

Catalysing Social Change: The Application of Forum Theatre in Ganguly's Sarama

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1

Abstract: *This paper examines Forum Theatre's application in Sanjoy Ganguly's play Sarama, illustrating its socio-political impact. Forum Theatre, rooted in audience participation, empowers marginalized voices to confront societal injustices. Ganguly strategically integrates Forum Theatre elements, such as background scenes and spect-actors, amplifying the play's critique of oppressive power structures. Through interactive dialogue facilitated by the Joker, audiences engage in collective resistance and reflection. The play Sarama serves as a platform for marginalized communities to challenge oppression and envision alternative narratives, showcasing the transformative potential of Forum Theatre in promoting social change. Through its thematic content and structural elements, the play highlights the potency of art as a catalyst for societal change.*

Keywords: Audience Participation, Collective Resistance, Forum Theatre, Marginalized Empowerment

Article History: Received: 21 Sept-2024; Accepted: 02 October-2024; Published/Available Online: 30 November- 2024

1. Introduction

Forum Theatre, a vibrant theatrical expression mode, surpasses traditional venues' limitations, resonating in spaces where people congregate and discuss their issues. Augusto Boal pioneered Forum Theatre, emphasizing its ability to adapt to community settings, whether bustling marketplaces or remote villages. Through ingenuity, Forum Theatre encapsulates the essence of daily life, offering a stage to illuminate and interact with the issues shaping human experience. Krause (1980, as cited in Kemper, 2012) describes the Forum Theatre as “theatre should be, can be, a vital part of the community- I think just as important as the school, the church, or for that matter the grocery store. All theatre is entertainment first of all, but theatre can illuminate what life is” (p.62). The Forum Theatre is important in addressing societal concerns by engaging individuals from the proletariat on stage and highlighting grassroots issues. Dutta (2015) discusses Forum Theatre as a tool for ongoing struggles against injustice, creating a democratic forum for women to collectively voice, showcase, participate, and integrate into society. This emergence stems from a shared sense of injustice and recognition of their collective agency, enabling marginalized women to assert their independent identities through Forum Theatre's distinctive and effective methodology (pp.56-70).

The Forum Theatre methodology is a fundamental framework for staging drama, providing a dynamic platform to highlight a spectrum of social, economic, religious, and political themes. It commences with either a pre-planned or spontaneous performance, illuminating the intricacies of societal dilemmas. Throughout the unfolding drama, audience members actively participate in discussions and exchanges facilitated by a designated moderator, commonly referred to as the “Joker”. This interactive process stimulates enjoyment and encourages robust engagement from the audience. Additionally, the Joker assumes a crucial role in maintaining impartiality, steering discussions, and ensuring logical interventions. Following each intervention, the audience assesses its impact, nurturing a reflective environment conducive to exploring alternative perspectives. Consequently, Forum Theatre emerges as a potent tool for societal examination and transformation, forging meaningful connections between performers and audience members. Further, the Forum Theatre's background is reminiscent of street theatre with its minimalistic approach. This includes no elaborate makeup, costumes, or traditional stage performances. Instead, the stage is stripped down, often lacking conventional lighting, stages, or music, with only a drum and perhaps some sticks or props (Halдар, 2012; Baumann, 2012; Sardar, 2012; Pal, 2012).

Furthermore, Michael Wrentschur (2021) highlights the importance of Forum Theatre, characterizing it as an interactive form of drama where the audience actively explores resolutions to socio-political conflicts portrayed on stage. By witnessing the impact of real-life social dynamics on fictional characters, spectators empathize with their struggles to articulate grievances and assert their rights. During the Forum phase, audience members directly intervene, shaping the storyline's progression and converting the theatrical setting into a laboratory for social experimentation. This collaborative endeavour cultivates a shared experience among spectators, transitioning from passive observers to proactive 'spect-actors,' collectively brainstorming and probing for solutions throughout the performance (p.637).

Sanjoy Ganguly utilizes Forum Theatre within his Jana Sanskriti theatre both on and off the stage, aiming to strengthen audience involvement and interaction. This approach encourages spectators to actively participate in the drama, often stepping into roles such as the hero or other characters. The primary goal is to catalyze socio-political change by prompting the audience to scrutinize and challenge oppressive social structures while brainstorming potential solutions. To achieve this, Ganguly incorporates various elements such as background scenes, performance structure, theatrical components, the presence of an Interlocutor or Joker, and the concept of Spect-actors in his play Sarama, both during on-stage performances and in off-stage engagements. Thus, the study tries to answer the following research question: How does the utilization of Forum Theatre methodology in the play Sarama contribute to portraying societal resistance against oppression and socio-political challenges?

