A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP: THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS AND EXPERIEMENTAL THEATRE

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I have been closely associated—creatively and intellectually—with the field of experimental theatre for the last three decades or more, I have come across different opinions, views and debates about many issues related to this field, and have also managed to contribute my bit to the general confusion! However, I have always felt that there are critical misunderstandings among practitioners, critics, intellectuals and general audience regarding some basic aspects related to the relationship between experimental theatre, thoughts and emotions. Aware of the eventuality of having 'misunderstood' these issues myself, I would still venture to present my thoughts, in the hope that it may spark a good debate and may enrich the practice of experimental theatre, in particular, and theatre in general, and that it may be especially helpful to the new generation of practitioners. These are the thoughts of a creative writer from his own perspective and are not intended for seasoned theatre critics.

In the field of theatre, or art, in general, we often hear terms like thoughts, emotions, experimental or experimentation, social relevance, sensibility, new sensibility, worldview, ideologies, content, form, internalisation, externalisation, etc. However, very less theoretical work has been done either by artists, writers or by academicians in Indian languages on these aspects. This is true especially in the field of theatre, which is a group activity, and an art which is experienced by a large number of people—called audiences—at the same time. These terms are generally picked-up by theatre practitioners arbitrarily and are also used in the same way. I am trying to sort them out here. I do feel the need to have some clear understanding of the terms and relationships mentioned above, especially, when I hear or read the contradictory reactions to my plays or, to the creations of many others who have something different to say, and are trying to do so. I am not against contradictions or controversies, but we need some common ground to understand

each other and to have difference of opinion.

There are two issues that I wish to focus on in this article, namely:

1. What is 'experimental' theatre or 'experimental' art? What is its relation to society, if there is any, and if there is, how 'socially conscious' is it?

2. What is the relationship between thoughts, emotions and theatre? And how can we describe 'theatre' as different from other art forms and literature with reference to this relationship?

Before tackling these two questions, it may be important to understand as to how the Indian society, by and large, looks upon art or theatre. I am referring to the general perception in the society and not that of a few enlightened ones. In our society, art is considered a hobby, as something decorative, or at best something which comes after the basic needs of life are satisfied. Such an outlook does not consider a very basic fact. In any society, one's basic needs like water, food, shelter, etc, do not remain a matter between nature and the individual. Neither is the scope of basic needs restricted to water, food and shelter. Even the decision as to whose needs will be satisfied, in what way, and to what extent, is taken by the society and its social institutions. At the extreme level, social norms—caste, patriarchy—also decide matters of who is 'untouchable', and as to who will have the first right to even basic needs like water and air. Even capitalism is at work regarding these matters. Many exploitative systems and relationships are created to suit a particular section of the society. A society is created around some kind of understanding or norms over a period. I do not refer to this 'understanding' or 'norms' behind society formation to dated terms like 'social contract', but to what noted philosopher Charles Taylor calls 'social imaginary'. He has clearly illustrated how myths, literature and arts (including theatre), play a more prominent and primary role in creating this 'social imaginary', than theoretical delineations. In short, art plays an important role in modern life and should be dealt with seriously. In bringing art to the level of the 'decorative', the 'hobby', the 'entertainment', one tends to forget this. It is bound to be immensely dangerous to treat art either in this way or going to other extreme, ask art to perform a 'problem solving' role.

Experimental theatre is more deeply related and committed to society. There are innumerable examples of this. At every important stage of a paradigm change in society, theatre or art, in general, changed its course and assisted in making meaning of the changed reality, be it renaissance, or industrial revolution, or two world wars. There have been innumerable *ism*s which have gone hand in hand with

philosophical systems like surrealism, impressionism, expressionism, modernism, romanticism, existentialism, postmodernism, etc.

What exactly is 'experimental'? For me, any good theatre is experimental in nature, whether it is commercially successful or not. By 'experimental' I do not mean a theatre 'which is difficult to understand', or 'which is to be seen with serious long faces'. Nor is it one which experiments only in form, by employing spectacular tricks, like bringing live horses on stage, or creating a fantastic illusion of train on stage, etc. It isn't even one which addresses or rather, claims to address, some current, controversial social topic, but at the same time takes utmost care not to disturb the accepted social values, or avoids even to discuss them. A much deeper social relevance or relationship to society and awareness is required to be really experimental. Real experiment occurs when the reality—in one or all the senses like, social, political, philosophical, existential, metaphysical—is interpreted, made meaning of or reconstructed, in theatre differently from what has been the given norm until then. It requires a different 'worldview' to do that. The process of the making of this 'worldview' of a person has always been a complex one; but it has become even more complex and multi-linear in the present times, in the era of what is referred to as globalisation, with many faith-systems and knowledge-systems encountering each other.

