THE POSTMODERN BREAKAGE: Aesthetics Of Collapse In Bourgeois Realism And Contemporary Text, Theatre And Performance

Papai Patra,
Research Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, and
Former Field Researcher, Centre for Translation and Literary Geography,
University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Abstract: The present article attempts to expatiate the journey of the 'Print Realism' with the birth of printed text in the West. Printed text gained a new field of culture and fixed the meaning of the text and author at one place. Specifically, in the Elizabethan era the shift from the old feudal system to new bourgeois sensibility provoked the dominant ideology. This dominant ideology consumed the linearity of time and space with Bourgeois realism. The society hold the Centre of a stable power or 'LOGOS' as everything was fixed. At this point Print Realism took an entry to theatre and the birth of 'Realist Theatre' took the essence from Bourgeois realism as it maintained the linearity of time and space. But the twentieth-century theatre transcended textual boundaries, embracing dance, music, gesture, and spectacle as collaborative art forms where meaning became contingent. Practitioners like Brecht, Brook, Grotowski, Artaud, and Pirandello dismantled realist conventions. With Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author exemplifying this critique by destabilizing the reality-illusion dichotomy and liberating text from authorial control. Influenced by Oriental performance traditions, theatre shifted from author-centred to director-driven creation, prioritizing embodied performance over written scripts. This transition marked the collapse of stable epistemological centres. Modernism witnessed this dissolution anxiously, while postmodernism celebrated the fragmentation of established theatrical and philosophical paradigms.

The writing of a theatre history reveals almost as much about contemporary tastes and values as it does about the cultural world of the past. The period of literary history we call the <u>English Renaissance</u> has at its core in the new commercial theatre of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the 16th century, means the time of Shakespeare, there was a very important transition in the society. The entire value or ethics of the Elizabethan society was shifted from the <u>Old Feudal System</u> to the <u>New Bourgeois Sensibility</u>. Before the Elizabethan era the Feudal lords could control the entire mechanism of society but with the rise of social and political consciousness, 'Bourgeois sensibility' came in. The society was attaining a state of stability. Time as an inseparable part of human life also acquired a new state. The linearity in time became prominent. Before the mid-17th century, time was no more that much linear. The politics of seeing time in the terms of linearity is definitely a product of the 'Bourgeois' society's sensibility. This sensibility subscribed the 'Dominant ideology'. By the gradual growth of Industrialization, Bourgeois sensibility broke the Old feudal system; the lords, barons they were losing power and power was shifted to the hands of middle-class people. For example, this transition is very clear in the juncture of the high politics in Shakespeare's epoch-making tragedy <u>Othello</u>. Again the middle class's fascination towards wealth during the 18th century becomes so clear in William Congreve's 1700s comedy of manners <u>The Way of the World</u> where Mirabell was chasing the rich Lady Wishfort just to gain her property.

By grabbing this renaissance hand of Bourgeois sensibility, 'Bourgeois realism' came to the limelight. Different art forms acquired this realism. It was only after 1688, The Bloodless / Glorious Revolution, that the realist sensibility started to take the thrall of the politics of tomorrow. In the earlier feudal system, the lords, barons, courtiers, they were not forced to think of tomorrow. But in the bourgeois society the middle-class people were forced by a kind of reality principle to think about a better tomorrow by delaying the enjoyment of today. There was a linearity of time and stability as well. But this delay for enjoying the better tomorrow was defined as life. The linearity of time was settled in the Bourgeois realism and European Consciousness only after 1688. In a sense, this linear progression of time is a part of High politics. The politics of tomorrow is also a political strategy of constraining the revolution. Bourgeois society was always busy to have a state of stability where no alternate definition of the society itself would be possible and thus it tried to hold the Centre of a stable power or 'LOGOS'. Social institution like 'Marriage' is such a logos, even 'Family' too.

