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Exploring Aspects of “Cruelty” and “Poverty” in the Modern Western Theatre and its Search for Indian Roots: A Study of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski

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Abstract: Twentieth century theatre was oriented towards avant-garde forms of expression and was essentially atheistic. These theatre schools were somewhat different from other existing realistic and naturalistic schools of theatre. Two of the founding figures of the modern and postmodern theatre are Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski. Artaud wanted a theatre based on total spectacle, elevating body and gestures to the level of hieroglyphs. His theatre focused on physical actions whereas the dialogues became secondary paraphernalia. These physical actions were heavily rooted in Indian performance traditions. On the other hand, Grotowski's theatrical troupe believed in minimalism and “poverty” of means. His brand of theatre strips plastic elements which he deemed non-essential and superfluous. Grotowski believed in a theatre stripped to its bare essentials, rekindling the ancient kinship between ritual and performance. This study explores resonances between the minimalistic approach of Grotowski and ancient Indian performative practices based on the Advaita philosophy. This paper will delve into the modern and postmodern avant-garde theatrical troupes and how they are deeply rooted in ancient Indian performance traditions and spiritual philosophies.

Key Words: Avant-garde, spectacle, minimalism, poverty, performance.

Antonin Artaud's *theatre of cruelty* serves as a revolutionary concept in twentieth century theatre. This radical vision of Artaud helped him develop his seminal work *Theatre and its Double* which provides a transformative experience to the audience through catharsis by dismantling psychological realism. Even though Artaud's theories are multifaceted, it is evident that his theories have wide correspondences with Indian traditions, theories and performance rituals. Similarly, Jerzy Grotowski's “poor theatre” can also be deemed as avant-garde twentieth century theatrical tradition. Grotowski's form of theatre is stripped down to

its bare essentials to evoke the raw association between the actor and the spectator. A significant source of inspiration for Grotowski's ideas arose from a rich and an ancient theatrical tradition: ancient Sanskrit theatre.

Antonin Artaud, the proponent of the *theatre of cruelty*, believed that the western theatre was the breeding ground of realism; hence he wished to release it from the fetters of the plasticity of the proscenium arch, to take it back to its primordial roots. Artaud after moving to Paris got associated with the Surrealists. He co-ran "Theatre Alfred Jarry", where he produced the works of August Strindberg. There he developed his theories which he later noted in his *The Theatre and its Double* (1938). These theories were mainly oriented towards surrealism and symbolism. Theatre of Cruelty refers to ideas which "crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theatre as by a whirlwind of higher forces" (83). Despite being an atheistic form of theatre, with resonances of the metaphysics of "higher forces" (83), with the body being stretched to limits beyond its own elasticity, signaling a cosmic connection, the "theatre of cruelty" largely draws from the ancient Indian philosophy of Bramha(cosmos). He wanted his theatre to "leave an ineffaceable scar" (83) in the audiences. This "ineffaceable scar" must be understood as having resonances with indelible marks left behind on the psyche after the tumultuous assault of "spectacle" on the stage, evoking the old Greek affirmation of the after-effect of tragedy: "calm of mind, all passions spent" (Milton's description of Samson Agonistes near the end of the play). This incidentally, is analogous to the concept of *Santa* which is a by-product of every *rasa* that is generated in a spectator during a performance. His self-written play *Jet of Blood* (1925) possesses some concepts that can directly draw parallels to Indian aesthetics. Besides, in the context of the use of the body in theatre, "solar plexus" (139) is a concept that has been occasionally discussed by Artaud in his *Theatre and its Double*, which is analogous to the *manipuraka chakra* from the annals of *Hatha yoga*. Hence, multiple influences from the repositories of ancient Indian philosophy cannot be overlooked during an in-depth study of *avant-garde* techniques in Artaud's theatre of cruelty.

