

THEATRE AND THE STATE

Neloufer de Mel

Ranjini Obeyesekere, *Sri Lankan theatre in a time of terror: political satire in a permitted space*, Colombo, Charles Subasinghe & Sons, 1999. pp.208.

An interesting contradiction inaugurates the central inquiry in Ranjini Obeyesekere's study of the Sinhala theatre of the late 1980s. At a time of intense political turmoil, civil unrest and ethnic war, a climate of draconian censorship prevailed which muzzled the newsprint, radio and television media. The government newspapers, radio and TV channels spouted its propaganda while the oppositional press took on a reactive stance. The press, depending on its ideological positioning, was under attack from the United National Party government of the day or the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which was in militant insurrection against the government in the late 1980s. In this climate, it was quite remarkable that the Sinhala theatre of the period, largely satirical of the UNP government, witnessed a flurry of activity. It was allowed to survive and able to attract sponsorship and audiences who braved various odds, including the sudden imposition of evening curfews, to see the plays and be entertained.

How, and why, did this happen? Why was the Sinhala theatre allowed to function as a permitted space of anti-government protest? Ranjini Obeyesekere sets out to find answers for these questions in a book which not only brings alive to the reader the enormous vitality of the Sinhala theatre scene of the 1980s but is also a guide to seeing the modern Sinhala theatre as a continuum with traditional religious ritual and Buddhist culture. The book offers a useful survey of the 'development' of the Sinhala theatre, from its origins in folk theatre and religious ritual to a modern, urban site of performance. It acknowledges the influence of the touring Parsi musicals from Bombay in the early decades of the 20th century and the nationalist theatre of John de Silva; the theatre of E.R. Sarachchandra who, in 1956, fused folk forms of dance and theatre with western paradigms to forge a new mode of poetic Sinhala theatre with *Maname*, and the vogue of realism in the theatre that took hold from the 1960s onwards. It marks the debates that took place in the late 1960s and 1970s on the issue of language. Two registers of the Sinhala language, one literary and stylized, the other colloquial and informal were available to dramatists. Which register was most suitable for the drama of the time? This question paralleled a similar contemporaneous search in the Sri Lankan theatre in English when playwrights like Ernest MacIntyre experimented with the use of Sri Lankan English – hitherto used only for comedy and caricature—for serious dialogue and character portrayal.

Much of the theatre history in Obeyesekere's book resonates with E.R. Sarachchandra's earlier book *Folk Drama of Ceylon* (1958). The reasons for the unavailability of a strong tradition of Sinhala theatre because of Theravada Buddhism's monastic emphasis on solitary creation and meditation which devalued the performing arts, the comic satire in the folk play, the advent of the Parsi theatre etc., rehearse the scholarship that went before as a useful introduction to the contemporary Sinhala theatre. Where Obeyesekere extends this scholarship is by documenting and analyzing the varied and dynamic youth theatre activity in Sri Lanka. She assesses the importance of government initiatives like youth drama festivals and theatre workshops, credits these initiatives with having lured audiences back to the theatre from the medium of film by the mid-1960s, and profiles the entry of five young playwrights who, in the 1980s and 1990s, arrived on the contemporary Sinhala theatre scene through these initiatives. Obeyesekere also examines the texture, allure and atmosphere of various Sinhala theatre venues within universities and urban centers. Her analysis is attentive to class and region, and shows how theatre venues play a central role in the Sinhala theatre, at times significantly shaping particular productions and audience reception of them. Obeyesekere's book is a valuable sourcebook therefore to understanding Sinhala theatre as an entire social text.

For Obeyesekere, the satirical tradition in modern Sinhala drama traces its roots to the permitted spaces for satire within Buddhist culture. Folk drama as well as literary texts accommodated social satire and criticism leveled at the ruling elites. This tradition, according to Obeyesekere, percolated into the Sinhala psyche largely because of high levels of literacy amongst the Sinhala people. Through print media and temple education, the Sinhalese imbibed these satirical forms. During the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the 19th century, the tradition of debates was famously invoked in what has come to be known as the 'Panadura debates.' They critiqued the ruling British, westernization and Christianization. The continuing space for critical satire within the Sri Lankan theatre of the 1980s is to be understood in terms of the legacy of this Buddhist heritage.

