

Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk* and *Indian Monologues*: Perusing the Non- dramatic Turn in Indian Theatre

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Abstract: The postdramatic tendencies are much seen in the Indian theatre scenario nowadays. This study thus probes into this new dimension in the contemporary Indian theatre. Moreover, my paper attempts to look into a monology performed by a renowned theatre performer Maya Krishna Rao. A key component of the postdramatic panorama is thought to be solos and monologies (not dramatic monologues). The new experiment she has tried in her non- dramatic works is a much untraveled path to explore. Her works show no direct influence of either postdramatic or dramatic traits, but a blend of both dramatic structures. The body, sound and image improvise her performance and define the theatrical situation.

Rao's 2012 solo performance, *The Walk*, was a response to the heinous gang rape of Jyoti in Delhi in December. The body plays a crucial role in this solo theatre. Rao carefully handles the conflict between the phenomenal body and the semiotic body to raise a protest against the culture of violence and atrocities towards women in India. The wider possibilities of phenomenal body, action and sound is being used in an unconventional way to give voice to the suppressed life of Jyoti. This work is thus a scrutiny into the possibilities of blending postdramatic features and Rao's Indian classical dance lessons to bring out a remarkable piece in Indian solo theatre.

Keywords: Monology, Rao, body, theatre, postdramatic, violence

INTRODUCTION

This paper probes into a new dimension in the contemporary Indian theatre. This looks into a monology performed by a renowned theatre performer Maya Krishna Rao. The new experiment she has tried in her non- dramatic works is a much untraveled path to explore. Her works show no direct influence of either postdramatic or dramatic traits, but a blend of both dramatic structures. The body, sound and image improvise her performance and define the theatrical situation.

A key component of the postdramatic panorama is thought to be solos and monologies (not dramatic monologues). Monologies and Solo theatres do not however develop fictitious worlds or present stories on stage. The dramatic theatre, which is primarily illusionist, deviates from the act of telling since it immerses the audience in the world of the story itself. The monologies are liberated from the ordained rules of dramatic theatre. The actor is given with a freedom of expression and presentation. Here nothing is asked to be 're-presented' and the only task is to present the essence. "Monologues help the theatre to exist as an 'external communication system...almost without the construction of a 'fictional internal communication system' (Lehmann 125- 8). Since these monologies and Theatre Solo's evolved in India, they create a theatrical scenario with a focus on performance actuality and the 'presentness' (Sengupta 92) of happening and are categorised under Postdramatic Theatre. Moreover these works undermines the dramatic unity and

internal logic. It is composed of fragmentary narratives and an eclectic style that incorporates elements from both music and the visual arts.

The works of theatre artists like Sudarshan Chakravorty, Kartikey Tripathi, Kalyanee Mulay, Maya Krishna Rao, Jyoti Dogra, etc. represents the new Indian Solo Performances which suits into the Postdramatic definitions. Their experimental approach contributes many unique works into the Indian drama. Their works are worthy enough to create a separate space in Indian Theatre history.

The works of Maya Krishna Rao has received much attention and appreciation far and wide. Her works are much distant from the traditional dramatic structure. She doesn't develop her works merely upon any narratives or text-based pieces. Each work presents an idea or 'essence' of content. Rao's Solo's are made out of any subject that strikes her attention. "The theatre-making process for me is about letting myself into a series of experiences. The trigger could be a short story, an event or a single prop (Rao 55). But she calls it as her own 'Theatre', as it is much defined in terms of body, sound and image than any textual source.

Her 2012 solo performance, *The Walk*, was a response to the heinous gang rape of Jyoti in Delhi in December. The widespread culture of violence against women in India was denounced in response to this incident. Rao's protest demands that women should have the freedom to stroll around Indian cities at any time of day or night without worrying about their safety. She does not merely speak for women walking on streets but also for victims of domestic violence. She calls for legal action and a law to safeguard the lives and honour of women. This show was presented in a variety of settings, including streets, campuses, and schools.

Rao presents a new mode of storytelling incorporating her Kathakali lessons into her theatre. Thus she utilizes the real scope of integrating the "Kinaesthetic and rhythmic elements of the ancient theatre" (Sengupta 132). Throughout her performance she is not trying to present any fictional character or protagonist but creates a doppelganger who "constantly negotiates" (Sengupta 98) with the intended character. Rao speaks what Jyoti left behind with her demise. Rao creates Jyoti's thoughts and emotions with fragmented but powerful words. Her voice is also strong, rhythmic and poetic, seems to be emanating from somewhere deep within the body. She catered Jyoti's unattended sorrows, unheard miseries and dismissed complaints to charge against the society and legal system.

"walk...walk..walk walk... should I ...can I ... not seven, not eight, not nine, not ten but after 12 midnight ...I try not to be afraid of dark." (Rao's *Walk*)

"I want to walk; I want to sit on the bus... I want to lie in the park..."

And I want to try not to be afraid of the dark." (Rao's *Walk*)

"if a man doesn't know how to sit..look..talk with a woman, a man, a girl, a boy, a partner...don't walk with him...don't lie with him...don't vote for him, don't talk for him...(Rao' *Walk*)

Rao's *Walk* is her open statement showing her support towards the victims of rape and abuse. As Dipanita Nath comments, this performance "shows how the protest theatre can be formally turned into a Solo performance that has no story line [into] a monologue which is indirectly confrontational or deeply reflective." (Nath online). Here there is no false notion that a dramatic performance will specifically affect daily life. According to a proverb that is frequently credited to Brecht, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer to mould it." (Leonardo and McLaren). This argues that rather than attempting to merely portray and re-present reality in a way that can be independently verified, art can and should affect upon and modify reality. Here Rao's theatre is able to leave a trace or mark upon the surroundings

where it is performed. The questions raised by Rao keep on reverberating in every spectator's mind. This spark taken by each of them is the success of this theatre.

