

Jatra and Kabuki : An Indepth Look

Farhanaz Rabbani*

Introduction

As the world sails into the second decade of the new millennium, more and more people are beginning to realize the importance of folk art, their elegance and beauty. Contemporary art is a reflection of the seeds sown by folk art in different cultures hundreds of years ago. But apart from just being traditional, folk art has a significant socio-political dimension. In this paper, folk art stands as a representation of the mass public which expresses itself as popular culture. According to Ang, the ‘populist aesthetic’ is “based on an affirmation of the continuity of cultural forms and daily life, and on a deep- rooted desire for participation, and on emotional involvement” (274). This paper will focus on the distinctive nature and role of popular folk art- the Bangladeshi *Jatra* and the Japanese *Kabuki*, which originated from the populist aesthetic of two very different cultures. Although Bangladeshi and Japanese cultures are varied, they have some common grounds on which oral or “dialogue drama” flourished as ‘performance’ among the underprivileged masses.

Origin of *Jatra*

The history of oral indigenous theatre like *Jatra* in Bangladesh is fascinating because it has gone through radical changes to meet the needs of the changing times. Although the first evidence of a Euro-centric theatre in Bengal is found in 1753 (set up by the East India Company), there is very little information on the origin of indigenous or folk theatre in Bangladesh. Nilu opines that *Jatra* probably began in the 15th century with the *Bhakti* movement when devotees sang and danced in processions, praising mythological and religious heroes. By collective singing and

* Lecturer, Department of English, University of Dhaka

exaggerated acting, they enticed the public to join them. Therefore, etymologically '*Jatra*' means 'to go in procession'.

However, Nilu also points out that Phani Bhushan Biddiyabinod asserts that *Jatra* was born out of an enactment of an event in Krishna's life when he left his loved ones to go to Mathura to punish his uncle King Kamsa. Hindu devotees called the legendary march to Mathura- the *Krishna Jatra*. But by the end of the eighteenth century, soon after the East India Company began its oppression on Bengal, the nature of *Jatra* changed. *Jatra* performers began to portray the grievances of the mass public through their story lines. Thus, *Jatra* began to represent the public's emotions more intensely, leading it to be a platform for social and political protest, specially in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. As Ahmed points out, *Jatra* or indigenous theatre "has been fashioned by the people of this land in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment." But in 1876, the British introduced the Dramatic Performance Act where all *Jatra* troupes were forbidden to showcase any anti British content. Disregarding this ban, throughout the 19th century, rural masses have embraced *Jatra* as a means to voice their frustrations about the society. In the late 1960s *Jatra* performances carried strong socialist ideals which eventually changed colour to strong messages of independence in the 70s. This trend follows Ang's assertion of the 'populist aesthetic' where the audience feels a deep rooted emotional attachment to the performances. The populist aesthetic makes the oral, dialogic theatre like *Jatra*, a performance. Barber, in her paper on text and performance in Africa writes:

The text is the permanent artifact, handwritten or printed, while the performance is the unique, never-to-be repeated realization or concretization of the text, a realization that "brings the text to life" but which is itself doomed to die on the breath in which it is uttered. Text fixes, performance animates (264).

Therefore, *Jatra* ceases to be just another traditional form of indigenous art. *Jatra* in Bangladesh, is a performance which entertains, animates and inspires Bangladeshis both in the rural and urban areas. According to Gerstle, in a 'performance', "the individual takes a turn at being the reader/interpreter (audience) and

at being the creator (performer)” (189). Shirane highlights that since performances are repeated, they are treasured by the audience as a communal memory. In other words, oral or indigenous theatre ‘performance’ is a result of a collective endeavour which helps to build new communal memory. At this point, another form of theatrical performance following the populist aesthetic ideals must be mentioned for a comprehensive understanding of the rise and popularity of non- formal oral theatre in Asia.

In Japan, *Kabuki* is enlisted on the UNESCO’s ‘Third proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’. But *Kabuki*, a form of oral performance initially patronized only by the lower and working class of Japan had a very humble beginning.