This argument is, perhaps, too culturally deterministic. The scholarship of those like Bruce Kapferer, Gananath Obeyesekere, M.H. Gunatilleke which the author cites, undoubtedly mark a significant comic and satiric tradition in Buddhist folk rituals. But in insisting that there are deep continuities of this culture in the psyche of the ruling elites that are anchored to Buddhist practice

runs the risk of homogenizing Buddhism and its impact on the Sinhala people. Within Sinhala Buddhist nationalism itself, there was a school of thought subscribed to by nationalist leaders like Anagarika Dharmapala who wished to foreground the rationality of Buddhism rather than its superstitious folk forms.¹ Michael Roberts notes that like Colonel Olcott, the Theosophist, Anagarika Dharmapala “was hostile to elaborate ritual and to the popular religious practices associated with the *yakku* and other figures in the Sinhala spirit world.”² Ritualistic Buddhist folk drama which carried interludes of social and political satire but also incorporated evocations to animistic gods and the demons would, then, have been sidelined within this school of thought. Moreover, Obeyesekere does not take into account the fact that a rich tradition of political satire was also the heritage of the British colonizer. Many Sri Lankan writers, intellectuals and journalists were influenced by contemporary British political commentary and its satirical forms. *Muniandi* and *Appuhamy* were two satirical magazines founded in 1869 and 1890 respectively, deeply influenced by the *Punch* magazine. The tradition of political satire in the British media would surely have traveled to the colonies and inspired nationalist leaders to use it for their own ends. But for Obeyesekere, satire, as in the Sinhala theatre, traces its roots only to Buddhist culture.

The more compelling arguments in the book are in Obeyesekere’s examination of hegemony as praxis. She writes, “The bounded space of the theatre, like the sacred space of the ritual arena, was seen I believe as a containing device within which political criticism could be aired and possibly defused, if not dispelled” (pp.64-5). That it was a proscenium arch theatre, bounded and within closed doors, is important. Obeyesekere is attentive to this as she comments on how the audiences were, by and large, passive participants, consumers of this theatre rather than agents of change in their own right. The Sinhala theatre of the 1980s fell short of the goals of the interactive theatre of practitioners like Augusto Boal. In Boal’s forum theatre, both actor and spectator contribute to the direction of plot and performance through which an understanding of larger socio-political structures occurs. It would have been useful if Obeyesekere had provided, in addition to the plot summaries she gives of *Naga Gurula* and *Juriya* (two of the most outstanding plays of the 1980s) a textual analysis of one of the Sinhala plays and a discussion of its performance.³ This would have showed how the proscenium arch theatre binds playwrights and actors in their political commentary, showing too how intimately form is connected to dramatic theme and message.

The limitations of the proscenium arch form was a dynamic that the censors and the government probably understood. Street theatre on the other hand, was viewed with far more suspicion by them. Street theatre travels, improvises and ‘breaks out’ of the limitations of the proscenium stage. It has the potential therefore to be far more subversive than the theatre of the urban auditorium. Similarly, although Obeyesekere does not mention it, civil society protest movements that took place at the same time as the urban Sinhala

theatre of the late 1980s and early 1990s flourished, were attacked by the government. The Mothers’ Front which took on the Premadasa government’s brutal crackdown of the JVP which resulted in thousands of ‘disappearances’ was threatened and countered at the highest levels. The Mothers’ Front was visible, out on the streets and the focus of the national and international media with the potential to badly tarnish the government’s image. It was refused entry to the Kalliamma kovil in Modera when it wanted to supplicate the Goddess in a Kannaluwa and came under heavy police surveillance. Yet, the author cites the case of the play *Naga Gurula* (Snake Eagle) which had a scene parodying the visit by President Premadasa to Manorani Saravanamuttu, (who became one of the key women leaders of the Mothers’ Front) when her son Richard de Zoysa was abducted and killed at the hands of the security forces. The play ran uncensored. It is significant that this particular theatre did not have to go underground and that none of its auditoriums were shut down on government orders.

This stands in contrast to the British colonial government which, following the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots, ordered the closure of the Tower Hall theatre, the home of the anti-colonial Sinhala nationalist theatre. The post-colonial Sri Lankan government of the 1980s was better at understanding that the spatially contained and inherently conservative form of the urban theatre of the 1980s and 1990s was less radical, and that this theatre’s own structural and ideological make-up made it comparatively less threatening than large social movements out on the streets with the potential to coalesce national and international support around them. As Robert Cruz writes:

Hegemony is not permanent; it has to be won and secured in history. There is no total incorporation of the dominated groups within the hegemonic structure. These groups retain their distinctive identities and their own specific ideological practices, yet they are contained, because “when these subordinated classes are not strong or sufficiently organized to represent a ‘counter hegemonic’ force to the existing order, their own corporate structures and institutions can be used, by the dominant structure (hegemonized), as a means of enforcing their continued subordination.” (Stuart) Hall cites the example of trade unions being used in this way – “confining its (the working class’s) opposition within limits which the system can contain.”⁴