The stability of this society was absolutely asserted and brought by the 'Print Realism'. The rise of printing technology in Europe and its influence on theatre since the publication of Shakespeare's plays in Quartos and Folios merge with the politics of the rise and development of bourgeois realism from Seventeenth Century onwards and its attempt to confer meaning on human experiences including literature. Therefore, the politics of the fixing and stabilizing the meaning of the society started with the printed text. The year 1623 is very important to mention here in this context because in this year Shakespeare's First Folio, including 36 dramas, was published. For the first time Shakespeare, the author became a stabilized writer, the writer of the printed text. In print realism the publication of a book is a juncture of the birth of the characters in the text as well. Hamlet, the character was born in the mind of Shakespeare long before 1623 but due to the publication of the book, Hamlet the character bears another birth. His meaning as a subject [according to the Althusserian Interpellation] also became fixed. Print realism fixed all the characters, subjects and provided the meaning. Thus, the ideology of print realism started to fix the 'LOGOS', it helped to build the 'CENTRE'. And it was much more epistemological. Renaissance onwards, thus, fixing the meaning meant asserting the centre or logos. Therefore, printing technology benefitted the Capitalist society as well. The dominant ideology took the control of other meanings. This market extended to the reading public, for in addition to attending dramatic productions, playgoers could obtain a printed copy of the plays they saw. The 1590s and early 1600s, in fact, witnessed a comparative 'boom' in the printing of playbooks. Printed versions of many scripts, often with what appear to be only modest alterations from the versions provided to the companies themselves, flooded numerous booksellers' stalls in the busy yard of St Paul's cathedral, and elsewhere. Significantly, some of the 'best sellers' plays that have subsequently found an almost permanent place in the canon of English literature were dramatic texts such as The Spanish Tragedy, Doctor Faustus and so on.

With the development of 'Theatre', realistic representation of reality in the theatre of Bourgeois realism maintained the linearity of time and space. In 'Realist Theatre' the duration is long, the stage is fixed and the middle-class people wanted to gain that fixed, stable position. Realist theatre couldn't jump into time and space and thus the linearity was being encouraged. Considering reality and the narrative of reality as a stable phenomenon is a chief marker of realism. Even all the realist novels believed in the essentialist notion, another outlet of the stable meaning and again this is very much bourgeois. The novels like Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne, Tom Jones by Henry Fielding, Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert, and the novels of Samuel Richardson like Pamela, all asserted the politics of tomorrow; the realistic representation of the characters, settings took the centre of the plot. In the true sense the literary realism took the front seat at first with 'novel' and then theatre adapted the trend with the hands of Henrik Ibsen in Norway, Anton Chekov in Russia and August Strindberg in Sweden. In German literature, 19th-century realism developed under the name of "Poetic Realism" or "Bourgeois Realism." The larger bourgeois realism, as discussed earlier, and the theatrical realism which in Italy is better known as verismo often interacted with naturalism. 'Realism in theatre' shared many stylistic choices with naturalism, including a focus on everyday (middle-class) drama, ordinary speech, and dull settings. Realism and naturalism diverge chiefly on the degree of choice that characters have: while naturalism believes in the overall strength of external forces over internal decisions, realism asserts the power of the individual to choose. Ibsen's Nora in A Doll's House can absolutely be a fine example of that sort. Though realism in theatre came in 19th century but it had nothing to do with Bourgeois realism. 19th Century's realist theatre was the theatre of the author, the performances, roles, props everything was fixed in the script. The print culture thus was being encouraged by this and more importantly this theatre was the theatre of business; the theatre company could earn money out of the performances. In the European tradition, Nineteenth Century realistic theatre is coterminous with modern Proscenium theatre with 'real'

décor. Realist theatre had had its own limitation, the limitation of time and space. Indeed, it attained the stable state from the concept of the stable 'Self'. 19th century's social ethics was to some extent driven by the Cartesian 'Cogito, ergo sum' or 'I think, therefore I am'. Everything of this ego/self formation philosophy of René Decartes contributed to the search of a stable self. Realist theatre considered reality as a stable phenomenon by putting the self in an account as stable.

Print culture gained the ground not only by this theatre of script or theatre of business rather by the concept of 'author' and 'text' vis-a-vis its inseparable relation and Colonialism as well. As Victor Hugo perfectly addressed printing technology as 'mother of revolution' it did so. During the late 17th century, the printed text helped the colonial masters to spread their empire across the world based on the sense of 'Self' and 'Other', 'Superiority' and 'Inferiority'. Colonisers could easily prove the culture, literature of the Colonised as inferior by producing a western printed text. Even to spread the Colonisers' language in the colonies printed text as a medium was very necessary. Thus, the print realism was encouraged. And again, with the influence of German Idealism, Nineteenth Century aesthetic theory puts emphasis on the mind or imagination ['Secondary' according to S.T. Coleridge] of the author. Hence Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Comte, Schleiermacher, Hegel and Schelling took the way of sense and enlightenment, so in this second stage of bourgeois economy we have the birth of 'Idealism'. The belief system was that the environment either does not exist, or is unknowable. Mind is the primary location. This development is the result of industrial capitalism, of the terrific power over its environment manifested by the machine. This makes it seem as if the mind is everything, and the environment nothing. It makes mind seem the sole active force generating all quality. Therefore, the mind of the author becomes the absolute place to hold every phenomenon together, fixed and stable. So, the author's mind itself is a 'LOGOS'; it helped the society to fix its meaning by the compositions appear in the printed texts.