One key influence was the Sanskrit नाट्यशास्त्र (*Natyashastra*), a foundational text on Indian theatre. Authored by Bharata Muni sometime between 200 BCE and 200 CE, the *Natyashastra* outlines the principles of *rasa* (emotional essence) and *abhinaya* (acting techniques). These concepts resonated once again later in Grotowski's pursuit of a transformative theatre that evoked deep emotional responses in the audience. Jerzy Grotowski created a new form of theatre, viz "poor theatre" which moved away from Stanislavski's

“psychological realism”. A substantial feature of Artaud’s theatre lies in its ritualistic experiences. He argues for a theatre that can transcend mere entertainment, becomes a conduit for a "plague" that infects the audience with a primal energy (18). This notion aligns to the rich Indian performance traditions like, *theyyam* and *yakshagna* from Karnataka. These performances are deeply rooted in mythological and religious practices of India, which conforms to the notion of spectacle in a dramatic text. Artaud, in his essay "Balinese Theatre," espouses his inclination towards “magical” power of the ritualistic performances which creates a metaphysical experience among the audience (100). Ritualistic theatre of Antonin Artaud is also analogous to various ritualistic traditions of India; for example, the ritual performance tradition of *Buta kola* from Karnataka, in which, different deities possess a *nartak* (dancer, who performs the ritual) who goes to a different level of trance. Artaud subjects his theatre to an analogous methodological principle, the principle of “trance”.

Dialogue, for Artaud, is part of secondary paraphernalia. He prioritizes dialogue over body-gestures, sound and movement of the actor to bring out the true emotion of an actor which lies beneath dialogues. This notion finds parallel to ancient Indian dance traditions like *Kathakali* and *Bharatnatyam*. These dance traditions evoke various emotions by meticulously codified hand gestures or *mudras*, *navarasas* (facial expressions and emotions) and body postures. Artaud, in *The Theatre and Its Double*, advocates for a theatre that speaks "in hieroglyphs" (90), echoing the symbolic language of ancient Indian dance forms. The notion of the physical language of theatre propounded by Artaud is also analogous to the concept of *angika abhinaya* (acting through gestures) as discussed in Bharatmuni’s *The Natyasastra* and Abhinavagupta’s *Abhinavabharati*. Artaud’s aversion towards his contemporary western theatrical varieties is evident in many forms. He was influenced by a style that would restore the theatre to its original ritualistic function, “fused together in a perspective of hallucination and fear” (53); this expression confirms that Artaud wanted a theatre of total spectacle or a performance-oriented expressionism in action, and not plot based or text-oriented drama, in the tradition of ancient Indian theories of dramatic performances (*Drishya kavya*) ascribed to Bharatmuni. Artaud hence recommends a new school of theatre, “theatre of cruelty” where cruelty would not mean actual physical violence, but an impulse which is caused by violence, that strikes the routine monotony of living.

Artaud's one and only self-written play *The Jet of Blood* (1925) or *The Sprout of Blood* presents the history of the universe. The content of the play is propped up by a spell of hallucination and fear. Antonin Artaud's production of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is also replete with the notion of organized anarchy. The staging of these plays demonstrates the element of spectacle that is associated with his genre of theatre. Abhinavagupta in *Abhinavabharati* had observed that the principal element of theatre was the spectacle itself. Both the plays mentioned above bear testimony to Artaud's inclination towards eastern philosophies.

Antonin Artaud explains the involvement of the "solar plexus" in the actor's invocation of his prowess of embodiment (of the intended spectacle), drawing from the Indian notion of yoga, and the concept of *manipuraka* chakra or the navel chakra while framing his own manifestos for his brand of "theatre of cruelty". He deems the source of creative energy to be a product that is generated from the solar plexus. He also writes "[The actor] must find, beneath the words he utters, a living language, a language which comes from the depths of his being, from his solar plexus. It is not a question of understanding the words, but of living them, of suffering them, or of making others suffer from them" (139). In this way Artaud breaks away from the conventional "cerebral acting" and emphasizes the role of solar plexus in performance.

