

**Puppet in the City: aesthetic and semiotic experiments  
in new spaces**

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of  
Master of Philosophy

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This dissertation titled *Puppet in the City: aesthetic and semiotic experiments in new spaces*, submitted to the Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is a record of my *bona fide* work.

It has not been submitted in part or full, to any university for the award of any degree.



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I put all my genius into my life; I put only my talent into my works.

- Oscar Wilde

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## Contents

	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
Chapter 1	Understanding the Puppet: Tradition, Form and Theatre	1
Chapter 2	Puppet's place in the contemporary canon: An attempt at definitions and institutional adaptations of traditional forms	13
Chapter 3	Composite form, multiple usages: A look at some puppet performances in the city and their semiotic resonances	25
Chapter 4	Puppets and performing objects: a study of intersections of new dimensions of puppet, effigy and mask	33
Chapter 5	Conclusion: 'A Post-Chapter': Reconsidering Themes of Translation and the Post-Colonial Condition	43
	Bibliography	46

## Chapter One

### Introduction:

#### Understanding the Puppet: Tradition, Form and Theatre

Transformation is the primary, necessary quality of a form that persists with passage of time and its ever-changing folk. The changes take on a new valence when the shift is also spatial and not only temporal, as can be seen in the case of contemporary puppetry in the cityscape. This shift is characterized by new spatial-performative dimensions because at times of the absence of clear, physical roots in the new context, and at others, due to the nature of the craft itself. The effort in this study is to locate the specifics of the puppet and the many expressions that the many-branched tree of puppetry acquires in the modern space of the city in the present day and to move towards understanding the semiotics and the aesthetics of this idiom of theatre. Plainly for purposes on initiating the multi-layered work, I have restricted this study to indicative examples of different practices rather than an exhaustive study.

The contextual move leads the form to take several trajectories in this 'new' space. An instance of it could be a move from the 'pre-modern' to the 'avant-garde', from ritual to entertainment, etc. The roles that puppetry comes to play in the city can be broadly classified in the following ways, the first being its reduction through the process of museumisation where the art becomes an artifact because of its limited use-value to the new context. From being a rooted folk form to becoming a 'folksy' fun-cum-educative genre, puppetry also gets infantilized. This ability to impart knowledge through

enjoyment that makes it so popular with the children and their educational/recreational programs is also utilized in its employment for educative/reformative projects in rural or semi-urban spaces. Radical representations of sub-cultural modes too take recourse to this form, as do re-interpretations in the locality of other genres (for instance, adaptations of Shakespeare in puppet form, etc).

Across time, when a popular tradition seeks to modernize, it adopts a process of selectivity. This is axiomatic, true of any living tradition which modernizes. The practitioner selects and rejects from the existing reservoir of the history of the tradition. For example, the *Kathputli* tradition of Rajasthan is based on just one central narrative – that of *Amar Singh Rathore's* return to court. The duration of the performance can be worked around as per requirement by manipulating the duration of the various episodes in the court (the snake-charmer's scene can be shortened, the courtesan *Anarkali's* dance can be made more varied by shifting number of dancing puppets, the washer-man episode can simply be erased altogether or stretched into a long brawl interspersed with many local jokes elongating it as much as the audience wishes, et al – variations that one may notice in the various cultural shows that are produced to promote tourism).

At the same time, an artist (trained or not, in the same tradition or otherwise) who approaches it from outside employs inclusivity as a strategic method at the formal level for the sake of her content. For instance, Dadi Pudumjee, as we see throughout his repertoire, may use puppets from different traditions in the same space or even juxtapose/counterpose a puppet with a human dancer not to make a formal distinction but

as a departure point for its thematic specificity. The exclusionary as well as the inclusionary ploys are, therefore, techniques that determine the evolution and expansion of the form, and need looking into in detail in these many aspects.

Puppet theatre is already an established theatre beyond the theatre of live actors and words, both in terms of rich traditional heritage and immense diachronic diversity as well as in the experimental avant-garde's repertoire. Theoretical and empirical explanations of the same have been many as well, investigating the puppet in relation to the actor, historical flourishing of certain traditions at certain periods of time as well as its specific aesthetic dimensions. The aim of this study is not to arrive at the city puppet in disjunction with the classical repertoire, but simply to explore the premises of experimentation in the wake of spatio-temporal shifts.

Whether in its simplicity or its magnificence, the puppet tradition is a complete theatre in that it works on the premise of a perfect illusion. Be it the shows where multiple backdrops, complex levers, pulleys and various design mechanics create a concentrated magical world on stage (a manner in which many animal fables are performed in various puppet traditions), or the physical form of a puppet which is a strong core of implication in its very plasticity, the theatrical form has a certain rigour and plausibility to it. These two key characteristics are important determinants in the role puppetry plays in cultural transmission of ideas as well in the study of its aesthetics vis-à-vis theatre which, through its history has sought to work with the tension between realistic depiction and stylized representation.



The puppet has been appropriated into the theatre both as a pure image as well as in the form of a mask. When the definite-ness of a sign which a puppet already is, is substituted in place of the psychological being of a human actor, the theatre does wish to make a point that has an enduring appeal to the audience. Also, when the actor adopts a mask, or in other words, harnesses the potential of the puppet by taking it on as a costume, a similar but nuanced effort is being made by the performer. It is then both the marionette as well as mask theatre (ritualistic and modern both) that work through a special signification in theatre. Yvan Coll says, for instance, that

We have forgotten entirely that the primary symbol of the theatre is the mask...In the mask lies a law, and this is the law of the drama. Non-reality becomes a fact."<sup>1</sup>

Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Rex* is a seminal case in point. Originally conceived and done as a puppet show within a small circle of friends to caricature a reprehensible teacher to a un-king-like king of an imaginary land that actually exists, the figure of the puppet is a body which

lacks any element of accident, protuberance or special characteristics...the smoothest body...presenting the greatest number of different facets.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Mask: Abstract Theatre, Primitive and Modern' E. T. Kirby *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 16, No. 3, The "Puppet" Issue. (Sep., 1972), pp. 5-21.

In the instructions he gave for the production, Jarry noted that

the actor should use the mask to envelop his head, thus replacing it by the effigy of the CHARACTER<sup>2</sup>.

The apparent character that a mask accords an actor and thereby makes the puppet an essential of theatricality is a notable theoretical backdrop to this study.

Keeping this in mind as a parallel model of analysis, I would like to look at the figure of the puppet as it progresses into the modern experiment in the context of Indian theatre history, and I wish to look at a city, i.e., the city of Delhi as the new space. A new space is also a new mode of cultural existence. Any theatre would reflect, resonate as well as be a pro-active part of these new strategies of existence in the new space. As a part of this larger investigation within theories of modernity, I would like to focus on how the figurality of the puppet fascinates the urban expression. The automaton, for instance, has been for its characteristics like rigour and movement, a basic feature of the urban fantasy. I want to examine, in the context of contemporary puppet practice in the city, how the puppet-image becomes a new site for theatrical reconfiguration – not just aesthetically but also having semantic and epistemological value.

