

## **Brechtian Reading of Usha Ganguli's Play *The Journey Within***

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### **Abstract**

Usha Ganguli's play *The Journey Within* (2000) is a solo performance in which she narrates experiences of her own life in an "autobiographical introspection" mode (Mukherjee 32). The play lays threadbare the journey of her mind and soul since her childhood. The narrative throws light on her own personality, her involvement in theatre, the recurrent themes in the plays directed or performed by her, and her interest in characters and living persons. It also partially reveals Indian 'theatre-women's journey' and women's theatre in India since early 1970s. However, at no point does the playwright use restrictive personalized narrative nor does she intend the spectators to identify with her emotions, feelings, or anger. Instead she throws, through her reminiscences and character speeches, situational questions at the audience regarding gender inequality, oppression of women, denial of rights, and adverse living conditions. The questions make the spectators examine their own behaviour in similar circumstances, provoke them to resolve, articulate, and respond. In order to achieve these goals, the playwright uses certain devices while writing and performing the play. I find that the playwright has applied characteristics of Brecht's Epic Theatre. This paper analyses *The Journey Within* by using, among the nineteen characteristics of the Epic Theatre, the following characteristics— narrative, transformation of the spectator into an observer, arousing the capacity for action, extract decisions, picturing the world, argument, making the spectator to face the situation, human beings the object of enquiry, alterability of human beings, and eyeing on the course of action rather than the end.

**Keywords:** Usha Ganguli, *The Journey Within*, autobiographical introspection, women's theatre, gender inequality, epic theatre, narrative, argument, alterability of human beings

### **Introduction**

Usha Ganguli (b.1950) is a veteran playwright, actor, and director in Hindi and Bengali theatre. With her theatre group Rangakarmee she directed and performed many plays like *Lok Katha*, *Mahabhoj*, *Beti Ayee*, *Court Martial* and so on. All the plays she has written, performed or directed have been highly experimental in nature and instrumental in raising burning social

issues. She not only strives to bring theatre to the doorsteps of the people who cannot afford to go to the mainstream theatre but also makes it understandable so as to bring changes in their lives. As all of her experiments are to make the theatre performances highly educative and political there is less attention on making them entertaining. All the features of her plays—experimental, educative, episodic, narrative—are reworkings of the features of Brecht’s Epic Theatre in Indian context. In this paper I would examine how Ganguli uses those features in *The Journey Within*<sup>1</sup> to make the theatre useful for the oppressed in India.

### **Narrative**

Structurally *The Journey Within* has no plot, organized in acts and scenes, but is a narration of episodes. Usha Ganguli narrates reminiscences about her nature since childhood until present. She reveals her equivocal nature through the narrative. She records her grievances straightforward, without hesitation. She begins to feel things unlike others since her childhood. She records her unhappiness during childhood about few things. One of which is about her inability to cope with arithmetic and the other is, that her birthday was never celebrated because she was a girl child. She has rebellious bent of mind and her work reflects her rebelliousness. It becomes quite clear from her interview by Atul Tewari during Prithvi Theatre Festival in 2006. He acknowledges that Ganguli’s works deal with the “revolts against narrow, parochial and regional biases as well as economic, social, and sexual oppression” (Ganguli Int. 1). Ganguli herself reveals her nature during the interview. She says:

During my childhood I reacted a lot, questioned a lot. There was a wall in our village. My mother always told me to stay away from that wall. I always felt breaking through that wall. (2)

She explains why instead of choosing to live a contented and cocooned life, she has chosen the area of theatre, and even Hindi theatre in Bengal. It shows her desire to swim across the current. She performs plays portraying issues like gender discrimination; economic, social, and sexual oppression in society; struggle for empowerment; and establishment of self-identity and self-worth by people. None of Ganguli’s characters is tame, dull or insipid. They are ordinary human beings with extraordinary desire to struggle against injustice, inequality, exploitation, and annihilation.

While performing on the stage Ganguli recalls her experiences about the plays and the performances she had in past. Matkari’s play *Lok Katha* (1987)<sup>2</sup> was performed by her theatre

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journey Within*, originally written in Hindi as *Antaryatra*, was written by Ganguli in 2000. Since then the Ganguli performed this play in India and abroad at various locations, including Universities, several times.