People are influenced in many ways by social frameworks, value-systems, ideologies, faith systems, relationships and sensibilities. Due to all these influences, a 'tapestry' of norms gets woven into several intricate patterns. There are some eternal concerns, like death, life, love, loneliness, greed etc and there are some temporal or spatial ones, as well, whose meaning obviously changes with time and place. At the same time, the texture of even the eternal concerns and the importance attached to each of them also changes constantly. Even though a person's intellectual and emotional world have always been complex, earlier it was mostly linear, as it was made up of tension between two poles; it was bi-polar. As a result of the boom of globalisation, it has now become multi-linear. Earlier, it was the tension between two opposites like Capitalism versus Marxism, or labour against the industrialist or faith against scientific logic, or Brahmin against lowest castes. Now it can be between unrelated elements like Capitalism against religious fundamentalism, or Dalit, Brahmins, Muslims joining hands against other Backward Castes like Yadavs, as is seen in Uttar Pradesh politics or whether to vote for a person who believes in the Rights of homosexuals or a person who wants to wage a war against Iraq, as it happened in the USA which had

elected Bush for a second time. The Syrian war is a classic example of this multi-linearity. Today, tapestry is getting more and more complex, and multi-dimensional. The list of influencing points is becoming endless, especially in a country like India which is extremely diverse and which is living in 'many times' simultaneously - from primitive to postmodern! Which of these points one gives more weightage to, either consciously or sub-consciously, is what goes into making up her 'worldview'. That is what determines the pattern of her 'mental tapestry'. It is this view that enables her to draw inferences about the world. Her 'place' in it is determined by the very same factors. They make her aware of the various contradictions and ultimately absurdities, the limitations of human existence. In a particular place, at a particular time the ratio in which a person accepts all these tensions, and the 'tapestry' that is woven as a result, is the worldview of that person. The more 'awake' one's perception of these tensions is, the more the worldview becomes meaningful, sharp, capable of discovering new meanings, real and lively. The more points it takes into cognizance the more 'comprehensive' it becomes. And the more intensely one's sensitivity experiences the awareness of these tensions, the more deep-rooted it becomes.

This 'worldview', and in turn the logic that it puts forth, depends on the one hand on the social conditions and on the other on the individual personality. Experimentation in theatre or art exists only when this worldview that is reflected in creation is different, and when the artist has allowed this sensibility to express itself without any compromises, or any extraneous motives, as truthfully as possible. I do not believe that such experimentation can take place only when there are major changes in social conditions, like the ones that took place due to two World Wars, or India gaining freedom, or what we term as revolutions in different senses, like Marxist revolution, industrial revolution or the electronic revolution. It is true that a massive change is perceptible under such conditions. That is why it is easier to give examples of different kinds of theatre or art emerging at such times. These are times of paradigm shifts, but significant, though smaller, shifts occur all the time. Every writer/artist has his/her own distinct worldview, which is different from that of the others, irrespective of the severity of social changes happening at that particular time. Social conditions are never so static, at least in the modern times, when the sheer momentum of change is immense.

I would like to mention here that all this does not mean that such a person is not interested in, or is totally above, considerations like money, glamour or acceptance by the society. However, these aspirations are not the prime motive behind the creation of

experimental theatre. Secondly, this distinct worldview or sensibility in the artist is a result of her/his being a part of a specific society, with all its traditions, inheritances, influences, and contradictions. This sensibility has to be aware of, and deeply entrenched in, these traditions. This is necessary even to defy or stand against the traditions or accepted norms. 'Experimental theatre' in this way is deeply rooted in traditions, socially conscious or related to social conditions, while being rebellious at the same time.

There are a few related points which should be mentioned before moving to the question number two. One, we can see new forms and styles emerging as a natural outcome of the process of the new worldview experimenting with content. This process is, at times, inevitable. In fact, the new form becomes inseparable from the new content like in the case of the 'theatre of the absurd'. However, it is not at all necessary that form changes drastically with the change in content. Realism can be used to convey different ideologies and worldviews—from the Marxist to the Hedonist—just as the same material, such as stone, can be used to create buildings with vastly different approaches. Secondly, we have to understand as to what we really mean by new logic or new sensibility. One must remember that it is never a totally new thought. Christ did not discover the feeling of compassion, or the things related to it. The difference is that he made it one of his central themes. Human existence, consciousness, etc. are obviously very complicated. Different concepts become more or less important, and acquire different shades of meaning. It is the highlighting of particular points, the logical relationships that one establishes or breaks in this grey area, which is important.

