talks about how several theatres have been formed which specifically work for the subjugated people, and the emergence of these groups raises a need to closely understand theatre along with the new non-traditional audiences. According to her, "these emergent theatres have self-consciously sought the centrality of the spectator as subject of the drama, but as a subject who can think and act." (1) She mentions that theatre aimed at exploited or underprivileged groups such as homosexuals, women, socially discriminated groups, workers (involved in strike), unemployed, seems to be an outcome of the non-conventional ideas of productions.

Aesthetics in the theatre are analysed in three ways: normative, descriptive and production. The evaluation of the script based on its contemporary time period is dealt in normative aesthetics, while descriptive aesthetics categorize the types of theatres. In theory of production aesthetics, one takes into consideration the author's intention and the audience's reception. This paper will be an insight into the street theatre of Safdar Hashmi while taking a close look at two of his plays *Machine* and *Aurat*, through the lens of normative and production analysis.

Street theatre is a non-traditional theatre, which evolved in the post-revolutionary Russia, as a complete break away from the proscenium theatre. Not only the place of dramatic action is altered, but also the entire aspects of conception, production and presentation are provided a new dimension here. Vellikkeen Raghavan describes street theatre as basically and essentially political, if the performance is devoid of its politics, only the show remains. The day-to-day survival issues of the common man are accepted as

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theme in street theatre. The group often arrives at the site uninvited and performs unannounced. Its total flexibility enables spontaneous incorporation of current political occurrences in the performances. It involves the audience throughout the performance and encourages them to join the play towards the end.

Safdar Hashmi worked fervently with street theatre from 1973 to 1989, with the group Janam (short for 'Jana Natya Manch'), which is a Hindi term for 'New Birth'. Janam has given around four thousand performances of twenty plays, (maximum by Safdar Hashmi) and of which many have been translated into different Indian languages. The group was formed as a result of breaking up of IPTA, and the division of Indian Communist Movement into the CPI and the CPI (M). Their most appreciated plays are *Machine* and *Aurat* (Woman). *Machine* is a twelve minute play about the inhuman conditions in which the labourers work in the factories. The play *Aurat* portrays the challenges faced by women in the social and domestic spheres of life, where several obstacles are put forth by patriarchy.

When we focus on the non-urban areas, we find that the people have limited access to theatre, therefore it is a different experience for them. Such audiences or the "potential audiences" as Bennett says, most of the times have no conception of the theatrical performance, hence emergence of problems in reception and the inability to decode the theatrical event.

The audiences to which Safdar Hashmi caters (labourers or rural areas), have a completely different idea of the theatrical event, from the one available to those in urban areas. These performances are not as common place or glamorous as the proscenium theatre performances, infact they are politically drenched. With such development in theatre, one observes that the event takes place in non-traditional spaces. According to Safdar, whether drama is performed in squares, rectangular or circular spaces, so long it expresses the sentiments of the oppressed people, it is people's theatre, irrespective of the form. He believed that the themes of plays must be closely linked with popular mass movements, interrogate anti-people political policies of the establishment, defend the right to protest, and should register the dissenting voices.

As opposed to street theatre, proscenium theatre had its innate weaknesses such as huge financial investment, comparative immobility and incapability to immediately respond to topical issues, and is unapproachable to the masses. On the features of street theatre, in *The Right to Perform*, Safdar says:

In order to keep it alive and involved in the day to day people's movement it can't afford to wait for relevant script to be written by professional and celebrated dramatists. Involvement of culture with peoples movement requires immediate analysis of the current political and socio- economic developments and preparing a new play on that within a day or two, if not in a couple of hours. This leaves no scope

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for professionals and celebrities to come into picture. (17)

During the post emergency period, people voted the Janata Government at the Centre, which also proved to be anti-worker and anti-peasantry, just like the earlier government. This government refused to look into the industrial conflicts between the labourers and the managements. The government put on deaf ears to labour unions regarding the solutions to improve working conditions in the factories. It was when an older CPI(M) leader, told Safdar Hashmi about the Herig India factory incident, that he decided to write a play about it. The labourers of the chemical factory, Herig-India (situated just outside Delhi), did not have a union. The workers there, had only two demands, they were asking for a place to park their bicycles, as they came from 15-20kms away. Their other demand was to have a canteen in order to heat their food and have a cup of tea during the break. When these basic necessities were not granted, the workers went on strike and the industrialists could not control the situation. They took the help of police and paid anti-social elements dressed as guards, to open fire at the workers, and killing six of them. "When I heard this story I decided to write a play about it", said Hashmi. He and his comrades, who align their political identification with the sufferings of the labourers or the working class, promptly decided to write about this incident, and brought into existence the most renowned play by Janam, *Machine*.

Therefore, Janam's full-fledged street play, *Machine*, was an outcome of the fore mentioned socio-political incidents during the last months of 1978. It was first performed in Delhi's Talkatora Stadium on 19th November 1978, in front of 700 trade union delegates, who were discussing for protests against the new Industrial Relations Bill, which was another attempt to crush the political activities and industrial disturbance. The premier performance was a massive success, and invitations were given to perform again at the Delhi Boat Club, where the trade union protest rally was scheduled to take place. And the play was watched by around 1, 60,000 workers. Vellikkeel Raghavanin his work "Safdar Hashmi's "Machine": A Metaphor of Post-Independence Indian Capitalist Industrial Apparatus", opines that the audience (workers) could easily connect with the play and the "labourers identified the image of a machine with all its implication in their life" (226). The play starts with five actors getting together to act as a big machine.