Origin of *Kabuki*

In the East, oral traditions were specially prominent because of a lack of access to foreign culture. Before the late nineteenth century Japan had a long history of withstanding to the pressures of the West both economically and culturally. The Ashikaga Shogunate (1338-1573) was characterized by the introduction of fine and gentle arts like *Ikebana*, *Cha-no-yu* (tea ceremony) *Koawase* (incense judgement). According to Lombard, these forms of art were encouraged to strengthen the “strict isolation of the sexes demanded by Buddhist ethics and Buddhism’s failure to bring matters of sex under the ennobling sanctions of religion.” Due to the Shogunate restrictions, the rural mass, being unable to take part in the elite art forms, found entertainment in a novel form of theatre offered by a young Shinto priestess named Okuni. It is believed that in 1603, Okuni’s dance was a form of *nembutsu*, a Buddhist dance of worship praising Amida. Soon, with the patronage of Sanzaburo, a young man who was opposed to the Shogunate austerities of religion, Okuni began to dance along with more popular tunes composed by Sanzaburo himself. This marks the beginning of the *Onna Kabuki* - *Onna* meaning ‘woman’ since Okuni eventually trained other women to dance with her. The word *Kabuki* is derived from three Chinese characters: *ka* (songs), *bu* (dance) and *ki* (skills). According to Matsuda, the word also means “deviating from the norm” or “eccentric”. Although the content of the *Kabuki*

performances had religious interpretations, their carnal presentations appealed to the rural public intensely. As the number of *kabuki* troupes slowly multiplied, the plots or messages conveyed by the dancers changed. The Japanese common people loved the *Kabuki* because it was a form of protest against social conventions. But, in the Edo period, *Kabuki* actors were branded as social outcasts because the rulers declared them to be lower than the peasant and merchant class. In 1629, *Onna Kabuki* was banned by the rulers because it allegedly propagated freedom of thought. As women were forbidden to perform in *Kabuki* theatre, a new form of *Kabuki* performance began where men played the roles of women. This special type of performance was called *Wakashu Kabuki*. However, the ribald and raucous performances of the young men portraying scandalous activities of government officials, led the Tokugawa Shogunate to prohibit *Wakashu Kabuki* in 1652. Undeterred by the repeated sanctions, *Kabuki* eventually evolved into a more sophisticated form when only older, mature men decided to perform for the public. *Yaro Kabuki* began its journey as a more stylized form of theatre with characters and plots.

***Jatra* and *Kabuki*- An analysis**

The most striking resemblance in both these forms of folk theatre is the actors. *Jatra* actors are well known for their garish make-up, specifically, the concentric circles around their eyes and several lines marking their lips. Some characters like the Fool have more distinguishable features than the others. In Japan, since women were not allowed to perform in *Kabuki*, male actors had to pay special attention to their make-up. Bangladeshi *Jatra* also flourishes with male actors playing female roles in colourful and exaggerated make-up and costumes. In *Kabuki*, there are moments when the main actor strikes a *mie*, which means striking an attitude. In *mie*, the actor often crosses his eyes and elicits an exaggerated expression for dramatic effect. On the other hand, in *Jatra*, dramatic effects are achieved by introducing *bibek* (conscience) into the plot or by accentuated and exaggerated gestures of the actors accompanied by appropriate music. In some forms of *Kabuki*, actors wear masks like some of the *Jatra* actors in Bangladesh. According to Ahmed, two *Jatra* troupes in Tangail and Narail, used masks, one for a tiger and another for a serpent *Kalnagini*, while