It is obvious that 'experimentation' being related to worldview operates at a qualitatively deeper level than the changes that take place as a mere fad. However, another point, not so obvious, arises due to the depth at which 'experimentation' is supposed to operate. The issue whether there should be any coherence or 'match' between the writer's personal life and her/his literature has been debated for centuries. Same is the case with\the socio-political commitment of the writer. In case of 'experimental' theatre, as the playwright is supposed to have a 'different vision' of reality, which includes all spheres of life, like social, political, existential and philosophical, should it be expected that her/his personal life will be more in coherence with her/his writings? My personal opinion is that it should be, but that being a bigger issue I will not dwell on it in this article.

It is quite evident that any real life activity or experience evokes our emotions and thoughts. We normally do not consciously try

to establish a relationship between the event and the emotions or thoughts related to it. Art tries to bring about this evocation through the experience of an art piece. We attain a similar condition of mind, when we witness a play or read a novel or see a painting, without actually experiencing a true life event. Experience of an art piece or seeing a painting is a true life event, but that is obviously different. This evocation of thoughts and emotions when we see a play is, as always, of two types. One which provokes you mindlessly for a short period of time, blunts your consciousness about self and outside reality (the way sex and violence are depicted in most mainstream cinema) and which is decorative, pleasing to the eye, which frees you from your guilt by shedding a couple of tears, like what you get in a typical soap or melodrama. The other makes you positively active, which increases the horizons of your consciousness about self as well as the surrounding reality in all senses—political, social, existential and philosophical. I would like to mention in passing that this awareness, this process of 'articulating meaning', is much more relevant in case of literature and theatre, compared to abstract arts like music or painting.

Now we come to the main point: relationship between thoughts, emotions and theatre. Normally, we tend to bifurcate or separate thoughts and emotions from each other. This bifurcation and categorisation works up to a point; to understand human nature, instincts, social influence, etc. Anger, love, greed, etc; are taken to be feelings, and thoughts are those which are related to logic, reason, science, pursuit of truth, etc. Feelings are supposed to be natural instincts and thoughts are supposed to be man made. According to some ideologies, like Romanticism, thoughts take us away from nature. When this logic is extended, we end up normally by thinking wrongly that the two are not related at all, and that the two do not influence each other. The fallout of this bifurcation then creates many misunderstandings. If we assume this, then next division is sort of automatic. Art is related to feelings and knowledge to thoughts. This is a wrong division. It assumes that art has nothing to do with knowledge; art does not require reason and logic. It is very important to remember that art can be looked at as a cognitive process, as an important source of knowledge and something which can change and give a particular direction to one's sensibility. Even if we disregard the influence of thought and emotions on each other for a moment, the importance of sheer thought in form of reason and logic in theatre can not be disregarded, especially if we agree on what we have said while we discussed the nature of 'experimentation'.

The worst that happens due to this division is that we forget that our feelings, our ideas and thoughts, which we consider as our own and sort of natural, are influenced to a very great extent by society. We forget that howsoever 'natural' or 'intuitional' my feelings may be, their texture is influenced by many other things. Let us examine the second point first. I often have had a dream wherein I stand stark naked in a crowd. Even in the dream, I get terribly frightened, get goose pimples and start shaking uncontrollably. What is this fear? The concept of nudity being a taboo is obviously social, but the feeling of fear is so immediate a reaction, without wasting any time thinking about its social origins that it seems as if, being afraid of nudity is instinctive/natural. Immediate anger exhibited by many, when they come across a news item about corruption in high places is another example. Let us take an example from theatre. The texture of fear and anger that a person—who understands the nature of modern state intellectually—when s/he sees Tendulkar's play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, is very different from that of an intellectually uninitiated person. If fact the latter may not feel any fear or anger at all while experiencing play. Love, hate, compassion, etc. like this anger always have many shades and the shades are to a great extent culture-specific, or condition- specific. When we say 'he was angry', it is never only 'angry', it is always with these shades, with a 'location', and a person coming from very different background may not be able to understand this anger at all. One is incapable of 'understanding' this 'anger' without understanding all the shades. These shades emerge from the traditions and existing value systems in a society, or even by rebelling against them. Thoughts and emotions are so closely related. This makes the feelings 'located' and related to social reality.