As different parts of the machine, they make sounds; move in rhythmic steps, shake and jerk. This machine becomes a metaphor for the industrial sector of India which signifies different aspects to different audiences. A factory labourer would see it as a kind of support to life, and also to the capitalist exploitation where their hard work is neglected. On the other hand, it becomes a source of immense profit for the factory owner, and the guard signifies the oppression meted out on the factory workers by the owner. These three reflect the network of industrial capitalism. Safdar Hashmi was successful in developing a

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familiarisation between the play and its audience through this theatrical image of machine, as it is a necessary constituent in the lives of the working class people.

In an opposing view to what Habib Tanvir says about the play, it cannot be termed as didactic. Hashmi has no intention of preaching to his audience, and is attempting to showcase the inhuman conditions at factories to create awareness amongst the labourers. Hashmi begins the play by throwing light on the importance of unity between the owner and the labourers, therefore, putting forth the fact that the 'life-rhythm' would be disturbed if any of the parts do not work together. In his monologue the labourer describes his situation, "I always get kicks only... kicks from the house owner, kicks of the mill owner, the shopkeeper, from the milk man and from the police! I am down with these tortures". These lines aptly speak about his oppressed social conditions and financial trouble. Next we have the owner, in a sharp contrast to the condition of the worker, his speech emphasises on his power when he says, "I invest money in business, bribe the ministers instigate the police, buy the judges, intimidate the workers...after all these, I order for some bottles of whisky from London". Then the security guard dwells upon his role in suppressing the demands of the workers. At the end of the play all the workers come together for a strike and bravely march forward while retaliating the physical assault done by the guard. The security guard is given a gun by the owner, who kills all the workers.

The entire play lasts for ten-twelve minutes and not much props were used. The props were, lathi of the security officer, the baton, the scarf, the string of beads and the cap of the mill owner. Janam successfully made a play which did not cost much, could be performed at several venues and proved to be effective. The play invites its audience (workers) to do a close critical analysis of the *Machine*, as they are a part of it. By projecting the workers as valuable and not worthless, they received a tremendous response.

Another play which grabbed the attention of the audience was *Aurat* (Woman, March 1979). The play was written for the North Indian Working Womens' Conference which took place on March 25, 1979. *Aurat* is said to be Janam's most successful play which came into being in ten days, and there have been more than 2500 shows of this particular play. The opening scene starts with the poem "I'm a Woman", by an Iranian teacher and revolutionary Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooii. It is important to note that the characterisation of "the woman" to portray the common women, was a conscious effort; as the manner in which the poem was recited, there were breaks in between when lines were spoken by the male artists.

Actress: I'm a woman

Actor 4: ... A woman from whose life's blood

The carcass of the blood-sucker bloats

And from the loss of whose blood

The profit of the capitalist increases." (Jana Natya Manch 1997)

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The poem had a particular structure which further cemented the frame work of the play, the episodes unfolded with scenes of a home, marriage, college, market, roads, a job interview and a factory at last. Therefore, there is a movement from the domestic life to the public life. From a scenario of dependence and inferiority, to search of identity and independence.

The play reflects upon the patriarchal notions, where the girl child is not allowed any education and bears the physical and emotional abuse by the husband for not giving enough dowry. When the woman wants to study physics in college, the faculty advises her that only home science and interior decoration are the subjects for a woman to study. Her degree in physics is not considered of any use by her job interviewers. But not only this, she is even paid fewer wages than her male co-workers. She does not take a stand against this exploitation until she sees a protest against unemployment by the Youth Federation. Even though her co-workers implore her to protest, she is not convinced and goes to the owner to apologise but he shows no mercy. Then she is told by the co-workers that "Leave the expectation of mercy from the wolves. Break these centuries' old chains which bind you. It is now time to choose sides" (Jana Natya Manch 2003). The workers also join the strike and the woman raises the Red Flag.

The presence of the only woman on the stage among the male actors, fighting for her rights, has its own captivation over the audience. The character of the woman was not the typical supporting character to the hero, but had an identity of its own. The vindication of the rights of women challenged the aspect of the male audience as the supporters in the scenes of exploitation. The play not only presented the plight of Indian women, but is also successful in appealing to the intellect. Hashmi relates patriarchy to the capitalist system where in order to go against male domination; one must challenge the capitalist structure too. Therefore, the trade union and working class organisation are portrayed as allies of women. One of the announcing notices of the play reads as:

"A BOON FOR THE LADIES

This is a play about women, their problems, their place in society, their pains and struggles. It is a play that you MUST NOT MISS." (Staff Association of State Bank of India 1979)

On one hand it appears to be very brave that the play addresses the issues of patriarchal oppression, while on the other hand there is no exploration of the structures which allow the suppression of the Woman, such as the familial structure, the education institutions, religious institutions and those women who catalyse the working of patriarchal authorities. Though *Aurat* does not go deep into the complexities of patriarchy and trade union functioning, the fact remains that it is the most successful play. Not only it has been performed in several Indian languages, it has also been performed in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The audience's response has been very emotional, for instance,

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mothers of dowry victims cried out when the play was performed as a part of the Dahej Virodhi Mahila Sangh at the Boat Club (1980).

To gain people's interest, Janam's plays were spontaneous and based on topical events, making it easy to have an emotional proximity with the audience. Safdar says, street plays should be bold, crisp and direct. He called street theatre as "militant political theatre of protest", as a means to agitate people and mobilise them to fight for their cause. Such theatre is an expression of the suppressed voice of mass and is always politically committed. In order to propagate the socialist ideas, the performances are highly interactive and form an instant rapport with the audience. Safdar's aim was to organise a *mohalla* (street) theatre while raising social awareness and not taking any neutral political stand. For him the actual Indian theatre is not the one which is Indianised or traditionalised, but the one which is deeply concerned with the contemporary lives of the people of India. True Indianness in theatre is when one talks about the developmental and social issues of the people of the country.

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