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## Transdisciplinarity as a Protest in *Talatum*: Situating Circus in a Theatre

### Space

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#### Abstract

Abhilash Pillai's *Talatum*, a tempest with a twist, is a transcultural adaptation of the play into the Indian context. The present paper attempts to comprehend how the performance of *Talatum* aimed at accentuating the deteriorating condition of the circus in India. The circus with its acrobats, jugglers, magicians, clowns, and music manifests the 'impossible' before its audience. In this process, Pillai draws our attention towards the miserable plight of Indian circus due to the government restrictions on using animals for performance. Concepts of dream and sleep are twinned with magic by the circus performers as a tool to question the dominant societal norms. The daring spectacle incites a dream-like world, an atmosphere befitting the dynamics of the play's plot. The performance sharply aims at the limits of human ability, one of the purposes of the performance space in every circus tent. The production with its transdisciplinary approach obliterated distinctions between theatre and circus performances. *Talatum* attains its attempted sense of protest by blending circus into theatre space and urging a transdisciplinary approach to revive the circus practice in the country.

**Keywords:** Protest theatre, Physical theatre, Circus, Transdisciplinarity, Performance, Experimental theatre

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The paper analyses how an experimental theatre performance from India aimed at accentuating the deteriorating condition of the circus in India. The paper examines the performance of *Talatum* (2016) by Abhilash Pillai to reveal how it triumphed in manifesting several of the impossibilities in virtue of a tradaptation of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. The paper also sheds light on the trans-disciplinary nature of the performance by incorporating Circus, Theyyam, Kathakali performers into the theatre space.

The plays of Shakespeare were subject to numerous translations and adaptations into the Indian literary sphere while the master playwright remains a source of inspiration to the tales and fancies of almost all storytellers around the globe. Since the colonial advent in the nation, the English canon witnessed its penetration into the Indian soil, initially through the theatre performances which then cast its shadows to fiction and finally to the realm of films. Shakespeare's position in the literary circles of this postcolonial nation is marked by its literary canonical stature as well as the remarkable transience and relevance of his works in the Indian scenario. "William Shakespeare is understood far better in India than his birth country and the iconic playwright's popularity in the emerging economies exceeds his fame in the UK, a new survey released on Tuesday has found" (The Hindu).

The Bard's plays from the Elizabethan England turned out to be so malleable with Lingui-Cultural differences that the Indian translations and adaptations show a rich affinity to the sociocultural facets of the target population. *The Tempest* since its first performance in 1611 has long held audiences and readers around the globe spellbound with its magical intrigue in the spectacle as well as utterances. The play, like any other Shakespearean productions, was subject to vigorous interpretations to unravel readings including the

postcolonial ideologies latent in the work. The once colonized nations identify themselves with the manner the mysterious island and its sole landlord Caliban is controlled over by the white intruder Prospero. D. A Shankar in his essay 'On Translating Shakespeare' argues, "every culture consciously or unconsciously regards translation as an agent which brings home both power and knowledge- power trapped from sources other than the indigenous, and, therefore, of a fresh kind- and both are brought in a manner and a quantum that would benefit the receiving culture" (16-17).

Literature of protest is a less-discussed genre in the Indian literary sphere especially in the arena of theatre. Into such a background Pillai came up with his experimental protest production of *Talatum* drawing attention to the plight of circus and circus artists in India. Pillai's concern is quite explicit when he says "this is an art form that may get extinct...compared to over 100 circus companies that existed in the 70s, there are only 15-20 today" (Times of India). In this production, he incorporated circus as a mode of expression in theatre space to prove it as a way for continued existence as well to articulate the predicament.

Pillai's response coincided with the intimation from the Central Zoo Authority withdrawing the licence of 21 circuses which authorised them to keep wild animals. This move effectively restrained the use of animals for circus performances disturbing the already collapsed industry. Pillai's concern for the art form reflected out as *Talatum* which artistically placed circus at the forefront, elevating its aesthetic reception in the Indian society. At the same time, the production showed alternatives for the economic burden endured by circus artists by proving them part of theatre space.