Even a puppet play for children works through a process of simultaneous complication and simplification. For instance, the props may be simple but the way

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<sup>2</sup> Jarry, Alfred. *The Ubu plays*. Trans. Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor. UK: Methuen World Classics, 1968. pp-3

multiple images are created from them can be complicated involving a great deal of dexterity on the part of the puppeteer. Similarly, simpler the structure gets, the images and movements would require greater imaginative application to be understood.

What is it about the puppet as a form that appeals to children? Is it merely the visual component or something more – integral to its concept that works in the way theatre/fiction is understood by children? Is that understanding infantile in only a reductive way that it can be adopted to give morals cloaked in fun, or does it address deeper structural aspects of the genre itself? And if that is so, how do these aspects relate to the use of the puppet as a prop/imagery or as a mode in the modern theatrical tradition?

To explore then the aesthetics of puppetry in this urban context where its primary features are its rigour and plausibility as theatre is the main tangent of my work as it stands now.

### Methodology and Significance

Whether the mask-like face of a puppet with minimalist movements is a reduced type/caricature, or a contained suggestion with variant meanings is a necessarily local and contextual matter. Nevertheless, it remains that the traditional form of puppetry as a medium gets transformed when it operates in a contemporary urban performative space. Having lost the auratic quality that an art form possesses in association with its sources (in this case, the base being religious/ritual), puppetry gets conventionally categorized as

children's art for its resemblance with present day animation. Conversely, it is also susceptible to being treated as a valorised exile as it gets canned for performances in elite show houses.

These two processes notwithstanding, I would like to argue that either infantilization or museumisation provides a very reductive view of the art form and its possibilities. Also, the disconnect between the employment of puppetry in various education-through-entertainment programmes and the absence of critical reflection on its other aspects and potencies reveal a huge lacuna. Much of existing work on Indian puppetry has either mourned the gradual death of the folk form in its erstwhile rural stronghold with the invasion of technology (in performative techniques as well as in modes of entertainment), or highlighted only the ritual birth of the puppet in most folk forms; the fact that "the ritual aspect of puppetry contains within it the very heart of the issues concerning the future of puppetry in India". Through a dialogue with puppetry, I wish to examine the conceptual possibilities and experimental usages in new spaces that have given puppet theatre new, different valences in the contemporary situation.

The political effigy is an interesting case in this regard. Not only would it be interesting to see its take-off point from the puppet-caricature/ritual effigy, but also the factors that encourage their use and ascertain their efficacy. However, it requires a distinction to be made between the puppet and the effigy. Dissident puppets are like camouflaged messages and are potentially subversive to authority in a way that avoids direct criticism. As a portable theatre, they can reach a wide public. At the same time,

they are a 'poor theatre', accessible to even those with neither sufficient money nor access to mainstream venues/forms of expression. Their ability to sustain, therefore, comes from the difficulty of monitoring 'them'. Puppetry can escape censure also because of the crucial distinction of a puppet, which has no life outside a performance, unlike a human actor. This might make puppetry a more effective medium for handling sensitive issues and therefore get a greater critical edge. Varun Narain's entire oeuvre called Object Theatre and his constant engagement with alternate sexuality provides a ready instance for this. The extensive use of puppetry in the new media testifies to its efficacy. Like the use of puppetry in news programs, like NDTV's 'Gustakhi Maaf' employs the "serious", satirical edge the form has.

The objective, to begin with, is to explore and identify the range of many such functions that participatory, composite puppet performances could, or rather, do perform. Puppetry bridges the gap between the two classical modes of thought, viz, whether theatre is an actor's or a director's medium. The dichotomy is overcome as the roles of an actor and a director overlap in the practice of a puppeteer. Also, even though the representation is iconic instead of lifelike, the medium is extremely dialogic and transitive.

There are various dichotomies at hand here in the study of the puppet. The most recognized one being the fact that the puppet is either raised to the altar, considered a momentary appearance of the divine among the humans, or else, just made a trivia of the great theatrical tradition, i.e., an animated children's doll that evokes not much but peals

of laughter amongst the 'unthinking but highly impressionable' young. Another is the dialectic between the puppet and the effigy, the puppet and the actor – the three loci of the image on stage. This also relates to the fact that the form – puppetry- lies at the cusp of many genres. The thrust of this work is to look at the way puppetry relates to this genres and the way puppets live them, keeping in view the idea that central to this mélange of formal innovations is the idea that puppetry is theatre.

A significant study in this case is Steve Tillis, who follows and improves on many of the erstwhile theorists. The puppet has been variously explained by many, from Kleist as the one most suited to theatre and representation because of its absence of consciousness to Jurkowski who says, "the speaking and performing object makes temporal use of physical sources for its vocal and driving powers, which are present beyond the object" (1983:31). The complexities of this relationship and its "constant pulsation" define puppet performance. Tillis adds to this by saying that the puppet works through an ontological paradox, i.e., its endurance lies in the fact that it operates through the dialectic of being inanimate and getting invested with life. Two categories that come into operation here with the puppet are the aesthetics/skill of the performer as well as the imagination of the audience. I hope to take this study of the 'paradox that works' further by looking at it in relation to its semiotics, its ties with other genres and its reception.

The distinction of this project from the already existing ones lies in not trying to settle the matter by siding with one of the binaries discussed above but in applying the paradox of the binary to the contemporary situation. The specific area in the study would

be a cross-section of performances from the city of Delhi, but that itself hopes to traverse many boundaries of forms and nationalities (represented in the mélange of formal and technical variety) as well. At the same time, it seeks to avoid either essentialising the form or provincialising it. The attempt shall be to consider the semiotics of the many puppets that perform keeping it firmly historicized as one goes along. The approach therefore shall neither be simple diachronic or synchronic, but an amalgamation of both. Hence, this research hopes to find new grounds not only in its approach but also in its objectives.

That one thematic can have variant approaches and hence strikingly different performances depending on a number of factors, namely, audience, intended meaning, occasion, funding sources, et al. As an instance, we can note the difference between Sanjit Ghosh's television program for children, 'Buddha Baba Ki Potli', sponsored by UGC, and drawing from the Arabian Nights' stories; and the performance titled 'Transposition' done by the Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust based on a Pancha Tantra story. While the former focuses mainly on visuality and its appeal to kids keeping the puppets simple (muppets, etc), the latter often employs more symbolic methods of representation and gives depth to the narrative instead of simplifying it. The scope of the study could therefore, range from informal puppet shows for small audiences to urban festivals and events where sub-genres of this misconceptualized blanket term "puppetry" intermingle.