The body plays a crucial role in this method of creating theatre. The individual body or the phenomenal body comes in discourse with the social or Feminine body. Here the body is “ethical and pedagogical element of performance” (Stiles 35-43). The rehearsal itself was a constant dialogue happens between the phenomenal and semiotic body. This does not completely ignore mental condition but instead approaches it through designed movement. The movements were choreographed and improvised after each of her performance. So no act is the repetition of another, but the ‘essence’ remains to be the same.

With her body, language and voice, Rao cultivates an atmosphere that makes the audience more sensitive. Like an Australian performance artist Stelarc, Rao uses her Phenomenal body as the “site of performance” (Jane Collins and Andrew Nisbet 231). The ‘phenomenal body’ and the ‘semiotic body’, according to philosopher Helmuth Plessner, are combined to form the actor's body. The Phenomenal body is the actor’s “bodily being in the world” and the Semiotic body is “the use of that body as the sign to portray the character” (Lichte 26). According to the interaction between these two bodies, the meaning of acting has changed over time. The conflict that developed between phenomenal body and semiotic body was how the audience perceived the actors' performance. Many arguments were raised supporting and opposing its effects upon the audience. Many acting theories formulated underpinning the possibilities of these two entities:

The acting theories of the eighteenth century attempted to eradicate the possible dangers stemming from the tension between the phenomenal body of the actor and actor’s portrayal of a role. They privileged the semiotic portrayal of a role over the phenomenal body by emphasizing the dominance of the literary text over the art of acting. Actors were no longer supposed to foreground physical playfulness, improvisational talents or virtuosity. Instead they were to use their skills to communicate poetic meaning provided by a text...actors were supposed to extinguish their phenomenal body in order to transform themselves as completely as possible into a “text” made up of signs that described the actions and emotions of a character. (Lichte 26)

This fear of phenomenal body overpowering the literary text is being challenged by Maya Krishna Rao in her Solo theatre. In her act called *Walk*, Rao has used her body (Phenomenal body) as the only tool throughout her performance. Rao exploited 'the doubleness', as Plessner proposes, that exists within her body. Despite being female, she portrays the female psychology of Jyothi in front of the audience. It thus becomes easily relatable for the spectator to read a feminine psyche inside a female performer. Patrice pavis comments upon the idea of ‘doubleness’ inside a performer’s body:

The term *performer*, as opposed to *actor*, is being used increasingly here so as to insist on the action accomplished by the actor, rather than the mimetic representation of a role. For it is the performer who is physically and psychically present in front of spectators. (58)

She thus presents herself in casual attires like shirt and jeans or kurta or even saree to suit her feminine physique. She overcomes the trouble put forward by Auslander as, “the performing body is always both a vehicle for representation and simply itself” (90). Here she could meaningfully exploit this limitation as a tool for her performance. She stood as the representative of all woman folk and as herself. Her phenomenal body as well as the semiotic body represents the same entity. Thus there

doesn't arise any conflict 'between two bodies' but occurs 'with/ on/ to the body'. Here her clothes she chose for stage doesn't contain herself in a semiotic system but worn as if in life.

Another fact is that, here the actor has is herself and nothing else supports her other than a musical note playing behind. The performer herself integrates into that space and she is focused by a spot light on that dark background. No other extra properties or materials are used for the performance. Her act develops with fragmented words and incomplete speeches delivered by her. Here Rao's act follows the same concept once proposed by a Professor in Performance studies, at University of Exeter, Philip B Zarilli:

Here the performing body comes into being through interaction with all the other elements of scenographic practice- costume, light, sound, space and audience. The way the body is read and understood is dependent upon "the play of signification between the signs produced by the actors and the interpretation of those signs made by the spectators. (Zarilli 17).

Rao's theatre is the expanded Indian version of postdramatic theatre. Rao maintained her distance from the actor while continuing to get in the way of the actor's character-playing. As a result, the performance is purposefully devoid of feeling and psychological nuance. Although the performer just displays the emotion physically, she does not become sentimental herself. In other words, when Rao performs the part of the character, it shows that the actor does not truly belong to the part. This is very different from the Western acting style that calls for the actor to emotionally connect with the character in order to portray them accurately. While the actor in our situation repeatedly engages in critical and detached negotiation with the role, she resembles more of a performer. But remember she is not directly enacting the character but showing a self-reflexive kind of performance in which the spectator is unable to separate one from another.

In conclusion this monology by Maya Krishna Rao is a powerful act using body and sound as the vital medium of presentation. The wider possibilities of phenomenal body, action and sound is being used in an unconventional way to give voice to the suppressed life of Jyothi. The blend of postdramatic features and her Indian classical dance lessons bring out a remarkable piece in Indian solo theatre. With its emphasis on performance realism and presentness, this theatre also defies the structural rules of the dramatic theatre by generating a theatrical scenario. As a result, the action on purpose lacks psychological path and emotion. In other words, when Rao performs the part of the character, the performer within her shows that the actor does not truly belong to the part. It is more or less a reflexive act in which the action transcends the character.

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