PERFORMING ENTERTAINMENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO LOCALITY PERFORMANCES FROM INDIA AND IRAN

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ABSTRACT
This doctoral thesis deals with two ritualistic folk art forms: the Iranian Tokamkhaani and the Indian Kirishnaytham. It should be obvious that the thesis tries to bring together two diverse forms of performances and two completely different forms of ritual traditions. Where it was unclear whether it would continue to diffuse, stabilize as-is, or slowly deteriorate. The category of “religion” made me reject the historicity that surrounds the theoretical understanding of religions. I come to the conclusion that religions work in accordance with the specificities of the societies that it seeks to govern. These variations are also reflected in the regional variations of the performance of the rituals. We suggest that understanding the future success of the innovation would be facilitated to a large extent by a dialectical analysis of the involved contradictions. An introduction should, at first, try to justify such an eclectic choice. The answer lays on the one hand the personal choice of the researcher and on the other, the fascination for an art form that symbolizes and represents the most complex and colorful form of Indian performative tradition.

Keywords: Iran, India, theatre arts, Traditional entertainment, drama

Introduction
Introduction also demands a brief introduction to Tokamkhaani, the foremost ritualistic folk performance of Iran. It lays its foundations in the history of Islam and the political and theological struggles during the early days of the religion. My first chapter dealt in details with this.

Kirishnaytham represents this palimpsest both in its written/oral text and the most important performance text. The parallels with Tokamkhaani were never obvious. But a deeper analysis and the reading of several scholars including Turner, and Schechner brought the hidden layers to the level of the apparent. And my choice of an Indian form was decided. It was undoubtedly Kirishnaytham, the war between Bhadrakali, the wrathful mother and the evil incarnate, Darika.

Since both Tokamkhaani and Kirishnaytham are ritualistic forms that are inseparably linked to
religious beliefs, the first chapter had to look at the history of religion, especially Islam and Hinduism, and the rituals emanating from religious beliefs. This led me to a detailed discussion of theories that govern the ideas of ‘religion’, Islam, Hinduism and ‘ritual’

My first chapter discussed this category further. And I found the importance of ritualistic and symbolic elements within the category of religion. My primary findings were about the historical and space specificity of religions. Religions, as I explain in the first chapter, take shape in specific historical circumstances. They correspond to the societies in which they take shape and seek to order the life within those societies. And I underline the communal character of the religious experience. This later led me to the communal character of the performance and reception of Tokamkhaani and Kirishnaytham. From this point, I moved on to the importance of the aspect of performance in religion

Tokamkhaani is one of the main points of my discussion, my discussion of Islam concentrated on the struggles within the nascent religion and the birth of Shiyyah and Sunni sects. Tokamkhaani commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein on the plains of Karbala and encompasses in it the history of the struggles within the religious organisation that led to the eventual death of the Imam. To sketch this background, the first chapter and the beginning of the second chapter gives a detailed historical and political picture of the political and theological struggles that gripped the religion following the death of the Prophet.

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Both Tokamkhaani and Kirishnaytham are first and foremost rituals that codify beliefs and religious practises. And the understanding and study of these rituals had to begin with the study of the concept of rituals. I used theories of Richard Schechner, Arnold van Gennep, Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner to understand the category.

Research method

The idea of liminality, especially, had a significant application in the study of Kirishnaytham. Those who are at the far end will stretch their hands towards the direction to symbolically indicate their participation. As the body enters the stage, the entire audience participates in the morning by beating their chests.

My analysis of the ritualistic elements in Tokamkhaani and Kirishnaytham was primarily based on the categories articulated by Schechner: Following Schechner, there are four perspectives from which rituals can be studied and understood.

- Structure: What rituals look and sound like, how they use space, who performs them, and how they are performed.
- Functions: What rituals accomplish for groups, cultures and individuals.
- Processes: The underlying dynamics driving rituals; how rituals enact and bring about change.
- Experiences: What it is like to be “in” a ritual.