I intend to look at recorded as well as live performances during the course of my research as my primary source. This would also include field study in terms of recording

the processes of production, dissemination and consumption, i.e., reviewing the internationalities behind picking a particular theme, a specific sub-genre of puppetry as the medium, the meanings that can possibly be generated through the performative idiom, etc. The method of looking at the performances will have to refer to not only to the cross-section of performances themselves where puppetry is being taken up but also in what capacity is it being used and the role it is playing. Also, very significantly, an extensive side by side study of bread and puppet theatre would be of direct concern to develop the methodological approach.

The modalities in which the puppet works would have to consider its structural specifics as well. For example, the way the backdrop is set, the range of props, the construction of the puppet itself, etc. the simultaneous simple and complex web of understanding and significations in the form are of interest as well. An example of this could be of the actor behaving like a puppet. While it is a stylization at one level, it also carries the rawness that a puppet always has – in its linkage with the folk tradition and in the materiality of its form per se. Further, how they connect to the thematics explored in the plays and performances that will be taken up for study and what sense of the aesthetics of this form can be derived from that in the context of the urban.

Apart from introducing the topic, this chapter focused on presenting a road-map of the existing theoretical work on puppet theatre. It also attempted to trace the available definitions of the puppet and its vocabulary as developed by certain institutions and movements worldwide.



Going ahead, I would like to begin with an analysis of the celebration of folk post-independence vis-à-vis puppetry and its channelization and proposed 'improvement' through national and regional cultural institutions. Cultural appropriations through the state and attempts to freeze the image can be seen from the very early attempts such as the Doll Museum located in Delhi which symbolizes a traditional-modernity. Also, I'll take a look at the experiments that failed and those that succeeded and their import and repercussions. For instance, IGNCAs and SNA's production (1996) of a modern epic of sorts based on some episodes of Gandhi's life through shadow puppetry evoked mixed responses. It presents an interesting study of the way shifting iconography of representation may affect the reception of a medium. An interesting counter-position is another puppet production based on Gandhi by Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust called Satya Ke Pratirop which varied significantly in production scale, techniques and responses.

Aspects of inter-disciplinarity and the mix-media's communication with the associative fantasies of the audience would demand attention, as would the production techniques and relative prioritization of the different genres, if at all.

## Chapter Two

### Puppet's place in the contemporary canon: An attempt at definitions and institutional adaptations of traditional forms

There is actually no such division as contemporary and traditional, concept-wise. A tradition in theatre or other art flows on, and the work in which it manifests is always contemporary. No art is a museum piece. Take the case of the oldest theatre in Kerala, Kutiyattam; the gurus bring innovation into it; no one forces them to do so, they do it from their own inner urge. Therefore, the bifurcation of any [theatrical] art into contemporary and [traditional] segments is absolutely wrong. Theatre is always contemporary; and it is always a continuation of the older theatre.<sup>1</sup>

– G. Venu

References of puppetry in the epic Mahabharata are a testimony to the antiquity of puppet theatre. Multiple living traditions within the many kinds of puppet traditions (including glove, rod, shadow and string) showcase the expanse of its variegated evolutionary journey. The diverse themes and stories covered in these variants capture the range and depth of the medium. Along with being one of the most ancient art-forms, puppetry is also one of the most composite traditions. It not only involves an amalgamation of dance, music and drama, but also taps into the art of sculpting, painting, wood-work, et al.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Tradition, and the way ahead', *Sangeet Natak* Vol XXXVIII No. 1, 2004, pp.- 79

As put forth by G. Venu, there are several noticeable innovations that we witness as the tradition matures in time. These innovations may be in terms of formal, narrative or both. A classic instance is that of the *Kathputli* (string puppets of Rajasthan). While earlier the performance used to happen on a table-sized platform, now the plays happen on the proscenium stage. For this, the size of the puppets has been increased, even as the dimensions and proportions stay the same. As the puppets become bigger and heavier, it calls for innovation in manipulation as well. Even as these adaptive changes give the traditional performer a new audience to sustain the art, the pressures of adapting may bear on the performing troupes and lead to practical difficulties.

An exemplary traditional puppeteer Puran Bhat of the *Kathputli* tradition has innovated with his puppets in several ways to sustain his art. Not only does he experiment with several puppet materials, he also changes the number of strings for every kind of puppet for differentiated manipulation. While the string puppets used to dance on just two strings earlier, they now have upto twelve strings bringing about more enhanced movements. He says,

In Rajasthani, the word *Kathputli* derives from “*kaath*” or wood and “*putli*” or toy. But I am not sure of the other meanings since “*putli*” is also the pupil, relating to the eyes, the window to the soul. To me, the word “*putli*” suggests a miracle: having life, movement, never still. Whether it has a nose or a mouth, whether made of cloth or wood, this is not a toy. The bulbs that convert leather into puppets cannot only be bulbs. This is

something with life in it, no matter what it is made of – jugs, mugs, spoons, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Varun Narain notes on Puran Bhat's work that,

Unlike any other string puppet form in the world, the strings of a Rajasthani Kathputli are manipulated directly with the fingers rather than the wooden cross-shaped control. However, some of Puran Bhat's puppets are manipulated simultaneously with fingers and a control. This makes his marionettes move with a refined subtlety, as well as a traditional festivity. The content of his work is related to his unique existence and celebrates tradition as modernity.<sup>3</sup>

Acknowledging that ultimately the performance caters to an audience, experimentations with content come about. For instance, while *Amar Singh Rathore ka Khel* provides the framework for the repertoire of the *Kathputli* tradition, the length of various episodes can be lengthened or shortened depending upon the needs of a specific performance. The traditional version is a matrix of several episodes, and each episode has a life of its own. Even as the matrix is supported by the fact of *Amar Singh Rathore's* court, interventions in the subject matter are brought about from time to time. A tradition which was never written lends itself readily to such fluidity. For instance, while the

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Rajasthani Kathputli: A tradition of wood and strings', Puran Bhat *Indian Horizons* Volume 55 No. 2-3, pp. 41-42

<sup>3</sup> 'The Contemporary Indian Puppeteer', Varun Narain *Indian Horizons* Volume 55 No. 2-3, pp. 142

character of the snake-charmer is generic, the conversations he engages and the issues he invokes may be topical. On the surface, this show may seem repetitive or mundane, but in reality it expresses shifting complex social commentaries. All of these traits combine to give this folk art great power for communication. Talking about the *Kathputli* tradition, Komal Kothari says,