Artaud's *theatre of cruelty* sought to assault the bourgeois sensibilities of the Western audience, creating a visceral experience that transcends intellectual comprehension. He emphasizes the use of light, sound, and music to create a physical impact. This aligns with the multi-sensory nature of Indian performance traditions. In Sanskrit drama, for example, the concept of "rasa" emphasizes the evocation of emotions through not just dialogue but also music, costume, and scenography. Similarly, temple rituals in India often involve a cacophony of sounds – drums, chanting, bells – that create an immersive atmosphere for the devotees. mirroring the sensory intensity of Indian performance.

In late-modernist theatre many dramaturgs attempted to incorporate different ways through which the proscenium *fourth wall* could be ruptured. Artaud envisions an audience actively engaged in the theatrical experience, and not just reduced to passive unquestioning spectators. This participatory approach aligns with the way audiences interact with certain Indian performance traditions. In Ratan Thiyam's performances, for instance, audience members often become active participants, making offerings and expressing emotions vocally. Similarly, in some temple rituals, audience participation is integral to the efficacy of the

performance. Grotowski's *poor theatre* too draws handsomely from Indian roots. Dissociated from the conventional props which are associated with regular forms of theatre like, light, makeup, costume, and sets, *poor theatre* uses the actor, solely to convey the setting and the character. Jerzy Grotowski's theatre, living up to the true spirit of postmodernity, was in competition with illusionism, available in plenty in the art of cinema and plastic theatre, in pursuit of conventional mimetic models. But such plastic mimetic models could not produce, or re-awaken, as Grotowski reasoned, theatre's original kinship with ritual and myths. Grotowski wanted to dismantle the separation between the actor and the audience, whose only objective lay in relishing a dramatic performance (*drishya kavya*). Peter Brook, one of the contemporaries of Grotowski, considered Grotowski's theatre to be a "holy" or a "sacred" theatre, and his actors to be "holy actors". Traces of ancient Indian dramatic strands can be found in many of his productions like, *Dr. Faustus* (1963), *Acropolis* (1962). Jerzy Grotowski, in his attempt to create a new form of theatre, writes his book *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) where he notes that theatre was in competition with illusionism and according to him, films would anyway deliver it in a better way. Grotowski thus was never in search of realism through theatre. His objective bordered on what Abhinavagupta called *Pratyabhijna* or *self-recognition*, both on the level of the actor and the spectator, in one moment of supreme incandescence or illumination. Theatre would thus be more of a medium of communion with the cosmic forces or the building blocks of the universe.

Grotowski's way of rehearsing plays evokes the methods practiced by his *avant garde* predecessors. His productions needed years of rehearsals, correcting every minute detail. This notion emphasized the concept of "complete surrender" to the craft, which incidentally, may be rooted to the *Bhakti* movement. The *Bhakti* movement itself advocates the notion of surrendering oneself to the lotus feet of the Almighty. The way in which Grotowski subjects his actors to rigorous rehearsals is analogous to the concept of complete surrender, propounded and preached by the *Bhakti* movement. Interestingly, Grotowski's contemporary Peter Brook also prioritizes the same amount of time for rehearsals. In this context, one may refer to an interview of actor Paresh Rawal on the veteran Nasiruddin Shah, who once went to Paris to perform a one-minute role in Peter Brook's production of *Macbeth*, after going through rigorous rehearsals. (November 30, 2022)

Grotowski notes that “a role should penetrate the actor” (36). Ryszard Cieslak, a lead actor in Grotowski’s team once commented on the unique style of the dramaturg that it is somewhat instrumental to his personal transformation. Referring to religious traces, Peter Brook considered Grotowski’s theatre “sacred” calling it “holy theatre” and his actors “holy actors”. Grotowski used to spend years in rehearsals to refine every aspect of theatrical performance. As a matter of fact, the actors of Grotowski were subjected to complete surrender to their art. Grotowski’s aspect of refining every move in the rehearsal before the theatrical production has a complete sense of surrender to it, evoking nuances of the philosophy of Bhakti. This can be understood from one of the verses of the *Bhagavad Gita*, chapter-18, verse-66)

ॐ णिर्दत्तं जेहं उ दत्तं नैः कृत्वा

अहं न च श्रोत्रजिह्वे न च घ्राणनेत्रे ।
न च व्योम भूमिर्न तेजो न वायु
श्रिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥१॥

(Working translation: “Forsake all religious practices and simply devote yourself to Me. I will free you from the consequences of your sins, so have no fear.”)