<sup>2</sup>Ratnakar Matkari (b.1938) is a noted Marathi writer, director and playwright.

group Rangakarmee. It depicts a story of Savitri, a rustic, but courageous woman, who, after her husband's death leads the struggle against the atrocities and oppression of local zamindars (Ganguli 32). *Yehudibibi* is about the era of World War II in Nazi Germany. *Yehudibibi* is a Jew wife of a pro-Nazi German husband. In the wake of war and the racial cleansing undertaken by Nazi dictatorship, her husband asks her to leave Germany. She lashes out at her husband and his racial prejudice and hypocrisy, so peculiar to the Germans. Mahasweta Devi's *Mukti*, again performed by her theatre group Rangakarmee, dramatizes the plight of a working mother. She is abused and deserted by her husband and misunderstood and insulted by her daughter. Mahasweta Devi's another play *Rudali* (1992) depicts alienation of Shanichari, a rudali in Rajasthan, who is hired to cry at the deaths of prominent persons. During her loneliness she finds Bhikhni, another rudali, as a companion of soul. Even destiny snatches Bhikhni from her. After the death of Bhikhni, Shanichari loses everything in her life.

Each character's speech is an episode in itself and shows a familiar story to the spectators. There is nothing surprising or suspense. What adds to the spectators' knowledge is the responses of those characters to the given situations. They all are separate anecdotes related to each other with a common theme rather than building a plot leading to a proper end. These episodes of her narrations are perfectly Brechtian.

### **Reasoning of the Decisions**

The characters she played or directed in her plays share certain characteristics. They are never dumb, passive or meek; even if they are illiterate or rustic. They are revolutionary in thought, expression, and action. They have clear vision about the life they want to live and demonstrate capability of taking and executing decisions. She recreates familiar situations on stage which require the actors and the spectators to decide about their responses in those circumstances.

*Parichay*<sup>3</sup> played by her group, portrayed a protagonist, Beena. Being an ordinary bus driver's daughter, she is not very confident earlier. Sudeep, a boy from a rich family, falls in love with her. Initially Beena imitates his words. Later on, when she is insulted and humiliated by him, she realizes the class difference. She realizes her foolishness in imitating him and becoming a dumb shadow of a selfish and shallow man. After realization her own self, she discards imitating him. She speaks her own words and begins to believe that her words are not less valuable. She discovers this as she says:

Strange! What am I saying? Not a single word of this is Sudeep's. All, all the words are mine. I can speak for myself now. Look, Sudeep, I can speak, using my words, my own

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<sup>3</sup>*Parichay* was a Hindi translation of Arnold Wesker's play *The Roots* by Usha Ganguli and Madhuri Dikshit, it was produced by Rangakarmee in Kolkata (1978) and was directed by Rudraprasad Sengupta.

words and own sentiments. I no longer need your crutches but can stand on my feet by myself, totally alone. (Ganguli 71)

This is an awakening. She realizes the power of her independent speech compared with the imitated words. From tacit imitation of borrowed speech, she grows to discard the same and begins to speak her own words. The revelation of hidden energies, which were eclipsed by willful self-denial due to selfless love for a selfish man, gives vigour to her resolve. This is a token revolt against forced identity. The looking inside, instead of relying on some external source of inspiration which again would delay the self-realisation, is a sign of empowerment of the self. This in fact encourages the spectators to emulate her in their own life.

Another play performed by her theatre-group is *Guria Ghar*, which is an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). Munia, the chief protagonist in the play, asserts her identity unambiguously, "My first identity is that I'm a human being. And must strive to become a complete human being" (73). They performed *The Mother*, which is an adaptation of Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* (1907). The play portrays the mother, who "stands as the catalyst of revolutionary change" (75). Even after her sons are shot dead, she exhorts the workers by saying, "Don't run away from death. Run away from the wrong kind of life that you are leading..." (75). Savitri in *Lok Katha* leads the struggle alone against the atrocities and oppression of zamindars. Deliberate portrayals of these women characters aim at multiplying such behaviour in real life.

All the instances of reasoning by the characters are nothing but their reasoning about choices, situations, alternatives and probable outcomes of their actions. Brecht asserts firmly this characteristic of reasoning in his idea of Epic theatre.