The narrative of Sarama unfolds against the backdrop of rural life, portraying the resolute journey of a young woman battling for justice amidst adversity. The tale unfurls dramatically, commencing with the harrowing ordeal of Sarama, the protagonist, who becomes the victim of a brutal gang rape perpetrated by three promoters of a political party, a ghastly act witnessed by the entire village under the unforgiving glare of daylight. Despite hailing from a privileged background, Sarama, driven by her convictions, opts to reside in a humble slum after estranging herself from her family due to her romantic involvement with Adheer. However, her world shatters when Adheer, in the aftermath of the assault, callously abandons her. As the narrative unfolds, Alok, the leader of the political party, endeavours to shield the perpetrators who hastily absconded from the village. Meanwhile, the women's organization, entrusted with the task of dispensing justice, proves ineffectual in providing solace to Sarama. Amidst this turmoil, Sutapa emerges as a formidable ally in Sarama's quest for justice, unmasking the duplicity festering within the women's organization. However, the labyrinthine corridors of politics breed corruption within the judicial system, with Sarama finding herself unfairly vilified for her audacious demeanour. As the tension mounts and the courtroom drama reaches its zenith, a glimmer of hope emerges as the 'Nirmala Social Service Organization' intervenes, heralding a triumph of justice as Sarama finally finds vindication in the eyes of the law, casting a poignant spotlight on the triumph of resilience in the face of adversity.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing textual analysis of the play Sarama to investigate the utilization of Forum Theatre elements such as structure, characters, and imagery, along with other innovative communication tools like songs, spect-actors, and the Joker. Through a comprehensive examination of these elements, the study seeks to understand how they contribute to portraying societal resistance against oppression and socio-political challenges. Data collection thoroughly scrutinizes the play's text, focusing on scenes, dialogues, and character interactions, highlighting themes of resistance and social protest. Thus, the study assesses how integrating Forum Theatre techniques in the play Sarama facilitates audience engagement and empowers marginalized voices, focusing on its effectiveness in portraying resistance against socio-political challenges.

3. Analysis

The playwright Sanjoy Ganguly implements the image of the seven local village homes as symbols of resilience and defiance against external pressures in the play Sarama. The bamboo stick dwellings represent the endurance of the villagers. By portraying them engaged in various professions like weaving mats and rolling beedis,

Ganguly illustrates their determination to sustain their lives despite socio-economic hardships. Though not prestigious, these occupations reflect the villagers' commitment to preserving their livelihoods and resisting forces that threaten their way of life. Through individual characterization and resilience, Ganguly humanizes the proletariat, depicting their defiance against all odds. This portrayal of village life highlights the essence of resistance against external political power, evident in the backdrop descriptions and daily activities. The bamboo stick houses and villagers' routines symbolize the proletariat's defiance against socio-political issues.

In the play's third scene, the playwright incorporates a Forum element song on stage to highlight societal issues. The audience is further immersed in the play's themes through the actors' performances and the accompanying song. By blending song with theatrical expression, the dramatist presents a range of societal concerns, prompting audience engagement on both intellectual and emotional fronts. Moreover, the song facilitates a nuanced examination of the human experience and the intricate dynamics of the characters' world, as found in the following:

*I am the party leader, nation's leader
The country is mine.
I am a party person, I love the party
Above anyone else
The people who empower the party
You know those workers-toilers
No matter how much they work
They have nothing to show for it
Thankfully...
My ancestors were stupid
They sacrificed their blood for the Party
Rather than follow their footsteps of sacrifice,
Now we make the most of the opportunities to pursue self-interest
It is the age of self-interest
That's what we do these days.
The dance is over. After a few seconds of remaining in a frozen image, the actors recite a few lines of a poem while walking around randomly.
Motherland, you see it all and yet you are blind.
Motherland, you hear it all and yet you are mute. (Ganguly, 2018, pp.80-81)*

The playwright highlights the growing divide between the political leader and the proletariat labourers, juxtaposing it with the sacrifices made by the leader's ancestors for the party. However, the current leader dismisses these sacrifices as futile, labelling them as “foolish” in the narrative, indicating a detachment from traditional values and a focus on present-day concerns. This acknowledgement of inherited values and legacy reflects a resistance to the power structures of previous generations.

Further, the playwright depicts the actors' sense of resistance and disillusionment through the lines of a poem, where the motherland symbolizes the nation observing silently, yet failing to address the needs of its people. Additionally, the accompanying song critiques the existing political authority and challenges entrenched ideologies. Through these artistic expressions, the playwright encourages spectators to take a stand against the prevailing power dynamics by resisting them.

The playwright Ganguly offers voice to the eponymous Sarama, who recites a poem describing the political leader's oppression in the play. She describes the condition as follows:

*Kings come and go, kings change
With a red attire on, with a blue attire on
Here comes a king, there goes a king*

Only the colour of the clothes changes
Only the shape of the mask changes
The day stays the same
Mad Meher Ali
Claps with both hands, Dances here, sings there
From street to street
Its all lies, all lies
All lies, all lies. (Ganguly, 2018, pp.101-102)

4

The playwright utilizes the aforementioned song to illuminate the dynamics of political power and its evolution within hierarchical structures, employing imagery of kings to convey this message. The song symbolizes resistance against the entrenched power system, urging spectators to scrutinize political leaders' validity, credibility, and authority. It signifies the importance of the proletariat's critical awareness in challenging political power and advocating for societal equality. Thus, the playwright empowers the proletariat by employing song as a tool of resistance within the play.

