

### Book Review

*Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Introduction*. Siddhartha Biswas. United Kingdom, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Paperback. £41.37

Siddhartha Biswas's book *Theatre Theory and Performance* takes a leap from the aesthetic representation and orients itself towards the socio-political aspects of theatre. The author aims to present the transition in agendas within theatre from Aristotle to the present day by giving us the view of different schools of thought and leading us towards a syncretic model of theatre. While the main concern of the book is to highlight the political elements, he devotes three chapters to analyzing the semiotic and performative aspects of theatre. The distinctiveness of the book lies in establishing a dialogue between Western and Indian theatrics, exploring the differences and the influences.

This review will first discuss how the writer has described the influence of politics on theatre, followed by a reflection on the semiotic and performative aspects of theatre. Then the review will show how Biswas leads us towards a dialogue between Indian and Western theatrics while providing a syncretic and post-dramatic model of theatre.

Biswas begins the first chapter by associating theatre with myths and rituals which later evolved into religion, and he presents how religion conditioned theatre for its own use. It becomes clear that Biswas is addressing the tension between the *cathartic* Aristotelian Drama and the introduction of a different theatrical discourse. This new theatre finds its foundation in the demand of the Brechtian "modern" epic social themes, which could not be contained by the same traditional normative form. It was only at the threshold of the nineteenth century that theatre took a departure from the theatrical model of Aristotle.

The issue of politics in theatre is again raised in the fourth and sixth chapters of the book. In the fourth chapter "Theatre and Politics", the author gives us a trajectory of theatre under the influence of rulers and religion to a theatre which becomes the voice of dissent. For a play to be socially useful, as Biswas suggests, it has to go against polemics, and a writer cannot be a slave to a single ideology. He gives us the example of Lorraine Hansberry, the first Black playwright, who was allowed to perform on Broadway. Her focus was not situated on the issue of race alone but she gave her characters a human face and managed to show life holistically. This example is an early vision of the syncretic model of theatre which Biswas discusses in detail in the penultimate chapter.

Biswas recurrently addresses the fact that it was only the socio-political conditions of theatre which went through transitions but the power structure remained intact. The political took the place of supernatural but the core idea did not change. The dominant theme of Greek Dramas—that the chain of being must be maintained and limits cannot be crossed, haunts English theatre as well. But at the same time, Biswas shows through the transition in theatre how theatre is "to look at life, at society, at the collective, in its entirety". More than a product of its surrounding, theatre is, for the author, "a commentary or protest against the social negatives" (25). Theatre, traces Biswas, traversed through a medium of conditioning to being a mirror to the society in the Restoration period and then became a tool to critique societal hypocrisies in the hands of Shaw and Wilde. It was used, at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a form of protest in Irish

National Theatre and in several anti-fascist movements. From a tool to subvert dissent, theatre became a voice of dissent.

In the latter part of the fourth chapter, Biswas explains how the post-independence playwrights like Utpal Dutt and Safdar Hashmi found their influences in Western playwrights. Dutt was primarily influenced by Brecht's notion of theatre as an ideological weapon. Whereas Brecht's theatre was centered around class conflicts and ideological paradigm, Dutt's was nation-centric. Dutt was "more focused on the state of the masses than on any 'universal' (at least deemed so) ideology that was projected as an answer" (38). Hashmi too was influenced by Brecht but his theatre was issue-based and not a mouthpiece for any single ideology. This gave his audience the freedom to approach his theatre in a pluralistic manner. But Biswas also holds the view that even though the Indian playwrights found their materials and political attitude from all over the world, they ended up compromising themselves in order to meet the "local cultural flavour" and "the audience has never really been challenged to rise beyond their own moral/cultural limitations" (38-39).

The sixth chapter "Three Theories of Theatre: Brecht, Artaud, Pinter" analyzes in more detail a departure from Aristotelian model of theatre. Biswas describes how Brecht's theatre subverts the cathartic model and engages with a form of drama which can leave significant emotions unresolved in order to force social action upon the audience. According to Brecht, theatre should correct "the problems that plague the concerned society" (53) and the audience should not be allowed to be in suspense or to involve themselves in an emotional response so that the priority can be ideas and not the story. The contrast happens in Artaud, who lets his audience set free their emotions, and what is suppressed comes out of deep subconscious states. Pinter's motive is to portray "the power equations that existed between individuals and between the individual and the state...Pinter, in not giving any exposition, does not allow the audience to form an emotional bond with the people seen on stage" (60-61).

Even though a major part of the book is invested in analyzing the political elements of theatre, Biswas takes a detour in the second and third chapter, and describes the semiotic aspect of theatre, presenting the distinction between a written text and a theatre performance. Introducing critics like J. Hillis Miller and Charles Sander Peirce in the second chapter, Biswas discusses the multiplicity of sign system and the augmented complexity when one deals with a theatrical performance. A written text happens in time, in succession with no scope of simultaneity at a syntactic level but a theatrical performance is intertwined with both time and space.

While a written text varies in meaning only in relation to the reader's interpretation, a theatrical performance is dependent on "...the dialogue, the setting, props, the body-language, costumes, levels of make-up, acting music—all the things visible/audible during performance..." (11). All of these elements come together to become words in a written text. Biswas aptly describes in the third chapter that the complexity of a written text is connotative but a theatrical performance contains "different physio-cognitive elements" (17). Not only the narrative aspect, but the author also explores how theatre went through a transition in terms of stage space in modern and postmodern times.