It is not narrative in nature. It generally does not try to tell a complex story. It only shows anecdotes. But these anecdotes too contain a narrative element. Take for instance...The Badshah had given ten kilos of Dulari to spin thread for himself [the Badshah]. When Dulari finally delivers the thread, there are only seven kilos. When the durbar official asks her why the thread is three kilos short, Dulari says, "Look, I've only taken half a kilo." "OK", the Badshah says, "forget about the rest, bring me the half kilo you've taken yourself." Well, this story is a biting commentary on the contemporary situation. You could even extend the story. Perhaps Dulari could retort: "Why do you ask me? The fellows who lay roads, how much money they swindle! The fellows who dig canals, how much money they siphon off!! After all, I've taken only a little." So you can make a lot of social comment using such situations. Even if you don't make a deliberate comment, the situations themselves generate comment. There is an abundance of such material in the tradition and one can develop [performance based] on it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 'Discussion: the Kathputli of Rajasthan', *Sangeet Natak* Vol XXXVIII No. 1, 2004, pp.- 16

Be it Puran Bhat's popular puppet character of *Jee Sahib* from a canned series on national television, or his play *Dhola Maru* where he incorporates threads of contemporary puppetry in traditional Rajasthani folk puppetry, the attempt is to rejuvenate tradition to new socio-cultural ethos, while keeping the essence of the form intact. It would not be far-fetched to equate the puppeteer with the bard, or locally speaking, the *Sutradhar*. The resonances are not just physical relating to the stringed nature of the puppets, but also symbolic in the way the narrator strings the story together, and meta-physical in how the form carries the message. A range of stock scenes or an array of typical characters may be used for this. The highly complex vocabulary of movement and a rich repertoire of music and song lend itself to varied different situational narratives.

While this may be a substantial case of how a living tradition evolves with time in an attempt to walk with the societal structures that support it, how changes in social, economic and cultural milieu may intersect with and influence the microcosms of folk traditions, needs a deeper engagement. Several government based programmes are run to engage and support these forms, both in a bid to adopt patronage as well as charting new ways of keeping them alive by discovering and supporting new usages.

In an event of limited use-value, as we have noted severally, the art gets reduced to an artifact. Many puppeteers from several puppet theatres across the country give testimony to the fact that most of their income comes from selling puppets (or puppet-like material) outside/after the performances. While string and rod puppets sell as dolls,

shadow puppets sell as wall-hangings or lamp-covers. This may, in fact, go against the tenets the folk practitioners hold close to their hearts.

Several puppeteers like Prem, Mohan, and Bhanwar Lal Bhat informed me that, for them, all of the puppets are sacred and that they perform their ceremonies even for the cheap ones that are made solely for retail. They also said that they felt that “selling the *kathputlies* is not right,” but it had to be done for survival (Kanahya Lal Bhat 2001). Initially, the Bhats’ perception of both types of puppets as being divine seemed rather paradoxical to me because I rarely ever associate business with religion, and thus I asked many of the puppeteers to explain this situation. Budha Bhat stated “When a farmer harvests rice in his fields, he puts some rice aside for the goddess, and some of it he eats. But it is all rice, and it is all part of god” (Budha Bhat 2001). This statement clarified their views of the *kathputlies* as it demonstrated that they saw no contradiction between the mundane and the divine in their puppets. Thus the Bhats viewed them as liminars that existed “betwixt and between” what I considered to be mutually exclusive categories of being.<sup>5</sup>

While the puppeteer may reconcile the two threads within his tradition, the imbalance between how these two modes contribute to earning livelihood paints a dismal picture.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Puppets with a Purpose: Folk Arts, Cultural Communication, and Development in India’, Eric Lee Littlepage, University of Virginia, pp. - 38

Parallel to this is also the fact that even as puppetry gets a mention in educational curriculum of some states and gets showcased in many museums and culture-shows, the connect between our lived reality and the form becomes more and more nominal. This may lead to a forced ossification and eventual extinction of a dynamic tradition. However, some of the areas where puppetry is being used extensively by various institutions, tapping into the highly interactive nature of the folk form, include sectors related to education and general awareness. These instances can be seen as an equivalent of America's much acclaimed children's television series, *Sesame Street*. The interactive idiom of the tradition has been explored variously, and below are some instances of the same:

The Union Bank of India employed a troupe of puppeteers to tour in selected areas of Uttar Pradesh, informing them how their money would be safer with the bank while it also earned interest. The life Insurance Corporation has also used the medium to educate rural masses about life insurance. Several developmental sectors and NGOs have used the interactive nature of puppet theatre to teach by example:

The puppet shows often tell stories in which one character heeds the advice of the development agency and prospers while his/her foil ignores the message and suffers greatly because of his/her refusal to change. One play I saw involved two women, and one character sought proper pre-natal care while the other continued to see the village medicine man. The wise



woman had healthy children who were able to play with the others and enjoy life, while the obstinate one gave birth to sickly infants who barely survived.<sup>6</sup>

Several factors determine the potency of a folk form like puppetry for such social awareness programmes. Many believe that due to the fringe status of the performers in local societies, they are allowed to discourse on several topics that may be out of bounds off-stage. At the same time, it is also the figure of the puppet that allows this particular folk form a distinct edge over others. The puppet is simultaneously alien and life-like, which ensures that while you may talk back to it, the tonality would border on performative catharsis, and not seem like real-life discourse. The ability to spread progressive messages informally also brings the folk form means of cultural and social patronage.

What makes an audience of uneducated adults and children sit through a puppet show, let alone change their behaviour because of it? Perhaps it is because India has a history of using puppetry as a tool for religious education that rural people of all ages respect the art of puppetry as a symbol of Indian culture and are more open to its messages. By using this trusted medium and characters that are familiar and non-threatening,

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<sup>6</sup> 'Puppets with a Purpose: Folk Arts, Cultural Communication, and Development in India', Eric Lee Littlepage, University of Virginia, pp. - 46

performers can gently introduce a new social message and persuade the audience to believe in it without coercion.<sup>7</sup>

Several issues have been covered under this aegis, beginning with secularism and national integration, to issues of literacy and health.

A broad range of health issues were being addressed through puppetry as a medium: women and child health and welfare, the use and efficacy of remedies such as oral rehydration therapy in saving children's lives, the reality of child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, and the harmless effects of smoking. Puppet plays now address sanitation issues, HIV/AIDS awareness, sexuality, personal identity and gender, domestic violence, the special needs and education of the disabled and the handicapped...<sup>8</sup>

Many such initiatives are being taken by government as well as private bodies. The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), along with its State bodies like State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT), has been encouraging puppetry in education, albeit peripherally, only skimming the surface of its potential. Puppeteers and educationists are slowly recognizing its value. A co-founder of People's Universal Popular Puppetry Educational Theatre (PUPPET), Ranjana says

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<sup>7</sup> Mutual Respect: Re-Examining Puppetry In India, Anna Sobel, *The Subcontinental*, (Volume 2, Issue 2, Summer 2004), pp. - 2

<sup>8</sup>, 'The Government-NGO-Puppet connection: India as a case study', Karen Smith *Sangeet Natak* Vol XXXVIII No. 1, 2004, pp.- 164



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We have learnt that direct messages do not work that well. For instance, when we present the evils of child marriage now, we don't say outright that it is bad. We just present the effect it will have on the girl and the problems she will have to face. This non-didactic approach works better.<sup>9</sup>

At the level of national literacy programmes also, several methods designed from education directives and materials developed by the National Literacy Mission employ puppets as the motif in the teaching process. The settings for the lessons are visually stimulating and crafted in a manner that learners can easily relate to (the puppet-show idiom). The accompanying voiceover reinforces the learner's ability to grasp the lessons easily, and repetition adds to the strengthening of what is learned.