The playwright employs the structural elements of Forum Theatre to highlight the interplay between power and resistance through visual representations on stage in the play. The arrangement of actors within a triangle enclosed by a circle depicts societal issues (Ganguly, 2018, fig.8, p.75), while the stage setup includes bamboo sticks, boards, and circular lines (Ganguly, 2018, fig.9, p.77). The use of a pyramid structure symbolizes the hierarchical nature of society, prompting the audience to challenge it. Further, the inclusion of the Joker character alongside seven bamboo houses and the political leader's oppression of the proletariat highlights the harsh realities of societal oppression (Ganguly, 2018, fig.1, 2, 3, pp.67-69). Through these elements, Ganguly encourages spectators to interrogate, confront, and resist the prevailing power structures in pursuit of equal rights

The playwright utilizes the 'spect-actors' approach to exploring the social issue, employing this technique multiple times to prompt the audience to resist oppression. In the initial scene, the dramatist illustrates the spectator's evolution into a spect-actor who actively engages in the performance. These spect-actors are designated with labels like 'first neighbor,' 'second neighbor,' 'third neighbor,' 'fourth neighbor,' and so on, as follows:

First neighbor: Apalling! Rape in broad daylight.
Second neighbor: This is the age of muscle-men.
Third neighbor: No, this cannot go on.
Fourth neighbor: The various political parties are the ones that support them.
Fifth neighbor: What kind of jungle do we live in?
Sixth neighbor: How will we survive this?
Seventh neighbor: Where is our security? (Ganguly, 2018, p.70)

Through the dialogues presented, the playwright illuminates the active role of the proletariat in resisting oppression and engaging as spect-actors on stage. Each spect-actor embodies a different facet of the incident, with the first person acting as a beacon of resistance against injustice. In contrast, the second spect-actor addresses the issue of violence, while the third spect-actor opposes political authority with the declaration, "No, this cannot go on." The fourth spect-actor exposes the corruption within political circles. In contrast, the fifth expresses disillusionment and estrangement from the prevailing violence with the question, "What kind of jungle do we live in?" The sixth spect-actor voices uncertainty with the query, "How will we survive this?" Finally, the seventh spect-actor demands safety and advocates for systemic change. Through this portrayal, the playwright highlights the proletariat's active resistance and engagement in the struggle against injustice and social brutality as manifested through the spect-actor persona.

The playwright utilizes the character of Sutradhar as a Joker, serving as a mediator between spectators and artists. This portrayal signifies the Joker's role as a means of resistance against oppression. The playwright aims to stimulate dialogue and critical examination of social issues by incorporating the Joker, a staple of Forum Theatre. Further, by including various elements such as characters, songs, the Joker, and spect-actors, the playwright not only enriches the artistic experience but also creates opportunities for audience engagement with the performers. Thus, the playwright portrays the proletariat's steadfast commitment to resisting political authority through the character of Sutradhar, inviting both artists and spectators to challenge prevailing power structures through active participation.

In sum, the playwright utilizes background descriptions, songs, spect-actors, and a joker to bolster the proletariat's resistance against socio-political challenges in the play Sarama. Bamboo stick houses and the daily activities of villagers serve as symbols of resistance, while songs convey consciousness and defiance against political authority. Spect-actors embody resistance against oppression, while the Joker facilitates dialogue and critical introspection. Thus, Ganguly effectively portrays the proletariat's social protest and resistance against class oppression through these elements in the play Sarama.

4. Discussion

The study revealed that integrating Forum Theatre techniques in the play Sarama effectively facilitated audience engagement and empowerment of marginalized voices. Through structural elements, character dynamics, and interactive techniques, the play vividly portrayed resistance against socio-political challenges, resonating with spectators and prompting critical reflection. Innovative communication tools, such as songs, spect-actors, and the Joker character, enriched the narrative, promoting dialogue and amplifying protest against oppression. Thematic elements like background descriptions and character interactions conveyed consciousness and defiance against political authority, further enhancing the portrayal of societal resistance dynamics.

5. Conclusion

The study examines the playwright's adept use of Forum Theatre elements and other innovative communication tools to amplify protest and resistance. The playwright effectively portrays societal issues on stage by integrating Forum Theatre elements like structure, characters, and imagery with protest songs, dance, and movement. It is contended that through these techniques, the marginalized are empowered with a potent voice to confront injustice, inequality, and oppression. This analysis also highlights the playwright's skillful wielding of these tools to create impact, enhancing our appreciation of art's potential as a catalyst for social transformation.

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Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to our understanding of the transformative potential of art, particularly Forum Theatre, in catalysing social change and nurturing collective empowerment. The findings offer insights for practitioners and scholars interested in utilizing theatrical interventions for social activism, emphasizing the importance of audience engagement and innovative communication strategies. Additionally, the study highlights the significance of artistic expression in challenging prevailing power structures and advocating for equality in society, paving the way for further exploration of Forum Theatre's role in promoting social transformation.