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold":

But it was only the beginning of the 20th century, the literary ground of academia started to break all the realist traditions, the logos, the centre; 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold' this was the situation. With the publication of the modern epic called, The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot in 1922, the concept of 'Pastiche' or the literary eclecticism was being introduced and which is in a sense a postmodern element. Due to the World War I, every ethics, structure of the society broke down. There was a sudden break of universality in various field. The concept of multiplicity in the terms of narrative formation, contextuality started to gain the ground of previous fixity. The bourgeois concept of time melts down and space remains an atemporal space. Salvador Dali's surrealist paintings The Persistence of Memory can be an absolute example of that sort. A modernist text tries to liberate the narrative from the limbo of time and space. Every modern text takes a musical structure, the back-and-forth movement. The mind of the author is not the only place to generate the meaning alone; there are other places also. Thus, the bourgeois, realist trend and the stable state of the society vis-a-vis grand narrative was discouraged. This was not only happened by the text alone rather by the mode called 'Theatre'. For film, painting, poetry the time before 1922 was modernism but for the mode of theatre it was not so. Modernism in theatre came with the experimentation of realism and naturalism. The difference between reality and illusion becomes so frail or fragile. By seconds, reality becomes illusion and vice-versa. In modern theatre, unlike the realist or proscenium theatre there was nothing called 'fourth wall.' The world-famous German playwright Bertolt Brecht was the first to break the fourth wall of the stage by introducing the Verfremdungseffekt or 'alienation effect'. Brecht did the experiment with the 'form' and 'content'. Every time in a Brechtian theatre one goes back to his own reality. It draws the audiences' attention to judge the reality of the theatre from the reality of one's own real world. Due to the absence of the fourth wall, the actors can instantly make the communication with the audiences. For example, The Good Person of Szechwan by Brecht. Theatre of Tom Stoppard, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee liberated the theatre from the cramp of time and space. The broken narrative, strange settings, dialogue with pause in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, Endgame very clearly shows that. The 'Absurdity' in theatre actually created a liminal space between modernism and postmodernism. Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre, Samuel Beckett they were such a figure to do that. European theatre in the true sense was changed by George Bernard Shaw by embracing a total theatre and oriental theatre concept.

20th Century's theatre was not only in the script or dialogue but also was in dance, singing, music, spectacle; the gesture of body became so important as well. Theatre become a collaborative art, Collage. The meaning became contingent. The plays of Brecht, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud, Luigi Pirandello became the liminal stage to critique the realist theatre and the proscenium theatre. Pirandello's famous

play <u>Six Characters in Search of an Author</u> is a perfect critique of the realist theatre. Pirandello in this play attempts to critique both the realism; the larger bourgeois realism, as discussed earlier, and the theatrical realism which in Italy is better known as 'verismo' which often interacts with naturalism. Pirandello, along with exposing bourgeois pretension, also points to the failure of realistic theatre in (re)presenting reality. If we consider the author's (who abandoned the six characters) mind as an element of reality and the space of theatre as a world of artefact then the six characters emulate the freedom of art form, illusion more convincing than reality. The destabilization happened with this dichotomy of reality and illusion in the 20th century's modern theatre. Pirandello uses the technique of interchangeability of actors and characters a temporary suspension of the 'being'/personality of actors and this is obviously Stanislavsky's <u>Method Acting</u> process. The search of the six characters for an author and their transformation from character to a narrator of their own experiences declare their freedom; the freedom of text and of language. This process in Pirandello's play became a chief marker of the transition from structuralism to post structuralism. In the terms of theatre, after 1940s it is no more a business. In this time theatre is the theatre of director. Director was supposed as the creator of the 'text' where 19th century's theatre was the theatre of the author but here that charm is lost. 20th century's theatre was influenced by the oriental theatre. Brecht, Pirandello they both at first looked at the Balinese theatre and Japanese theatre. Thus, the realist theatre as a product of bourgeois realism, capitalist society later in the era of Brecht, Brook, Beckett lost its base and became the performance of body not the printed text. Therefore, in this way of a big transition towards the end of the 19th century and mid of the 20th century all the 'LOGOS', 'CENTRES', stable body of knowledge collapsed. Modernism helplessly watched that collapse and post modernism truly enjoyed that collapse.

Works Cited:

Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 11th ed., Cengage Learning, 2015.

Brook, Peter. The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946-87. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory: An Introduction. 2nd ed., Blackwell, 1996.

Klages, Mary. Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed. Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2015.

Kulkarni, Anand B., and Ashok G. Chaskar, eds. An Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism. Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016.

Lodge, David, and Nigel Wood, eds. Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader. 2nd ed., Pearson Education, 2003.

Moretti, Franco. The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature. Verso Books, 2014.

Malpas, Simon. The Postmodern. Routledge, 2005.