An instance of another such play talking about AIDS awareness has been described as:

A jolly clown lures an unsuspecting victim into her den where the AIDS demons are waiting for their next prey.

Will it be one of the three youngsters dancing merrily in a party to whom the other two offered a dose of drug through injection which they also take using the same needle? Or Madho who had an accident in the village and

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<sup>9</sup> 'Puppets for a cause', Gagandeep Kaur, [www.boloji.com](http://www.boloji.com), 3 June, 2006

needed a blood transfusion? Or Mr. Sharma who is on the way to his rendezvous with a local prostitute?

The puppet show 'Meri Pehchan' highlights the different aspects of HIV/AIDS transmission. A local community group has been using the puppets to shape a message and spread the word about AIDS prevention, especially to local women. Realistic situations are portrayed in an entertaining manner using humorous scenes and familiar incidents with songs from Hindi films.

The puppet show is part of the ILO project "Decent Employment for Rural Women". Apart from training in various skills the project aims to create awareness about health issues like HIV/AIDS. Shows are performed throughout West Delhi, and are a popular draw for a hard-to-reach audience. The puppet show 'Meri Pehchan' ends with the puppets worried that one day everyone will know about AIDS and bring the pandemic's rule to an end...<sup>10</sup>

As audiences for and means of popular entertainment shift, such reconfigurations of the form itself are expected. However, there is something intrinsic to the syntax of the form itself that lends itself to such adaptations. That investigation forms part of the focus

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<sup>10</sup> 'World AIDS Day - Meri Pehchan: preventing HIV/AIDS in India', [http://www.ilo.org/global/About\\_the\\_ILO/Media\\_and\\_public\\_information/Feature\\_stories/lang--en/WCMS\\_075520/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Media_and_public_information/Feature_stories/lang--en/WCMS_075520/index.htm), International Labour Organisation, 30 November, 2005.

of this study. Even as the popular myth of puppetry as children's art [i.e., primarily for children] is undone, I would try and explore what is it that lends the art an edge of appeal and efficacy on this fork of the pedagogical and the performative.

## Chapter Three

Composite form, multiple usages: A look at some puppet performances in the city and their semiotic resonances

As established already, the aim of this study is not to arrive at a disjunction between the city puppet and the folk repertoire, but simply to explore the premises of experimentation in the wake of spatial and temporal shifts. Several of these experimentations occur on the intersection of various different folk forms, as they come in contact with each other in modern spaces. Puppet artists who are not born in a tradition but seek a creative initiation instead, selectively pursue genres and arrive at new idioms of expression. We can see many such examples of puppeteers in the country putting forth landmark productions, even as the landscape is still fragmented. A study of these artists showcases the various semiotic trajectories along which the fabric of this evolving new modern, almost post-modern, inter-disciplinary genre emerges.

### Revisiting/Reordering Classics:

Anna Sobel notes,

The puppets can be modernized in [other] ways, with new controls that allow them to pick up objects or move in ways not previously possible. Another tactic would be to draw from India's treasury of instructive tales, including not only Ramayana and Mahabharata, but the animal fables of

the Panchatantra, as some puppet theatres are already doing, and highlight the morals of the stories while introducing a social theme.<sup>1</sup>

One such landmark production has been the adaption of the subject of the freedom movement of India and the role of Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle in the form of a shadow puppet play, called *Ghandiji*. This effort was made by renowned puppeteer Belagal Veeranna, Founder-Director of the troupe Sri Ramanjaneya Leather Puppet Group of Bellary and S A Krishnaiah, with the financial support of IGNCA (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts). The play focused on Gandhi's non-violence philosophy while spinning a message of the importance of harmony in diversity. S A Krishnaiah observes,

The Gandhi story, presented in the shadow theatrical form, has adequately excited children, generating new ideas in them and leaving a lasting impression on them. Important stages in Gandhi's life, like his involvement in the fight for political rights by Indians in South Africa, his arrival in India and his acceptance of the leadership of the Indian Freedom Movement, Champaran, the Indigo Movement, protest against the Rowlett Act, the Jalianwala Bagh incident, Gandhiji's commitment to the eradication of untouchability, his promotion of village industries, incidents like the Non-cooperation Movement, the Salt Satyagraha, the Quit India

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<sup>1</sup> Mutual Respect: Re-Examining Puppetry In India, Anna Sobel, *The Subcontinental*, (Volume 2, Issue 2, Summer 2004), pp. - 3

Movement, etc., are presented in the play, which lasts from half an hour to one hour.<sup>2</sup>

The puppet play *Gandhiji* picks up a theme that can suitably be molded as a modern epic of sorts, and so replace the traditional epics, without causing much disruption in the formal aspects of the shadow puppets or the invocative nature of the narrative. The deviation is the subject matter, even as the subject chosen is the most epical event from modern history. The style includes multiple narratives and the manner is encyclopedic, both traits of the epic genre.

Suresh Dutta of West Bengal is yet another significant puppeteer in this regard, whose puppet production *Aladin*, produced by his company, CPT (Calcutta Puppet Theatre), has continued to appeal to children and adults alike for over three decades now. The production has now had countless shows, and is a similar showcase of the contemporary application of puppetry, catering to evolving audiences and sustaining social and cultural utility. The production is as epical as it is cinematic, and both factors add to its popular recall.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Karnataka Puppets: an in-depth study', S A Krishnaiah, *Indian Horizons* Volume 55 No. 2-3, pp. 92



### Prop Plays Protagonist:

Another instance of a similar yet distinct adaptation is Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust's *Almost Twelfth Night*<sup>3</sup>. Founded by Anurupa Roy with the support of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of H H Dalai Lama in 1998, the Trust not only has a repertoire of many varied performances, but also conducts regular workshops, engages in Social Media communication (including outreach, therapy, awareness generation and problem solving) and supports puppet theatre related research. *Almost Twelfth Night* is based on Shakespeare's comedy, *Twelfth Night* – the story of twin siblings separated during childhood in a sea storm, and re-united after many (mis)adventures many years hence. The play is marked by cross-dressing, a series of mistaken identities, and a mesh of love triangles. The cross-dressing achieves a new level of theatrical representation as much through easier role-playing as it does through fast-paced visual stimuli. The subtle play of sexual identities, the farcical ruses of mistaken identity and disguise assume enhanced effect through a puppet's inherent mastery at assuming multiple characterizations at the flick of a robe/costume. The pace gives the mayhem enhanced entertainment value. Since the puppet is always already a highly charged entity, as it operates on the cusp between pure figure and absolute representation, it evokes an instant connect with role-play.