Shakespeare being the epitome of canon turns out to be a powerful tool of protest once he is brought to address the same power structures which he represents. Therefore the postcolonial and subaltern readings of Shakespearean texts quickly acclaimed scholarly as

well as popular interest. When such texts became part of a mode of protest, the gravity of its manifestation enthral the audience.

The circus, as an art form, is placed on the lower strata of the socio-cultural hierarchy especially in India. Nevertheless, circus remains closely bounded with the cultural history of our nation. As a performance form, the circus is simultaneously real and impossible. The 'impossible acts' of the circus has always fascinated people of all ages. Like the catharsis, this nature was instrumental in initiating a sense of possibility in the minds of the audience. The 'unreal' unleashed before the people by the jugglers and acrobatic performers at a tent tend to cast away the gloom of impossibilities. Pillai deployed circus as a medium to manifest the 'impossible' of replacing Shakespearean language with physical articulation and a state of female domination in a Shakespearean theatre space. The aesthetically pleasing performance of *Talatum* is a strong expression of the protest just as Stauffer point outs:

The first two [rhetorical strategies of protest literature] are empathy and shock value.

Empathy is central to all humanitarian reform, and protest literature encourages its readers to participate in the experience of the victims, to "feel their pain." Shock value inspires outrage, agitation, and a desire to correct social ills. The third characteristic of protest literature is "symbolic action," to borrow a term from Kenneth Burke.

Symbolic action implies indeterminacy of meaning, rich ambiguity, and open-endedness in the text, which goes beyond the author's intent...It prevents protest literature from becoming an advertisement, or propaganda, whose purpose is strictly teleological. (xiii)

Both these characteristics of empathy and shock value are brilliantly generated throughout the performance of this production. While the character of Caliban empathetically moves us, the acrobatic and impossible artists produce the awe to contribute to the shock value.

The performance space of *Talatum* was constructed resembling that of a circus tent. Since the whole atmosphere was made dreamy and fanciful, the tent simultaneously reflected a sense of unreal and real. The performance space and performance blended with each other in *Talatum*. Space itself became a medium of articulation, thus performance in this production. The play incorporated jugglers, aerial performers, and acrobatic artists as the leading characters.

The fascinating juggling, and the mind-blowing fire-juggling and fire-eating performances convey the mysterious environment of the disputed island. The interaction of Caliban with the jugglers produces laughter along with awe in the minds of the audience regarding the beauty of the impossible act. The aerial performances in the play are jaw-dropping moments exhibiting the physicality and risk involved in the art form of circus. Miranda engages in aerial movements to convey the perfect moulding and learning under her father Prospero. The absolute trust that firmly aids an aerial performer to generate synchronised gestures triggers emotional connectivity with the audience. The moment of completion of a move is felt unanimously by the performer as well as each one of the audience.

The topsy-turvy movement of the circus was merged into acting skills to dramatize the narrative of *Talatum*. The transdisciplinarity of the performance incorporated breath-taking acrobatics and trick cycling, mind-blowing juggling, spectacular puppetry along with music and fireworks to transform the theatre space.

The act of puppeteering is crucial in the whole performance with the very process of the tempest is articulated through it. The puppet show accompanied by vivid music transforms the performance arena into a sea addressing a tremendous tempest. The lines from *The Tempest* including “Full fathom five thy father lies...” are retained to provide the indispensable musical atmosphere to the performance (1.2.397). In order to substantiate the

argument that the island, in fact, belongs to Caliban, a puppet presentation is subsumed in the performance narrating Sycorax giving birth to Caliban.

A huge puppet of Sycorax occupies the central position of the performing space. The witch, embellished in colourful circus clothes and a headdress, carries the entry and exit routes of performers under her chest. The mighty figure reaffirms the postcolonial reading of Prospero as a mere colonizer of the island. The whole performance that happens on her watch with the dominating magician in Prospero fails to bring about any change to her position. The attempt to bring a non-live stage character into the performance space subverts the position of women in the whole presentation of the play. Within the aura of this single act, the entire narrative got subdued by the symbolic assertion of Sycorax's power.