Biswas gives us a view of how theatre transformed in relation to performance in the sixth chapter “Performance and Performers.” From a mere act of caricature to improvisations or stock presentations in *Commedia dell’Arte*, theatrical performance went on to become a more orderly craft in the hands of Goethe. While the proscenium stage dominated in the nineteenth century, Yeats’ Irish Literary Theatre aspired to liberate the actors from the formal rulebooks of performance so that the actors could realize the whole of their genius. But, it was in the twentieth century that we see a vibrant usage of time and space which Biswas discusses in relation to performance. In the latter part of the chapter, Biswas introduces Stanislavsky’s ideas of being in character as “understanding the emotional construction of the person on paper” and the counter-argument of Brecht, who points towards an understanding of “the play and its purpose and its functionality vis-a-vis social issues become more important in the case of Epic theatre.” (49)

In the seventh chapter “The Bhava-Rasa Theory”, the author initiates a dialogue between Bharat Muni’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (an Indian treatise on theatre) and the Aristotelian theatrical paradigm. In the very beginning of the chapter, while making a comparison, Biswas reflects that Aristotle’s emphasis lies on audience manipulation but Bharat Muni’s Bhava-Rasa theory does not even allow the audience to go that far. The Bhava-Rasa Theory limits itself to the aesthetic aspect of theatre by exploring the human emotions and consequent responses from the audience. While making the distinction, Biswas remarks that the Aristotelian paradigm does not instruct the audience about how to react in a particular situation but *Nāṭyaśāstra* bounds actors by the formulations mentioned. Aristotelian Theatre focuses on cleansing the public angst through catharsis but Bharat Muni’s treatise overtly leaves the political construct within theatre by indulging in the human-divine association.

Biswas denounces Aristotle’s *cathartic* model and Bharat Muni’s Bhava-Rasa theory but he comes up with an alternative by fostering a syncretic model of theatre in the eighth chapter. This chapter begins by highlighting how the Western theatrical conventions construct the “other” so that the resolution can appear by its removal. Biswas posits that “[t]he key vision that rules western theatre is the politics of power- macro or micro—and the resolution ends in the victory of the establishment over the other” (75). The author states that the same parameters appeared in Indian theatrical scene with the establishment of the colonial rule which replaced the indigenous tradition, focusing on the essence of everything by creating a space for coexistence. Biswas maintains that the syncretic model is not just a postcolonial trope but a way to find a balance between the dichotomy of centre-margin.

Describing the syncretic model of theatre, Biswas gives us the example of post-independence Indian dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar who used Brechtian alienation techniques, opening space for a new Indian identity. Girish Karnad’s usage of Indianized English, the combination of regional tradition with the dominant theatrical method in K. N. Panicker and Manish Mitra’s *Urubhangam*, which mixes dance form with a narrator telling the story— all of these works by these dramatists incorporated the notion of theatre, where different forms and agendas could exist together. Badal Sarcar’s departure from the proscenium structure and Ratan Thiyam’s production of *Antigone*, which interweaves the ancient classics and the contemporary, contributed to the inception of a syncretic model of theatre in India.

The book's final chapter focuses on the post-dramatic theatre, which gives precedence to practice over theory by going beyond the diction-dominated plays. The post-dramatic theatre, as Biswas expounds, aspires to indulge in those elements of theatre which cannot be represented in a written text. It challenges the linearity of time and the authorial presence which enriches a narrative with "multi-directional manner" of representation (84). The attempt is to create a paradigm which does not adhere to the negotiation "limited to the author and his reader/viewer but would become more collaborative, therefore, more like reality" (85). But Biswas also reflects that the complexity of post-dramatic theatre hinders "a certain communication" that an audience expects. He ends by contending that theatre, as a mode of live-communication, needs to go through constant reevaluation in order to compete with other modes of entertainment such as cinema and television, and to do so, it has to evolve aesthetically and at the same time, provoke the audience to think.

As Biswas states in the preface, this book is intended for both students of literature or theatre and advanced researchers. Biswas's book is an informed and disciplined commentary on the political, semiotic and performative aspects of theatre. But the book does not mention pre-independence Indian playwrights like Girish Chandra Ghosh, Dinabandhu Mitra and Upendranath Das who used theatre as a tool for protest against British colonial rule. To silence the nationalist plays like *Nil Darpan* and *Surendra Binodini*, the British government implemented *Dramatic Performance Act* in 1876. Since one of the dominant motives of the book is to trace the political transition, the author could have shown how Indian theatre took a political turn under colonial rule.

Though the author states in the preface that there is no real movement from one chapter to another, it would have been convenient for the readers if Biswas introduced what Brechtian theatre is (which he does in the sixth chapter) before explaining Brecht's influence on Dutt and Hashmi. The other noticeable gap in the book is the absence of female playwrights.

The contribution of this book lies in providing a syncretic model of theatre by mapping the way from Western theatrics to Indian contemporary theatrical paradigm. While establishing a dialogue, it should be noted, Biswas does not conform to nativist or Eurocentric paradigm and criticizes both these structures. This book does not indulge in promoting specific ideologies but looks at theatre as a whole, reflecting life in all its complexity.

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