If what I have written above is correct, then two things become important. Firstly, how sharp or blunt are my emotions and thoughts, and secondly how do I relate my real life thoughts and emotions to theatre? Both the things are obviously inter-connected. Let us examine the second one, first. The act of relating art experience to real life is by no way, natural. Lot of practice and effort go into establishing this relationship. One has to learn, to 'internalise' art. This process starts in early childhood. That is why, under favourable conditions, children can be amazingly creative. I will give an example. It will also illustrate how closely the social conditions and surroundings are related to art. A three-year-old child from Maharashtra learning a Marathi nursery rhyme like *'yere yere pawsa'* (O rain, please come), can easily relate with it because of the Marathi culture at home and her experience of

monsoons in Maharashtra, which the children and adults both enjoy. She not only sings it, sort of 'instinctively', when the rains actually arrive, but experiments with some similar poetry of her own, like '*ye ga ye ga aai*,' or '*ja ga ja ga gadi*' ('O, mother please come' or 'O train please go', etc.) A child from England most certainly will not be able to associate with this nursery rhyme so easily. I implore the readers to stretch this example in case of more complex ideas and concepts. If I am not able to relate to these concepts in real life, it is impossible to connect to them through theatre. However, once I train myself to establish this relationship, I can extend this understanding through theatre or literature, to things not experienced by me in real life, or concepts not understood directly in real life. Then, a writer from nineteenth century, cold Russia, like Dostoevsky, can become a close friend of a reader from the twenty-first century, warm India. What is needed is the process of internalisation of art. It is never easy to relate to somebody else's sensibility. One's own sensibility matures through this. It becomes more subtle and sharp. It makes one more conscious about oneself and one's surroundings. This process of internalisation is often talked about in case of actors and writers only. But it is valid in case of every reader or spectator, as she experiences theatre or art, and sort of recreates it for herself depending on her own abilities, sensibility, and associations, as we saw when we were trying to describe the nature of art.

My experience of a play like *Mahanirvan* or *Hamlet* is bound to be considerably different from that of anybody else', though some factors may be common. That is why this process of empathy or 'co-experience' is very important. But, what exactly do we mean by internalisation or co-experience? And why is it specifically important in theatre? Though this phenomenon is important in all fields of art and literature, in theatre two additional aspects make it more complicated. Firstly, whatever happens in theatre is 'here and now'. What the spectator sees is what is happening in the present. Whatever is not 'here and now' is left to the imagination of the spectator. The spectator can be 'informed' only through dialogues, visual elements like sets and voice modulations and body movements of the actors. There is no narrative like what we can have in a novel. It comes here and now in another sense as well, as the spectator needs to follow whatever is taking place on the stage, matching the speed at which it gets depicted in front of her/him. This is like real-life experience. The spectator can not turn the pages back like s/he can do in a novel, neither can s/he keep the clock still as s/he can, while viewing a painting. This requires instantaneous internalisation on the part of the spectator. On these accounts, the so called 'tension' in the

proceedings in theatre has to be constant. This obviously depends on the capacities of both the spectator and the creator.

Secondly, theatre is a 'group art', or an art produced by a group of people working together. Many worldviews and sensibilities are trying to co-exist, co-operate and co-experience the theme. It isn't a linear chain. The writer on his/her part is trying to internalise his/her characters. The director does this process himself/herself after the script is ready. The actors and others are in contact with both, the script, as they interpret it, and with the director, according to his/her interpretation. All these people together try to reach the audience, on an individual spectator and at the level of a 'group of spectators'. Many a times, this congregation of spectators becomes an important consideration, which adds to the complications. An individual spectator is influenced by the others. Imagine a situation, where only one spectator amongst a group of five hundred is able to understand a particular kind of humour in the play like *Waiting for Godot*, and is reacting to it fittingly, while everybody else is absolutely quiet. Such a spectator is bound to be affected by the reaction of the others. If the particular play is experimental (trying to make meaning of a reality from a very different worldview, something which we are not used to), the complication is compounded. This possibility of different interpretations is another problem in this society. It is taken as a bad sign, when in fact it should be the other way round.