*The Tempest* has always dazzled the audience with its amalgamation of magic and music with the verbal outpour from the characters. Prospero's dexterity in evoking the fanciful on stage is magnified by his words, especially the ones that suppress the rebelling Caliban and the compliant Ariel. Abhilash Pillai in his work subverted the entire communication techniques deployed by Shakespeare in the original work while re-presenting the same plotline on an Indian theatre stage. 'Talam', the Urdu word, literally means the topsy-turvy movement of the waves in a sea as a result of a storm. The performance, therefore, featured movements as the central mode of articulation. The linguistic skill that aided Prospero, Caliban, and Gonzalo among others to express themselves in *The Tempest* was substituted by physical articulation in *Talam*. The dual agents of magic and dreams that construct the required atmosphere for the advent of Prospero were elevated as the core elements in *Talam* that aid circus, the primary mode of expression in the play.

The performance of *Talam* was conceived around the thematic of sleep and dream. According to Pillai, "the whole play is placed surrounding these ideas" and the music used throughout the performance exemplifies this idea (NDTV). The sound of snoring which

progresses to breathing together with snoring signify sleep and dream. This music is further exalted making way for songs, denoting absolute dreams of the mind. The performance set in this musical surrounding is necessary for Prospero to indulge in his dreamy magical endeavours. It can also be inferred due to this surrounding that Prospero could be dreaming the whole ventures in the mysterious island.

Prospero in *Talatum* (Prospero hereafter) is a circus ringmaster who makes use of the material world available to him to create the dreamy sphere. While Ferdinand identifies Ariel as a meaningless and therefore useless spirit, Prospero of *The Tempest* makes use of the spirit to achieve his pursuits. In the tradaptation, the physical world is marked by the element of circus and the magical is signified by the diverse impossible circus performances. Thus, the reality in the physical world is availed in evoking the dreamy, hence turns an instrument in the hands of Prospero.

Prospero further deploys magic as an instrument to achieve his dreams. Unlike most of the Shakespearean storylines, events don't progress on their own as per fate in *Talatum* rather it is Prospero who exercises ultimate control over it. In *The Tempest*, this dominating tone, be it paternal control over Miranda or the commanding orders on Ariel, is expressed through his dialogues. He affirms to Miranda, "I know thou canst not choose" to disobey his words (1.2.186). This admonitory tone is intact in Prospero's speech even during the final appeal to the audience as he concludes, "As you from crimes would pardoned be/ Let your indulgences set me free" (Epilogue 19-20). The verbal artistry of Prospero disappears in *Talatum* as the performance aligned itself with physical theatre. But the God-like stature of Prospero is brilliantly retained through an intricate blend of circus and magic. As a ringmaster, Prospero forges a world of fantasy in the circus tent. He evokes juggling, aerial performances, trick cycling and fireworks in the act of affirming his sovereignty. It is

Prospero who delivers most of the dialogues in this minimally verbal performance, revealing irreplaceable power of Shakespearean language.

Although shades of Prospero's patriarchal hegemony cast over Miranda, her characterisation in *Talatum* affirms the capability of transcending the boundaries fixed around her. The aerial performances within which she expresses her joy, wonder and sorrow are such that she attempts to free herself from the clutches of her father. These symbols of resistance as we read under the shadow of the mighty Sycorax clearly situate Pillai's aim of foregrounding the female presence in the text. These impossible projections situated in this canonical text which side-lined women manifested in India by means of physical theatre rather than verbal articulations.

It was purely language in *The Tempest* that acted as the medium of distinction between good and bad, and nature and nurture. The audience could infer the binaries as they listen to the speeches by Miranda and Caliban who grew up in a controlled environment on the same island. The goodness in Miranda is vividly expressed while witnessing the tempest as she exclaims, "O, the cry did knock against my very heart! .../Had I been any god of power, I would/ Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere/ It should the good ship so have swallowed and/ The fraughting souls within her" (1.2.8-13). Miranda of *Talatum* is characterised by her perfectly synchronised aerial performance. Her actions produce awe filled with admiration in the minds of the audience. This is contrasted by the words of Caliban, "O ho, O ho! Wouldn't had been done;/ Thou didst prevent me, I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans" (1.2.349-351). The savage tone in his language was articulated by the appearance and bodily performance in *Talatum*. Caliban is distinguished from other central characters with his half-naked dark appearance with comical yet bold movements. His physical articulations are carried together by the vibrant movements from Kalaripayattu. At the end of the play, as Prospero leaves the island allowing Caliban to finally exercise his

control the liberated slave expresses the salvation and possible sovereignty affirming matrilineal succession by an unrivalled shriek of cry although until then the verbal communication by him is limited.