Grotowski’s production of Stanislaw Wyspianski’s poetic drama *Akropolis* (1962) and Christopher Marlow’s *Dr. Faustus* (1963) demonstrate how actors can be completely stripped off the trappings of plastic theatre. This concept is analogous to the notion of attaining *nirvana*, or a state of *eternal bliss* through the *stripping off* false identities that one is identified with. The notion of *stripping off* may have resonances of the philosophy propounded by Adi Shankaracharya in his six-stanza poem *Nirvana Shatakam*.

मनोबुद्ध्यहङ्कारचित्तानि नाहं
न च श्रोत्रजिह्वे न च घ्राणनेत्रे ।
न च व्योम भूमिर्न तेजो न वायु
श्रिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥१॥

Here Shankara speaks about how the self is associated with the faculties of the mind and the sense organs. These four aspects are- *manas* (memory), *buddhi* (intellect), *ahankara* (ego), *chitta* (intelligence) which are to be stripped off to discover the true self that is the eternally blissful form of shiva

(*chidanandaroopa Shivoham Shivoham*). This same concept is being incorporated by Grotowski to introduce his minimalistic theatre or poor theatre.

It is seen that Grotowski was acquainted with the ancient Indian plays written in Sanskrit as he staged Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* (1960, Opole). Grotowski was associated with the stage design and direction while the assistant directors were Rena Mirecka and Antoni Jaholowski. Grotowski, in keeping with his artistic philosophy of the time, subjected the archetypal narrative of Shakuntala and Dushyanta's love story, which explores themes of overcoming worldly vanity and trusting divine wisdom, to a rigorous examination through contrast and derision. The content of the play was perceived in a pure exotic-erotic form with certain citations of Vatsayana's *Kamasutra* to expose the sexual themes of the play. Grotowski's travels to India in the 1980s further cemented his connection to Indian theatre. He collaborated with Bengali folk performers like Baul singers and explored the possibilities of integrating their techniques into his "Objective Drama" research. This collaboration highlighted Grotowski's ongoing quest for uncovering universality within diverse theatrical forms.

Grotowski's attempts at breaking the fourth wall are somewhat different from Artaud's. He does not want any separation between his actors and audience. In this way most of his productions mingle with the actors or surrounded them from all sides. The performers are constantly exposed. In this way Grotowski not only breaks the fourth wall between the audience and the actors but also creates a communion in tune with the notion of *Advaita* or "non-dualism"; which by extension meant that the actors and the audience are no different.

The correspondences and the conversions of the Indian Philosophical traditional practices on the work of Artaud and Grotowski, have continued to evolve. Recent scholarship examines the role of the "sutradhara" (narrator) in Sanskrit drama and its parallel to the metaphysical stage manager, created by Artaud. The Indian influence on Grotowski's "Poor Theatre" extends beyond specific techniques and philosophies. Grotowski's theatre acts as a tool of shared transformation among the audience community. Both traditions view theatre as a journey of self-discovery, for both the performer and the audience. In *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Grotowski espoused the notion of creating a holy space and a holy actor. This concept aligns with the Indian notion of the performance space as a sacred arena While the direct influence of

Indian theatre on Grotowski and Artaud is debated, both wanted to create a primal theatrical experience. Artaud strived to create a theatre of cathartic spectacle while Grotowski wanted to create a theatre of total inclusivity.

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