### **Argument**

Not only the characters performed by Usha Ganguli are argumentative, the subject of the play also evolves argumentatively. Maya in *Subah* is a working woman. She lashes out at the complacency of her husband being an idler in sharing the household responsibilities on the ground that he works. She says:

Who goes out for vegetables? – I. Who cooks the food? Who washes the vessels? Who takes the responsibility to run the house within the limited salary? – I, I, I. If you are a whole-timer in the factory then so am I. But who washes your dirty socks? Have you ever washed even a hanky of mine? (79)

Yehudibibi in the play *Yehudibibi* scolds her husband's dual nature over the issue of race:

If the shape of my nose and my black hair are different, why should I be punished? I was born in this country, but I am being thrown out of it to save expenses! What sort of people are you? What kind of a man are you? (79)

She hurls anger against the cruel nature of men in power who on one hand spend resources on creating artificial lungs on the other bomb innocent people (79).

The playwright focuses on their argumentative nature so as to reduce the instances of unconditional acceptance of patriarchal dictates by women and protest what is wrong. Short and unconventional plays on issues about women were really instrumental in bringing strong gender consciousness and solidarity among women than the mainstream theatre. While citing the enormous influence of short episodic plays like *Mulgai Zhali Ho* (Girl is Born) performed by women in colleges, offices and parks Pushpa Sunder says,

Apart from the role it has played in forging solidarity among women, women's theatre is significant because it signals an increased self-confidence among Indian women, after years of suppression and submission. That they can publicly perform in plays dealing with issues such as rape is indeed a great step forward. (135)

These performances helped women further their argument and bargain with the patriarchal odds.

### **Active Intervention by Spectators (Spectators as Alert Observers)**

She also mentions instances where her performances were actively intervened by the spectators. It is possible only when the spectator is alert and ready to intervene either by action, speech or gesture. She remembers the twenty tribal *Santhal* women, in a small town Trilokchandrapur, before whom she played Request Concert, an Indian adaptation of German Silent Theatre, in 1986. "Twenty pairs of riveting eyes" (77) of those women, with full of zest for life, compelled her to change the pessimistic end of her play in which she was about to swallow the sleeping pills meant for death and she had to throw them at the end. She also recalls an old man rising from his place to come to her rescue when in her performance the actor goes try to capture her. This follows Brechtian theatre as, 'it did not want only to provide its spectators with an experience but also to squeeze from them a practical decision to intervene actively in life' (Brecht 130).

### **Picturising the World**

The social issues she has chosen to portray on stage reveal her serious inclination towards social concerns. In order to dramatize such issues, she established her own theatre group *Rangakarmee*, which is committed to portray social issues. *The Journey Within* has given her an

opportunity not only to reveal the journey of socially committed theatre and her own take on such issues but to experiment with a new performative strategy of solo narrative that could be tried in such theatres. The solo narrative reveals that the protagonists in almost all the plays performed by her group are ordinary women in ordinary situations, but while facing the difficult circumstances they become extraordinarily courageous. Her women characters are clearly visible in the multitude of masses because of their independent mind, clear vision of life, and love for freedom and self-worth. These qualities help them maintain their identity unaffected from the coercive patriarchal intimidation.

In her personal life, including her career in theatre and as she confirms through her performance, Ganguli has seen many ups and downs. Through her own as well as other women's experiences, she is aware of the great distress women have to suffer. But she is neither pessimistic nor antagonistic to the idea of confluence between the conflicting parties. She believes in respectable co-existence of a man and a woman. She dreams:

One day there will be a situation where a woman wins legal battle to get her son back from her husband, where a husband and a wife work in kitchen, where girls will have their heads held high while marching towards their dreams. (Ganguli 83)

She concludes her narrative with the performance of a character Mrinal in her play *Strir Patra*:

You kept me covered under the blanket of the dark custom. But within a short time Bindu pierced through that darkness and discovered me. It is she who with her death has torn away from me totally that sheath of darkness that had encumbered my vision. (84)