The language in *The Tempest* stood for notions of power and self-identity. As Stephen Greenblatt rightly argued, the work remains an unparalleled proponent of linguistic colonialism. Prospero attempts to edify Caliban by teaching him the intruder's language. While Prospero advocated the supremacy of the regal over the uncouth Caliban, Gonzalo expressed the political ideologies sugar-coated with comedy. The latter's famous outpour on his ideas on "commonwealth" is based on the notion that "all things in common nature should produce/ Without sweat or endeavour...nature should bring forth/ Of its own kind all foison, all abundance/ To feed my innocent people" (2.1.159-165). The visual language of *Talatum* failed to accommodate the expression of Gonzalo's line of thought. The characters of Gonzalo and Stephano were performed by a single artist focusing solely on the comical side of expression using the circus movements. The modern performances rich with verbal articulation emerged primarily from the primordial non-verbal performances. All human emotions could be communicated through physical expressions until language appeared as an easier tool. Still, if attempted human emotions and ideas can be articulated through physical acting in the modern theatre space as well. Hence, to manifest the linguistic genius of Shakespeare via bodily language is very much possible, as we inferred in *Talatum*.

Another significant point of debate in *The Tempest* is the conflict between matrilineal and patrilineal modes of accession. The problematics of this debate is solidly situated in *Talatum* by the figure of Sycorax looming over the entire performance space. Although Prospero attempts to dominate over the land, his temporal possession is overshadowed by the mighty puppet. The visual language of the performance therefore subtly yet clearly articulates

the politics of this tradaptation. This attempt is reiterated by deploying the circus as the medium in a large section of its performance.

This attempt by Abhilash Pillai to bring together diverse disciplines transcends interdisciplinary approaches and can be identified close to a transdisciplinary production. By blending the acting space with the performances of circus artists, we are provided with a new theatre space in the circus tent of *Talatum*. Pillai affirms, “I am excited that I got the chance to direct *Talatum*, as I feel that while the circus has great international academic renown, its relevance as an academic theatre-form in India is close to zero, due to various social, economic and cultural factors in India” (Daily Pioneer). The production was part of a larger vision by Pillai called the ‘Pioneer Palace’, a project conceived by him in 2015 which aimed at creating a national culture of circus through regular performances and training techniques. The experimental performance premiered at the Serendipity Arts Festival 2016 succeeded in expounding a radical approach to the theatre realm, especially to the ones dealing with the Bard. It also triumphed in its attempt to accentuate the deteriorating plight of circus as an art form as well as a means of livelihood.

*Talatum* firmly places itself between those works in arts and literature that stood for a political cause of action by crossing the boundaries of disciplines. Writing about her experience in a circus tent, Shona Ferguson says, “the practices of circus people, although highly fragmentary, show a concern with rules, their transgression, contradiction and absence, and are the basis of a process of identification, by which anyone can become a ‘circus person’” (51-52). Therefore the distances between circus performance and other performance arts as well as between a circus tent and a performance stage are so thin that it can easily be overlapped. The inherent capability of circus performance to express the seemingly impossible tasks could also be utilized to manifest the ‘unreal’ and herculean

before the audience. That being the case, the performance of *Talatum* excelled in its expression of the dramatic tradaptation and advocates novel performance techniques.

In this attempt of dramatic expression, the performance merged circus with the theatre space, situated physical articulation as the possible substitution for the verbal masterclass of the Bard. The transdisciplinarity of the entire production paved way for the circus to dominate the mode of expression, thereby calls for a revival of the art form, thus a protest in a unique sense.

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