What were the structures within the urban Sinhala theatre that inherently weakened its potential as a site of radical protest? The limitations of the proscenium arch was one. The aesthetics of the theatre which mediate politics in specific and transformative ways was another. If the brutality of the violence and torture actually taking place outside was repeated in the theatre (which it was in plays like *Dhavala Bhisana* and *Sudu saha Kalu* in which violent and sadistic interrogation and torture scenes by security personnel were re-enacted), it was to “‘reexperience in veiled and transfigured form’ the violence in the society around.” Obeyesekere quotes the

work of Rene Girard who, in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), analyzed society's coping mechanisms for violence. She notes, "Theatre directors in portraying that violence and terror within the confined space of the theatre were enabling audiences both to 'reexperience' and perhaps to symbolically 'subdue the forces of destruction.'" (pp.149-150) Just as the audience vicariously watches this violence and imbibes its impact—mediated through performance, stage set, lighting etc.—it is also possible that the political and satirical thrust of anti-government protest in these plays are reduced in meaning. The astute audience knows when a politician is being parodied and when topical allusions are loaded with political meanings. But these remain, nevertheless, mediated through the aesthetics of the theatre which make them distanced, ultimately confined and defused to a performative aesthetics and language.

Sponsorship of the Sinhala theatre of the 1980s was another structure which, paradoxically, connected this theatre to the government. A paradox because, this Sinhala theatre was openly hostile to the government's open-economy policies. It was hugely popular with audiences as a result. Yet, those who sponsored this theatre and gave it financial support made their money on the very economic policies the plays attacked. Even as these sponsors were invited before the curtain opened to light the oil lamp and savour their moment of recognition and acknowledgement in front of the audiences, the open-economy which had advantaged them was roundly criticized in the plays. That the very commercial survival of this theatre as well as the improved sophistication of its décor, costumes, music, lighting etc. were dependent on the capital of its sponsors did not matter. This points to the robustness of the Sinhala theatre of the time which was unafraid to alienate even its sponsors. For this, as well as its anti-government critique, the theatre directors and actors were respected by the audience. (It is significant that this theatre was far more silent about the ruthless militancy of the JVP. Ranjini Obeyesekere does not quite explore this point, but the Sinhala theatre of the 1980s was also able to survive because of a large audience base that supported its views and possibly even sympathized with the JVP. The often populist message of anti-western, anti-globalization rhetoric that this theatre espoused at times, resonated with JVP dogma.) It is a moot point however, that the theatre sponsors who encouraged anti-government plays, also generously endowed government initiatives and /or politicians, ensuring their own economic survival. Ultimately then, both the theatre as well as the sponsors stood for groups which were not totally incorporated within the hegemonic State, but whose own structures and double-edged strategies for survival ensured their 'complementarity' with the State. This ensured a dynamic of struggle, but also an equilibrium which did not overturn the fundamental basis of the State.⁵

The value of this book on the Sri Lankan theatre of the 1980s and early '90s is that it encourages the reader to look at theatre performance as multi-dimensional, working within an aesthetic paradigm as well as reflecting the nature of the State and the struggles against it. The post-colonial Sri Lankan State is, in this case, an uneven mix of feudality and modern capitalist. Its path involves authoritarianism and the regulation of culture. How the theatre both resists these modalities and participates in them, how culture intersects with the State, is the significant story of this book. Feminist theatre scholarship of recent years has concentrated on how women's theatre groups consciously attempt to structure themselves differently in order to better resist the regulatory practices of the patriarchal and authoritarian State.⁶ Ranjini Obeyesekere gives us a glimpse of her own theatre practice when she writes of her production of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*. However, she does not discuss feminist theatre praxis or the consciousness of it in the field of the contemporary Sinhala theatre. There are a few renowned women theatre directors involved in the Sinhala theatre. Do they organize their workshops, working styles and productions any differently? Perhaps this is an aspect which could, in future editions of this book, provide a useful counterpoint to the discussion of mainstream Sinhala theatre of Sri Lanka, exploring if, and how, women playwrights/directors and the internal structures of their theatre groups are able to challenge, in a more radical way, the hegemony of the State.

Notes

¹ Ernest MacIntyre highlighted this point in his presentation 'The Proximity of Drama Outside the Theatre,' seminar at the Dept. of English, University of Colombo, January 2001.

² Michael Roberts, "For Humanity. For the Sinhalese. Dharmapala as Crusading Bosat," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56 no.4, November 1997, p.1014. Roberts cites an entry by Dharmapala in his diary which states "All ceremonies, rituals, tomfooleries, abominations which go under the name of Astrology, charms sacrifices and Beliefs in Ghosts, demons godfathers I abhorred." (18 August 1902).

³ The author had intended such a discussion, but the pressures of publishing deadlines prevented its inclusion in this edition of the book. Ranjini Obeyesekere, personal communication.

⁴ Robert Cruz, "Black Cinemas, Film Theory, and Dependent Knowledge," *Black British Culture Studies: A Reader* (eds.) Houston A. Baker jnr, Manthia Diawara & Ruth H.Lindeborg, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 108.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.108-9.

⁶ See Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay (eds.) *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, London & New York, Routledge, 1998.

Neloufer de Mel teaches in the Department of English, Colombo University.