One can imagine what the actors go through, when they are trying to internalise the characters and trying to come to terms with the theme. It is not easy to co-experience. Most often, it can not be achieved through simple, straightforward logic. What helps in the process is the maturity of your own worldview, of associations, references and experience. It is never a one-to-one relationship. This can be illustrated beautifully by the example from a Shakespearean play. In the play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare has shown Juliet to be very young, about 16 or 17 years old. On the other hand, she speaks with the maturity of a much older person. People have tried different interpretations. Some straight away made her older, assuming that Shakespeare was wrong in showing her to be young. Some others associated her precocious maturity to the social conditions in Europe at that time. This contradiction in the play can not be overcome by such efforts, and so most of them did not succeed. This contradiction is important. Here one has to internalise Shakespeare as a writer, going beyond simple logic.

What then is this 'internalisation'? Let us go back to our description of art and its relation with real life. In real life, the field of our

emotions and thoughts is disturbed, by any event or experience, just as ripples produced on a still water body when a stone is thrown in. These ripples and the previously existent ripples, caused by previous experiences, make the pattern extremely complicated. If one wants to co-experience, then one has to understand that there is a complex pattern. To understand this complexity, simple logic is not enough, but one's own sensibility, thoughts, emotions, and associations developed over the years, have to be sufficiently mature. One also needs to be compassionate to all the thoughts and ideas, even those that do not match with one's own. I will take another example, to illustrate how difficult it is for the actors, and thereby, the spectators; as ultimately every spectator creates her/his own play. There are two main characters in my play *Thombya*, namely, Sadashiv and Rajeev. In one of the scenes right at the beginning of the play, Sadashiv says to Rajeev, "What? Are you at it again? All the time thinking of shares and debentures? Enough, I say." Rajeev gets extremely angry at this. Atul Pethe, who was the actor doing Rajeev, felt that this severe anger was totally unjustified. We had numerous discussions on this and I tried to explain this in many ways. He was not convinced. On his insistence, we tried and saw what would happen if Rajeev did not get so angry. Atul was the first one to agree that this did not work at all. Then Atul requested the actor playing Sadashiv to say his cue lines with more force of condemnation towards Rajeev. That produced even worse results. The only solution was for Rajeev to get angry and Atul was not able to do it convincingly. We left it at that for the time being. Then during one rehearsal, when perhaps Atul had a particular mindset due to his personal, real life conditions, he 'discovered' this anger. It was evident that something in the past of the character called Rajeev must be responsible for him getting angry to this extent. This past was not given by me, i.e. the writer; nor was it easy to imagine it exactly or in an articulate manner. But Rajeev getting angry at that point was convincing enough! How does the actor react then, if he is not able to associate with it?

In giving these examples, I am neither trying to underplay the importance of analytical and logical understanding nor do I mean that the actor should actually be in the conditions in which the character in the play is. Atul, who at some stage or the other worked this out at an analytical level too, could construct a particular past for Rajeev in concrete terms as well; otherwise he would not have been able to perform it in every show. If all of this is true, then there is only one solution, whether you are an actor, writer or spectator. The slate of one's mind or brain should be as clear, or as open, as possible

when one approaches a play. However, the stone of this slate must also be amenable to absorb any kind of colour that might be painted on it; it depends on the quality of the slate. The capacity to 'co-experience' depends on the maturity and variety in the associations gathered in one's emotional and thought world. On the other hand, exposure to such theatre and art increases one's maturity. It is a two way process.

If we take the issues I discussed till now: nature of experimental theatre and worldview; the relationship between thoughts, emotions and creativity and; the specific nature of theatre which makes it different from other arts and literature, it would be evident that experimental theatre is a rather complex matter. Naturally, it is not very popular. Some people claim, either for convenience or due to innocence, that 'good art is the one that is appreciated by everybody.' It is very clear that this criterion for judgement is totally wrong if we consider our analysis so far. It can prove to be wrong in one other way also. When anybody makes the comment mentioned above, it is evident, that what he/she is actually saying is quite different. What he/she means by 'everybody' is actually 'him/her' or people of 'his/her' level of understanding. Someone else may claim that this first person's 'level of understanding' is way too high and not common at all. If one continues with this argument, one reaches the lowest common denominator as the standard of good art, which is, obviously, not good for art or for society if the location of theatre/art/literature is as important as we claimed at the beginning. Such lowering of standard will not make the first person happy either, as he/she will not satisfied by the product now, which is way below his/her expectations! No theatre or art is capable of bringing about a revolution in a society or of changing a society dramatically. That is a false notion. What theatre or art can do is to help the society achieve this goal if that particular society is interested and ready for the revolution or change, to start with. At the same time, if you look at any vibrant society throughout the passage of history, the literature/theatre/art it produced was also vibrant, ready to take on new challenges and find new meanings, open to new worldviews. The choice is ours, as always!