All this chaos assumes a special variance as Bunraku style rod puppets enact out most of the puppet play, ably supported by puppeteers, posing intermittently as actors or

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<sup>3</sup> The show premiered at the Ishara Puppet Theatre Festival in September 2002, and has travelled extensively since.

storytellers. Since the piece involved the puppet and actress as alter egos of each other, the puppeteers were, therefore, both actors and storytellers in the play. It can be described as a “text-puppet conversation” where the prop plays the protagonist as much as the actor. Sometimes the puppet supports the actor and vice-versa, but often enough, they become a manifestation of thought and physical action, or simply represent conflict in thought itself.

The divergent traditions include the canonical framework of Shakespearean comedy, interspersed Indian colloquial idioms for topical comic relief, represented through traditional Japanese puppet theatre Bunraku – all converge in the play between the puppet and the actor on a scene that adjusts itself equally well with an open-air folk environ and the classic proscenium setting. The hilarity ensues from the plot (and the ‘translated’ wise-cracks), but the play of the bunraku-like, albeit swiftly shifting puppets, is what lends a centuries old classic, a novel comic effect.

Varun Narain’s recent work *Giselle ki Kahani* similarly draw upon the classic romantic ballet *Giselle*. Through the process that Varun describes as “connecting emotion to an object, realizing aesthetic Indian options within the Western classic ballet and bringing out the story of Giselle.” The story travels between this world and that, at multiple levels – the living and the underworld, western classic traditions and Indian musical adaptation of the same, puppet theatre and contemporary dance. The production is simultaneously a play between the puppet and the dancer, while the puppeteer interacts with both separately with them, and together. The layers of representation involved add

richness to the ballet, as the puppet figure shifts from being a prop like many others on stage to the protagonist around which the dancer and puppeteer perform. Varun Narain calls his puppet tradition 'Object Theatre', a coinage which gains strategic significance as well as aesthetic depth in context of Peter Schumann's elaboration of the object-subject relationship:

Objects have been performing under the whip of subjects too long and are now disobedient and can't be counted on any longer. They avoid real contact and meaningful relationships and divorce themselves from the intentions of subjects. They used to be good and close to our hearts. They almost liked us and seemed to be grateful for our attention, but were deprived of their dignity by the throw-away philosophy, which resulted in the object's revenge: garbage.

Why are puppets subversive? Because the meaning of everything is so ordained and in collaboration with the general sense of everything, and they, being only puppets, are not obliged to this sense and instead take delight in the opposite sense, which is the sense of donkeys confronting the existing transportation system.<sup>4</sup>

What is significant is the alchemy at work here which is not committed to a tradition, form or genre, but to a wide range of semantic possibilities.

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<sup>4</sup> 'What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets & Performing Objects?', Peter Schumann *TDR* (1988-), Vol. 43, No. 3, (Autumn, 1999), *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, pp. 58

## Puppet As Scenography:

In the examples above, the audience acknowledged the puppet either as an inanimate doll or as a living being. While the puppet is an object, for the course of the performance, it becomes the fact of the performance itself. The puppet is in fact, simultaneously object and life. Michael Meschke observes,

Let us regard the puppet itself as an instrument, not as an end in itself. The most attractive instrument is the one that has the most possibilities, not necessarily the ones having the most complex technique, but capable of offering the richest possibilities for expression.<sup>5</sup>

He further substantiates,

The puppet theatre is a theatre of unlimited possibilities...An un-jointed puppet can be just as expressive as the one that is well articulated, a single string can produce just as much plasticity as many strings, a small figure can be just as expressive as a large one. What is most important is that the technique serves the content. Everything depends on what one wishes to impart.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Meschke, *In Search of Aesthetics for the Puppet Theatre*, IGNCA, pp. - 18

<sup>6</sup> Michael Meschke, *In Search of Aesthetics for the Puppet Theatre*, IGNCA, pp. - 20

In the light of above remarks, we can posit a lot of Dadi Pudumjee's work, where the tapestry of performative is drawn not from a tradition or from a confluence of tradition, but rather from the play of the very tools of performance. It is no longer the dancer interacting with the puppet against a setting. A step ahead, dance becomes puppetry and puppetry is the means of the theatrical – it may take puppets as their departure point, their locus or their backdrop – almost coming full circle to where the composite art-form started from.

While puppet traditions across the globe are inundated with stylistic variety, the connecting thread among them all is the fact of 'movement'. The puppeteer merges into the puppet and the movement takes precedence. The emphasis on the visual appeal and the primary relevance of movement is apparent in his work, be it in his production *Transposition* based on the Vetala Panchvinasati story and Thomas Maan's transposed heads, "a visually dramatic performance with puppets, dancers, projection", or *Journeys*, where "puppets, actors, dancers and objects take you through a journey of life, love, fantasy, violence and beyond".

## Chapter Four

### Puppets and performing objects: a study of intersections of new dimensions of puppet, effigy and mask

Puppetry, by contrast, is the ultimate Brechtian art, in which the live performer never blends in seamlessly with the character she manipulates. There is always a disjunction between the live actor and the character and a consciousness on the part of the audience that the performer is at work making an inanimate object appear alive, even when the puppeteer is not visible.<sup>1</sup>

A puppet is not an actor and a puppet theatre is not human theatre in miniature, because when an actor 'represents', a puppet 'is'.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the two above statements in conjunction, they at once point out that what is enabling in a performing object is precisely what delimits it. In popular understanding, people have always conceived of puppets as metonyms for human beings, and thus these figures are able to communicate with others much like people can. Puppets, however, are not exactly identical to live actors, and thus they are not subject to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Coming Full Circle: Performing objects, New Media, Interculturalism in new Puppetry', Claudia Orenstein *Indian Horizons* Volume 55 No. 2-3, pp. 173

<sup>2</sup> David Currell, *An Introduction to Puppets and Puppet making*, London: New Burlington Books, Quintet Publishing Limited, pp. 6

the same restrictions so they can make controversial statements without causing offense. For example, in an AIDS awareness production, puppets of *rakshasas* or demons have been made to represent the various ways of contracting AIDS. Thus there was a sex *rakshasa*, a drug *rakshasa*, and so on. These popular referential monsters acted as stand-ins for the various ways of contracting AIDS, which may be far less known by the masses.