The 'covering' of women in our society by the 'blanket' of 'dark' customs is similar to imprisonment, which has severely hampered the growth of mind, soul, and body. The blanket is so thick and dark that it requires tremendous efforts on the part of the person covered to tear it through. Usha Ganguli uses the image of 'blanket' instead of shackles or prison, because even the shackles and prisons do allow the inmate to see the world partially; can allow air from the outside to come in for the inmate. The inmate can surface his/her grievance and that can cross the wall. The very possibility of inhaling and exhaling is completely shunned by the use of dark and thick blanket. The dark blanket successfully muffles the voice of the sufferer under it. It is when the "Bindu of freedom pierces through the blanket; her journey towards light freedom begins" (84). The realization of the freedom of self catalyses the sufferer's movement towards freedom. Even that moment of realization gives reasons to the sufferer to exhilarate. Ganguli glorifies the present moment of meaningful independence along with a sense of honour for herself, "I am not one to die easily. I have just started living"(84).

She portrays the world in its totality, with its pros and cons, and makes the spectators see with open eyes. There is no strategy to create any illusion with the help of costume, set up, language, or poetry.

### **Eyeing on the Course of Life/Action Rather Than End**

The play does not aim at a 'round' or 'completed' end as such. Rather it keeps the journey going till the equality of women is not achieved. In the play her mind and soul lays threadbare her experiences, sweet and bitter; and her aspirations. She also shares the strugglers' predicament with her characters while they are striving for identity and self-worth in their fictive existence. The play is not only the journey within, but journey with them towards the common destination. The subject matter of her plays and the characters in those plays reveal her concerns for the issues in our society from a woman's point-of-view. She deals with man-woman relationship in both tradition-ridden as well as modern society; she deals with intra-familial, intra-social conflicts; and she also deals with the nature and colour of theatre which attracts, engages, and immerses her.

### **Human Beings -The Object of Inquiry**

The object of the play is human beings, she herself and women like her. Through her own introspection she introspects her 'self,' 'a woman,' and the 'womanhood'. During the course of her introspective narration Ganguli swings continuously between hope and distress but she is never gloomy. Her journey from a struggler to an established theatre-personality is not without trials and ordeals. Her characters, ranging from Bina, Reema, and Afsari Begum to Shanichari and Yehudi Bibi also reveal the similar trait of swimming across the current. Ganguli's fictive representatives show the feeling of dissatisfaction about the frozen life around them and that kicks the process of change in their as well as the spectators' mind.

The clarity of vision about her own life and vocation and readiness to swim across the current despite odds, carve out unique identity for Ganguli. She tells in her interview:

I was pretty clear about what I wanted and was never really confused. I always had it in my mind that I have to do this my way. That's why later I did not do theatre with any other group but instead formed my own group – '*Rangakarmee*.' (Ganguli Int. 2)

Her constant struggle, to establish a socially committed theatre, which diagnoses the maladies in social relations and situations and attempt to ameliorate the situation from her side, proves that she is a committed theatre artist and activist. The glamour of commercial theatre, which purely stresses on entertainment to earn name, fame, and money, does not charm her. In her interview she says, "All of us used to fight and discuss about what kind of theatre should we

do and by the time the year ended, the number was reduced to just fifteen of us. We went our ways.”(Ganguli Int. 2) She asserts her special and close association with her theatre group thus, “My strength is my group. We have around three hundred members and nobody will believe me, but we have sixty female artistes in our group. We are like a family.” (2) She, along with her writers, co-actors, and characters, provides the sparking impetus to dramatise the inspiring struggles of unsung and unnamed heroines of the society, to achieve the place of dignity and honour. She admits in her interview with Atul Tewari, “It is not for feminism, but I will fight for the rights of women. I will keep on doing it. I won’t use my fists to do it, but I will fight for the rights of women” (6).

### Conclusion

Epic theatre has a special purpose when it departs from the conventional theatre in practice and the philosophy. The philosophy was to change the nature of theatre-going activity from the passive and purely aesthetic reception to enforcing a critical engagement with the society through the medium of theatre. The philosophy was staged by using technical devices such as episodic plot, narration, argument and so on to break the illusion departing from the devices of plot, character, diction and songs used in conventional theatre for creating and sustaining illusions.

Open introspection by Ganguli about her life and the journey of her theatre asserts that the scrutiny of human life is the object of the play. Analysis of the play with reference to the features of Epic Theatre reveals that the devices used by Usha Ganguli are Brechtian and she succeeds not only in her theatrical attempts but achieves the purpose inherent in Brecht’s educative and transformative theatre.

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