performing a *Bhasan Jatra* (154). In *Jatra*, there is an air of festivity just before the actual performance itself. In the 16th century, the *Jatra* stage used to be set only around Hindu temples. But today, with increased patronage and support from Muslims, the *Jatra* stage is sometimes set up in an open space where everyone can sit in an organized fashion. The spectators of *Jatra* vary in age and gender; the women often sitting apart from the men. Among the many forms of *Jatra*, like, *Bhasan Jatra*, *Rama Jatra*, *Sang Jatra* etc, *Jhumur Jatra* bears a close resemblance to the nature and content of *Okuni's Kabuki*. According to Ahmed, *Jhumur Jatra* is “performed purely for secular entertainment”. He quotes Gurusaday Dutt thus: “the expression *Jhumur* is a generic term applied to dances or songs which do not fall under any specific class but are of a miscellaneous character, particularly with erotic association” (252). With an array of musical instruments, the musicians sit on one side of a square stage which has a ramp leading to the green room. While the spectators are seated all around the elevated stage, actors enter the stage through the ramp, enabling the audience to see the actor transform into his character on stage in seconds. The space between the actors and spectators is therefore minimal, making the whole experience very personal and emotional.

Although both *Jatra* and *Kabuki* evolved as religious performances, Hindu and Buddhist respectively, *Kabuki* quickly transformed into a celebration of carnal pleasures. While portraying the scandals of the *samurai* class and merchant class, *Kabuki* was predominantly a raucous, ribald event. Even today, there is a striking sense of total abandonment in the *kabuki* theatre environment.

Matsuda writes: “Just step inside a *kabuki* theatre and you will hear shouts from the audience. These shouts called *kakegoe* are actually shouts of encouragement or recognition made by individual audience members calling out the names of the actors or their affiliations”(1).

The shouts of the audience also indicate the informality of the *Kabuki* stage, which also features a ramp, the *hanamichi*, from where the actors sometimes make dramatic entrances. Being physically close to the actors on the *hanamichi* makes the audience

feel personally closer to his performance exactly like the audience of a *Jatra* sitting near the ramp. There are no pretensions in the *Jatra* and *Kabuki* stage environments. The public psyche is determined by the communal need for an outpouring of spontaneous emotion. As Lombard suggests, that the *hanamichi* “marks the *kabuki* for what it is- a play of the people for the people” (1). This kind of atmosphere concurs with Bakhtin’s concept of ‘Carnival’ which is “a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators” (274). He further states: “Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (275).

For the audience of both *Jatra* and *Kabuki*, for a few hours of the performances, “all distance between people is suspended”, as Ang points out, giving rise to a “new mode of interrelationship between individuals” (273). *Kabuki*, in the later years was witnessed by both the low class and also by the respectable class of Japanese society. Today, *Kabuki* is considered to be a national treasure, patronized by the rulers and the working class alike. Bangladeshi *Jatra* has also been revived in popularity today, as both the young and the old generations are regarding this folk theatre as an indispensable part of our identity.

Conclusion

Drawing upon all the features of these two types of folk theatre, one from South Asia and the other from Far East Asia, it is easy to assert that despite the predominance of written literature, oral culture or oral literature is the driving force of a communal psyche. While it is important for a nation to have written texts on science, poetry and arts, it should not be forgotten that the mass public, and very often, the rural public have the power to shape national identity by defying conventional norms and hierarchical standards set by rulers. Popular culture, therefore, can be viewed as a determinant of social and political change in the collective psyche of a nation. At the same time, in the study of arts, the concept of ‘performance’ is equally as important as the study of the written texts. It is gratifying to know that in both Bangladesh and Japan,

oral tradition in the 21st century is as strong and influential as it was in the 16th century.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Jamil Syed. *Achinpakhi Infinity*, The University Press Limited 2000. Print

Ang, Ien. "Dallas and the Ideology of Mass Culture" *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed John Storey, Longman 1998. Print

Barber, Karin. "Text and Performance in Africa", *Oral Tradition*, 20/2 (2005): 264-277. Print

Gerstle, C. Andrew. "The Culture of Play: Kabuki and the Production of Texts", *Oral Tradition*, 20/2 (2005): 188-216. Print

Lombard, Frank A. - *An Outline History of the Japanese Drama*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1928. Print

Matsuda, Ryohei. *An Introduction to Kabuki*. Japan Digest. Indiana University. January 1998. Print

Nilu, Kamaluddin - "Jatra and Bengali Culture". 26 August, 2010. <http://www.catbd.org/>

Shirane, Haruo. *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Basho*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1998. Print