I looked at the specific performative aspects of the art form. I followed Chelkowsky through the scene of Kasim’s wedding to realise the dynamics through which the audience comes to identify with the sacrifice of the beloved Imam. My analysis also
looked at various elements of the performance. There is a detailed analysis of Tekieh, where the performance takes place. I have traced the development of the Tekieh through the centuries and used the description of Chelkowsky to denote the grand proportions the structure has achieved in the modern age.

In the fourth chapter, developed this idea of spectator participation using various theoretical concepts and reached at the confluence of this participatory performance and cathartic effects that they have on the spectators. The analysis also looked at various theatrical elements of Tokamkhaani including makeup, costumes, stage design, etc.

My third chapter had the performance of the ritualistic folk art form Kirishnaytham at its centre. Kirishnaytham, the ancient temple art form of Kerala, has its roots in the religious myth that symbolises the victory of the divine over the evil. A went to the etymological roots of the term and found the legends and myths that form the background of the performances. The chapter provides a detailed retelling of the myth and its many variations, drawing upon various textual and other sources.

The third chapter further analysed the performance structure of Kirishnaytham and went through the various stages of the performance—from the rituals that precede the actual performances, through the various episodes till the rituals that conclude the ritual performance. I have given detailed and graphic descriptions of all the major characters and their narratives.

Discussion

This element of the performance has also been looked at in terms of the various techniques that the performance evolves that take the spectators to the role of performers. Also, the analysis looked at the embedded caste and religious structures that play out in the performance of Kirishnaytham.

The last chapter of this work analysed Tokamkhaani and Kirishnaytham and looked at the divergences and similarities between the two ritual performances. This was a tricky exercise as I was looking at two forms that had completely divergent contexts and histories, and it was impossible to decontextualise them or take them out of the deeply religious structures in which they were embedded. Instead of doing an a historic comparative study I chose to look at various elements of performance using a range of theoretical frame works.

How the performance of rituals actualises the abstract. I analysed how the art forms used conventions of theatre to achieve this. In this context, I analysed the marriage scene in Tokamkhaani and the use of lighting and other elements in Kirishnaytham. Especially in the case of Kirishnaytham, I have shown how stage setting and use of light and the effective use of costumes and makeup find their full use in the actualisation of the myth that hardly has any historic validity. I have specifically discussed the actualisation of the mythic figure of Kali. The entry of Kali uses the distribution light to the fullest extent. The bright torches, as they reflect on the bright colours of her costume, produce a psychedelic effect which converts the magic into the mundane.

I looked at the possibilities of improvisation within the strictly codified performances like Kirishnaytham and Tokamkhaani. Unlike the latter, Kirishnaytham allows for improvisation. It allows for a separate performance text that evolves in the actual performance. This led me to the question how this “de-formation”, as Pavis calls it, manages to convey the codes without interruption, considering that the ritual performances are highly codified. This led me to a discussion of the cultural specificities of ritual performances and the dangers of decontextualisation. Pavis’s theories regarding the
space-temporal equations have also been applied in
the study of these two art forms.

**Conclusion and Results**

My explorations into the two art forms have taken me to a deeper understanding of ritual performances themselves and their deep roots in our cultural and religious consciousness. These are performances that appeal to our collective consciousness and bind us together as communities and they collective our disparate individual identities. We have deep yearnings to be part of a crowd, to become one of the spectators rather than the lone audience. stage emerges from one or more traditions’ involvement in change processes and their attempts to recognize and resolve the contradictions involved in such efforts.

The performer stands outside the performance to interrogate the plot disturbing the spectators out of their cathartic reverie. This is aimed at making the performance a vehicle of social change. The performance is opened to historical intervention and involvement from the part of the audience.

Faith therefore lends itself well to a dialectical perspective in which the researcher uncovers the contradictions involved and explores how contradictions shape the adoption process. This approach leads to an understanding in which faith facilitates swift and productive adoption of theatre-based innovations while at the same time implicates tensions that endanger further diffusion and the long-term sustainability of the innovation.

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