The conclusion is simply that to involve allows you to instruct, and what can instruct may also protest. What is seen as puppet theatre undertaking educational projects is at once also a “radical” theme taken up by a puppeteer, both in terms of how he experiments with the puppets and in the contextual nature of the subject matter. The progression of the puppet into a dissident figure and as a reformatory tool tread a fine line of distinction as the instrument of pedagogy also becomes a weapon for irony, by drawing on the same feature, i.e., its property of being lifeless and animate simultaneously. In some cases, the wide reach of the former and the coterie performances of the latter are the only separating feature. For example, Varun Narain’s work always has a non-conformist protagonist (the vegetarian lion in Operetta of Animal Tails). At the same time, he has successfully developed through use of puppets modules for providing counselling to harassment victims. Contrary to being infantile, puppetry’s widespread use in alternative pedagogy and the appeal and efficacy of the puppet to inform follows a special aesthetics of childhood which needs to be explored.

Sergey Vladimirovich Obraztsov observed that “a puppet is a miracle of animation of something which is inanimate. For the audience, it is the miracle of an object come to life. A puppet is not an imitation of a living being, but is a highly collective image transformed into an allegory.” There are similar cousins of puppets in various performing objects, like effigies and masks, which need a consideration in this regard too.

Effigy, Puppet and Idol form an interesting three-stringed relationship. While the idol is sacrosanct, the puppet is earthy. The effigy, interestingly, lies somewhere on the intersection of these tangents. The burning of effigies is undoubtedly one of the oldest and most widespread forms of pagan worship as well as a very popular form of political and social protest. Although such political demonstrations may express wishes for the literal destruction of the person represented, in ritual contexts the burning more often is a working of sympathetic magic aimed at changing what the effigy represents or thwarting its power. Instances of ritual effigies are enduring, while political effigy is topical.

Political effigy seeks to be placated. A recent instance of burning effigies was the protest against recent attacks on Indian students in Australia. Similarly, an effigy of the Dutch cartoonist who sparked protests in the Islamic world with his cartoon about the Prophet was burnt in several parts of the world. This was a peculiar case of interspacing of a religious issue with a political one. While the representational forms may be at loggerheads, the symbolic efficacy of protest determined the mode,



“They call this freedom of expression, but it’s freedom of aggression,” keynote speaker Munawwar Hasan, a leader of the main Islamic party Jamat-e-Islami, told the crowd as it chanted “God is great.”

Wearing head bands inscribed “We are ready to sacrifice our lives for the sanctity of the prophet,” they marched for two kilometers (more than a mile), then gathered on Karachi’s main street to listen to speeches.

They also burned an effigy of Wilders as speakers said their government should sever diplomatic ties with Western countries supporting the publishers of cartoons defaming the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>3</sup>

Another notable instance is that of the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. The outrage was not spontaneous and fiery, yet it was a cutting remark. The nature of the effigy, and the manner of its parade and eventual burning, itself indicate the process was a performance in itself, even as it was political protest.

...condemned the role of the current Central and State governments in aiding the killers of Bhopal and prolonging the torture of the victims.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Mohammed Cartoon Watch: 25,000 Pakistanis Protest Geert Wilder’s Fitna and Mohammed Cartoons’, <http://flapsblog.com/?s=munawwar>, 6 April, 2008

At the end of the rally at the Union Carbide factory, an effigy of a four limbed demon symbolizing the Dow Chemical Company with Anderson hiding behind it was set on fire by the protestors. The effigy held a chemical conical flask and a bag of money sitting atop bent figures symbolizing the Indian and state governments. In a meeting held near the memorial to the disaster, participants of the 800 kilometer long Bhopal-to-New Delhi march this year, were felicitated.<sup>4</sup>

Even though technically an effigy can be as simple as a ball of yarn, year after year, the Bhopal protests see a different, highly detailed effigy pointing out the exact nature of their dissatisfaction with the proceedings. A similar instance is related to that of the November 2008 Mumbai blasts. There were widespread protests against the sole accused arrested alive, considered responsible for the activity. This was the most striking manner of protest,

A Holika Dahan effigy of the lone surviving terrorist of the November 26, 2008 Mumbai attacks Mohammed Ajmal A Kasab, stands in a city neighbourhood ahead of the Hindu festival of Holi in Mumbai. The effigy

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<sup>4</sup>‘December 3rd rally in Bhopal on film and in photographs’, [http://www.bhopal.net/blog\\_act/archives/2006/12/index.html](http://www.bhopal.net/blog_act/archives/2006/12/index.html), 8 December, 2006

of Kasab was set ablaze as part of the Holika Dahan festival-on the night before Holi.<sup>5</sup>

Another interesting instance is of the Tibet protests which were also a direct political comment. The protests took place in McLeodganj, also known as Upper Dharamsala is a suburb of Dharamsala in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, India. It is known as "Little Lhasa" due to its large population of Tibetan refugees. The Tibetan Government in Exile is headquartered in McLeod Ganj and these protests were being made against the Government of China. Pictures of demonstrations taken in March 2008 during disturbances in Tibet show how the effigy derived its looks from many of the masked monsters/human-size puppets of the region.

Burning an effigy is no longer a highly stylized ritual; it has come to symbolize a popular expression of discontent or dissent. The protests may be against say a fallen idol in the field of cricket, and the expression will be through the medium of burning an effigy. It has come to be associated with the voice of the populace, even the profane, but definitely, the collective. While such dissent plainly has a political dimension, it is sometimes an awkward fit and can even be, politically counterproductive. The cause in a particular context may even be unsophisticated, amounting to little more than make mischief. Even though political censure may get blunted, the heightened signification of

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<sup>5</sup> 'Mumbaikars burn Kasab effigy in Holi fire: Images'

<http://news.in.msn.com/national/article.aspx?cp-documentid=1942818>, 11 March 2009

the performative process and the engagement of the collective (whether serious or frivolous) makes the effigy a powerful performing object.

Mask is another important part of theatre craft, emerging from ritual practices and Indian history, which draw several similarities with the Puppet as a performing object. Masks are used for their expressive power as a feature of masked socio-cultural performances both ritually and in various secular theatre traditions across the country. The function of masks may be 'magical' or religious; they may appear in rites-of-passage or as a prop/accessory for a certain theatrical form. Etymologically too, the mask denotes gesture, mockery and transformation in various languages. The powerful imagery of the various mask-traditions derives from the specific cultural markers of that particular tradition and the ritual/performative significance of the mask for that culture. In contemporary world theatre, a mask is used in conjunction with several puppet theatres to create an art which relies more on the visual than the verbal discourse.

