

Drama Under Siege!

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In its long Indian career drama has enjoyed and suffered from many ups and downs. Some of the major forces that have influenced its fortunes beneficially or otherwise are migrations, religious movements, political upheavals and socio-economic redistributions. Yet another factor to cause multiple anxieties has been the debut of a new art/art-form. This is specially so when the new form also happens to be audio-visual in format and operation. What are the strategies drama employs when it is under such a siege?

Drama is said to have encountered the siege-situation by adopting three procedures subsumable under one broad phenomenon. To borrow, imitate and to assimilate are the three procedures. The overall governing phenomenon is the aesthetic dialectic which inevitably takes place in situations of cultural confrontation.

Energies released by arts in a confrontation-situation, always carry on an aesthetic dialogue or discourse full of action and inherent logic irrespective of the category, form and culture involved. The result is an identifiable aesthetic dialectic. The dialectic enables the participant arts to regroup, realign and stabilize their respective altered forces only to sow seeds of another situation of a cultural confrontation. In other words, a beleaguered state could be interpreted as a suggestion of new and fruitful things to come! It is believed that the contemporary drama is facing one such tense moment. A pair of eminently potent audio-visuals namely video and television are described as forces hostile to both drama and cinema. Of ironical interest is the fact that cinema was once charge-sheeted for sounding the death bell for Indian drama! It is therefore instructive to deal with the theme in some depth. It is repeatedly stated in the history of Indian drama that it suffered a major set-back with the advent of cinema, and especially the talkie, in the early decades of the century.

Maharashtra and Bengal are pointedly mentioned in this context. Both the regions, it is noted, enjoyed flourishing dramatic traditions till the nascent Indian cinema arrived in Pune, Bombay and Calcutta. The dramatic art described in the ancient Indian poetics as 'poetry of the heard and the seen' was reportedly nudged out by a

patently audio-visual medium which could boast of an additional property of being an image projected on a screen.

It is clear that the property (of being projected) produced a rare combination of reality and illusion qualitatively different from that experienced in drama. A little examination convinces that some interesting features of inter-art relationship in general are revealed in the first Indian encounter of drama and cinema.

Ostensibly, drama went three ways to meet the new challenge. Some drama-companies closed down while some others converted themselves into film companies! The more significant effort was of course, to put drama and acting on a cinematic footing. Some external features were changed in the process.

To note briefly, presentation and performance formats were modified. For example, performance-time was drastically reduced. Duration of individual song-items as well as the total number of songs was pruned. Most substantially, realism was accentuated in themes, treatment, decor and song-placement etc. Social themes, quick scene-changes, miracles, realistic sets were accorded priority. The aim was to carry the battle to the enemy-camp and beat the new medium on its home ground!

I submit that the battle was lost as soon as it began because drama seemed merely to borrow cinematic features rather than imitate or assimilate cinematic principles. For our purpose, borrowing could be defined as deliberate placement of new features in an already established setting. Imitation is 'translating' or transforming of such features in terms of the prevailing setting. Finally, to assimilate is to dissolve the features concerned into fundamental processes/tendencies which the features represent. Assimilation aims at creating openings for the fundamental tendencies in the aesthetic patterns explored by the earlier art. Under the circumstances to use some image-projection, to construct short-scenes, to change locations frequently or to rely heavily on trick-scenes etc. is to borrow from the cinema.

To convert the usually improvised and actor-oriented staging into visually-saturated and pre-composed presentations is to resort to imitation. Finally, to comprehend realism as a wider strategy of channelizing the dramatic truth and not to confuse it with visual authenticity is to follow the path of assimilation. Of essence is to know that dramatic and filmic realities are not the same. Protagonists of drama are likely to remain content to borrow the tried, success-formulae if this basic principle is not understood in its full implications.

At this point one may look to the other participant in the dialectic, namely films.

It has already been suggested that confrontation between a new and an existing art always creates a dialectical situation in which both the participants tend to borrow/imitate/assimilate mutually (in most cases in that order). It is, therefore, not surprising that the nascent film-art was also keen to borrow etc. from drama.

The obvious action of the cinema, that of recruiting stage-actors etc. is too mechanical to be discussed. More significantly, the cinema also relied on the dramatic type of dialogue, presentation etc. for example, on many occasions Indian cinema appeared to produce a 'filmed drama'. This was the phase of borrowing as described earlier. A little later cinema tended to imitate drama and produce 'dramatic films'. In such films, actors seemed to respond chiefly to the other actual imaginary actors.

It is in the assimilative phase of the cinema that actors began responding to the additional factor namely the non-verbal, visual environ carefully and elaborately pre-composed for maintaining a close correspondence with the filmic creation.

Greater and purposeful use of close-ups, editing, background music and/or a deliberately constructed soundtrack etc. soon became regular cinematic features. Thus, it was left to the image to create artistic illusion and not to the 'live' presentations.

It would be easily seen that it is feverish (and may be natural) to attribute aggression to the new but it can hardly be true! Both the established and the debutant in reality get immediately engaged in a process of mutual sharing. The intrinsic aesthetic procedures are identifiable as borrowing, imitation and assimilation and these are adopted by both the old and the new. This is inevitable because in the final analysis they are all participants in an aesthetic dialectic. What is essential is to create conditions conducive to operation of the dialectic so that a new equilibrium is attained leading to a new art-corpus functioning vigorously.

Drama has no cause to despair if it succeeds in remaining itself and yet become a positive partner in the ongoing dialectic!