

Script to Performance - A sociological dimension.

Course Objective:

I am from the field of creative writing and in my opinion - barring a very few exceptions - not much consideration or thought is given to the sociological understanding of any creative product such as a play. As far as most of the writers are concerned - even the serious ones - they happily claim that they are politically neutral or 'apolitical'. Literary criticism has a profound tradition of being inclined only towards aesthetical or technical evaluation. At the most it is concerned with the 'logical progression of a story'. Such as 'whether a woman of a specific background will leave her husband under such and such specific conditions, etc'. Hardly any thought is given to the fact that the writer is expressing and urging the readers/spectators towards a particular ideology or viewpoint - whether through a conscious effort or subconsciously. This is true both for practitioners as well as critics. Our academic courses also do not give sufficient weightage to the sociological and political aspects that a particular play or literary piece reflects - whether due to the fact that the writer has made any conscious effort to do so or otherwise. There is no need to point out that 'I am apolitical' as that in itself is a highly political statement, but is usually not understood as such. This is truer in case of theatre, films, and TV serials, as the academic study of these mediums is rather crippled in our conditions. The objective of this course is to try and make the students aware of what kind of socio-political statement the playwright / scriptwriters are making and what kind of worldview is being expressed through the theatre they are creating or witnessing as spectators. Political understanding of a community matures more through the realization of such hidden hegemonies than through the awareness of overt political and social events or ethical norms.

Course outline:

The course will be broadly divided in 4 parts:

A. Here discussions will be initiated either through a brief introduction by me or through reading of some essays on some basic topics like: 1. Does theatre or literature have any impact or effect on the society and if it does then in which way. 2. Can the writer be truly 'objective' or does his worldview get reflected in his work - if so, how? 3. Can she still be sympathetic to all the characters she creates? 4. What do we mean by a political or sociological understanding to start with? 5. What are the socio-political concepts and conditions that are specifically important today like globalization, fragmentation etc. 6. What do some of the eternal sociological terms mean - like power, hegemony, violence, ideology, 'social imaginary' and why their reflection in theatre or literature is important. 7.

How are the mediums like theatre, films and literature are different from other fine arts like music, dance, painting etc; and how it has a bearing on our topic. Care will be taken that these discussions are in the realm of the understanding of a undergraduate student. They will become interesting if examples from their own lives as well as theatre and films they see are sited routinely during the discussions. It is not planned to give elaborate sociological lectures on these issues but to initiate discussions. An effort will be made to make the student do presentations on these issues. The questions or points mentioned above and any other such related points will not be discussed separately but as a seamless awareness regarding the issue at hand.

B. A couple of sessions will be dedicated to actually discuss what happens during the actual staging of the play and how the practical considerations like the formation of the group, finances, working conditions, performance spaces etc. affect theatre in broader way. Students will be asked to visit a few selected diverse theatre groups and performance spaces - like Dalit groups, middle class experimental theatre, popular theatre etc.

C. A particular number of plays (in English translation) will be selected from different genres - 'overtly political' to 'popular entertaining' - and given to the students in groups to study and analyze with social perspective. As far as possible I plan to select plays which are currently being performed or whose video recordings - at least rudimentary clips - are available.

D. The students will be asked to develop short scripts - may be of a duration of not more than 15 minutes - in groups. All the groups will analyze these scripts as the second part of the assignment. If possible these short plays may also be performed - necessarily without much dependence on sets, props, lights etc. The evaluation will not be on the basis of talent as a writer or performer in aesthetic terms but on the basis of how the student is able to find out hidden sociological metaphors, signs, symbols that are created in the process, to see if she becomes more conscious of how theatre affects society socio-politically.