A mask may help one to disguise, or it may enable another to preside; a mask may be punitive or celebratory. A mask is a pure-image, that allows a field of heightened signification to the wearer, as also elaborated by Edward Gordon Craig when he talk about the Uber-marionette,

The Uber-marionette is the actor plus fire, minus egoism; the fire of the gods and demons, without the smoke and steam of mortality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 'Preface', Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, London, Heinemann, 1957, pp. - ix

During the WORLD PUPPETRY FESTIVAL organized by Puppeteers of America and UNIMA (Washington D. C., 8-15 June 1980), Kathy Foley observed

The festival affirmed that puppets and masks can do some things better than human actors. The puppet maker can select significant features which are to be incorporated into its image message and eliminate all others. Thus, the puppet can be an icon that allows us to see clearly the smile of the god or the grimace of Mephistopheles. The puppet, unlike the actor, can change almost instantly -his head can fly off in death, or his alter ego can appear as his mouth opens to reveal his other face. These potentialities give him an innate theatricality and explain some of the fascination puppetry continues to hold for artists and audiences.<sup>7</sup>

The process of adorning a mask, whether it is for ritual or theatrical purposes, is a communal activity, and so draws upon a language of the collective. A mask is in fact one of the many ways in which the puppet has been incorporated into several theatrical traditions. A comparison has been drawn between magic and masking thus,

Magic is efficacious not despite the trick but on account of its exposure.

The mystery is heightened, not dissipated, by unmasking and in various

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<sup>7</sup> 'World Puppetry Festival by Puppeteers of America and UNIMA', Kathy Foley *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2. (May, 1981), pp. 263

ways, direct and oblique; ritual serves as a stage for so many unmaskings.<sup>8</sup>

It is not the use of masks in ritual performances, but rather in non-ritualistic communal activity, that I wish to concentrate upon briefly. Several subversive examples present themselves employing the mask as a performative tool, that both transcends a restricting condition and escapes censure. Queer Pride Parades being a very potent example of the same, where the masks are not merely decorative but also carnivalesque. The theatrical given of the mask allows a person to become a performer, or at least temporarily, lend from a certain grammar of the performative that allows transcendence. This is substantiated by Andre Gide in his statement

When one speaks of the history of drama, it is important, perhaps more important than anything else, to ask: Where is the mask? In the audience, or on the stage? In the theater, or in life? It is here or there, never both at once. The most brilliant periods of drama, those in which the mask is triumphant on the stage, are those in which hypocrisy ceases to mask life. On the contrary, those in which what Condorcet calls "the hypocrisy of manners", is triumphant are the very periods in which the mask is snatched from the face of the actor and he is required to be not beautiful but natural; that is to say, if I rightly understand, that he must take his models from

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<sup>8</sup> 'Performing the Intelligent Machine: Deception and Enchantment in the Life of the Automaton Chess Player', Mark Sussman *TDR* (1988-), Vol. 43, No. 3, Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects. (Autumn, 1999), pp. 88

reality, or at least from the semblances of it to be seen in his audience; and that is to say, from a monotonous and already masked humanity.<sup>9</sup>

It is this rigor of the performative that reflects into the puppet (and its many forms) that asserts itself in any study of the power, be it instructive or disruptive, of the puppet theatre.

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<sup>9</sup> 'The Mask: Abstract Theatre, Primitive and Modern', E. T. Kirby *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 16, No. 3, The "Puppet" Issue. (Sep., 1972), pp. 8

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion:

Aesthetics of Childhood: 'if you can hold my attention, you can tell me anything'

In any idiom of theatre, the process of representation is epistemologically rooted in fundamental cognitive operations. With the puppet as a locus of subjectivities in the new spaces, I hoped to trace the above mentioned liminalities in the ontology of the puppet (the figure of the puppet being at once inanimate and animate) in terms of both its success and its aporias. The aim however, is not just to give a critical review but also an enquiry into its potentialities. We have sufficiently established by now that

Through puppetry we accept the outrageous, the absurd or even the impossible, and will permit puppets to say and do things no human could. We allow a puppet to talk to us when no one else can get us to speak. We allow a puppet to smile at us even when we have not been introduced. We also allow a puppet to touch us when a person would lose an arm for the same offence.<sup>1</sup>

It is not that the puppet does not role play, while the actor does; it is simply that the nature of role play in both cases is distinct. Obraztsov attempts to explain this with the help of an example

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Sinclair, *The Puppetry Handbook* Richmond, Victoria, Australia: Richard Lee Publishing, pp. 3



On a stage, a man might portray another man, but he cannot portray man in general because he is himself a man. The puppet is not a man, and for that very reason, it can give a living portrayal of man in general. It is this general representative capacity of the puppet, as much as its capacity to represent through particular-abstracted signs, that appealed at one time to Maurice Maeterlinck, who, “ felt that human actors, because they were restricted by their physical characteristics, were not appropriate vehicles to portray the archetypal figures with which he people his stage.”<sup>2</sup>

If the primary features of puppet theatre are *rigour* and *plausibility*, operating in a field of heightened signification, it is indeed the *aesthetics of childhood* that the puppet theatre works on. Commonly infantilized, like several other folk forms may be reductively seen, the fallacy arises from the fact that puppetry can lend itself with ease to modes of interactive learning and instruction. However, to restrict it to educational use-value is to strangle the potential out of a living tradition. We have seen this severally in contemporary situations as well. Most of the adult audiences that puppet performances attract are merely parents who are accompanying their kids to an evening of leisure and learning. A layman’s definition of the tradition of puppetry itself is “children’s form of art”. Edward Gordon Craig points towards this reductive in his work in his work too. He observes

To speak of a puppet with most men and women is to cause them to giggle. They think at once of the wires; they think of the stiff hands and the jerky movements; they tell me it’s a “funny little doll”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Tillis *Towards the Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a theatrical art* Greenwood Press USA (Westport), 1992, pp. 45-46

<sup>3</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, London, Heinemann, 1957, pp. - 90

At best, it is recognized that the form has folk roots, which may not be relevant to the socio-cultural milieu of today, explaining the dire status of the living tradition. However, I have sought to put across a divergent view, not positing Puppetry as divorced from its pedagogical affinities, but merely pointing out that the affinities emerge from a larger aesthetic paradigm, and have significantly higher resonance than we yet recognize.

Furthermore, this helps to establish that what we hitherto called experimentation is also an inherent characteristic of the art form.

Just as puppetry involves something more than the puppet's representative capacity as perceived object, it also involves something more than the audience's desire to imagine that the puppet has life. That something more can be identified when we consider the perception along with the imagination, the "object" along with the "life".<sup>4</sup>

It is with rigour and plausibility that the aesthetics of the puppet theatre create a meta-performative understanding of the puppet in the audience's mind. When a puppet moves onstage, it is not the materials it is made of, or the expressions it generates that determine its plausibility. Theatrical conventions of this nature determine the appeal and efficacy of a particular puppet. However, what determines the appeal of *the puppet*? The appeal lies simply in the fact that the presence of the Puppet in itself is Theatre.

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Tillis *Towards the Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a theatrical art* Greenwood Press USA (Westport), 1992, pp. 58

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