

NAQQAL AND THE TRADITION OF FOLK HUMOR IN PUNJABI PERFORMANCE CULTURE

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ABSTRACT:

Naqqal is a folk theatre in Punjabi, which has a heavy dose of humor, satire, and improvisation. In this paper, we will discuss the purpose of folk humor in Naqqal performances and further elaborate on how performers develop comic situations in improvisational dialogue, mimicry, and physical acting methods. The paper also examines the performance structure of Naqqal which was made up of comic exchanges, female impersonation, music, and dance. Special emphasis is placed on the idea of 'jugat' (spontaneous comic improvisation) and the communication between the performers and the audience in the development of the humorous character of the performance. Also, the paper addresses the issue of humor in Naqqal as a source of social commentary; that is, issues like dowry practices, social hierarchy, and the nature of life in the village are addressed. Through these points, the study identifies Naqqal as a valuable reference to the practice of folk humor in the Punjabi performance culture.

KEYWORDS: Satire, Naqqal, Punjabi Folk Theatre, Folk Humor, Improvisation, Jugat, Mimicry, Punjabi Dialect, Audience Interaction.

INTRODUCTION:

Naqqal is a traditional Punjabi folk theatre that combines storytelling, music, dancing, satire, and mimicry. Naqqal is a term that is based on the Persian word Naqal, which means to imitate or to mimic, which is the key feature of this performance tradition (Chowdhry, 2011). Historically, the performances of Naqqal were held in village squares, fairs (melas), weddings

and in other community events in which huge crowds were able to see energetic theatrical acts. These shows were composed of songs, dances, comic conversations and dramatic stories that formed a celebratory and interactive theatre ambience (Chaudhary, 2008). Previously, the majority of Naqqal musicians belonged to hereditary performing groups, such as the Bazigar or Mirasi, who have a long music and storytelling tradition. These musicians also used to move between villages, and sometimes landlords of the villages sponsored their performances (Johal, 2020). An average Naqqal performance starts with comic conversation and improvisation between the performers. The show slowly transforms to music, dance, and dramatic retelling of famous Punjabi folk stories including Heer Ranjha and Sohni-Mahiwal. The other unique aspect of the tradition is female impersonation, where the male actors perform the characters of women using stylized movements and voice alteration (Chowdhry, 2011). Naqqal holds a special niche in the Punjab performance culture as a folk humor theatre where satire and improvisation are employed to amuse the audience and at the same time comment on the social realities of the day.

Acting Techniques and Comic Improvisation in Naqqal

Naqqal performances are very interactive and are largely based on improvisation as opposed to scripted works. These performances are built on the basis of oral traditions where an artist can constantly adapt his or her dialogue, movements and actions with regard to the audience and the circumstances (Chowdhry, 2003). Flexibility is one of the most significant aspects of Naqqal. Actors are the so-called master adapters who modify their script, gestures and even songs in the course of the performance and make each performance different and vivid (Chaudhary, 2005). The other important element of Naqqal is the impersonation. Male actors tend to perform female characters through voice adjustment, gestures and stylization. This method contributes to performance not only in terms of humor, but also in terms of creativity and is recognized to be a vital element of Naqqal tradition (Chowdhry, 2003). The performance style is not so much realistic. It combines easily music, dance, story-telling and comedy to form a live and involving theatrical presentation (Chowdhry, 2003). The simplicity and spontaneity of Naqqal is the true power of this art in our view. The actors depend on their bodily movements and their communication with the viewers instead of the technology on the stage and this makes the performance seem more authentic and related to life (Chaudhary, 2005). On the whole, Naqqal is a strong blend of improvisation, humor and performance art where performers not only entertain but also mirror social realities in their art .

Folk Humor as Social Commentary

Humor is also employed in Naqqal as a form of entertainment as well as a form of social commentary. The performers apply satire and humorous scenarios to point out the social problems and social contradictions in the society (Chaudhary, 2005). They also satirize authority, social stratification and conventionality through funny conversations and funny interactions, which not only entertain the audience, but also make them think (Chaudhary, 2005). Major social issues such as dowry, corruption and shifting values are usually portrayed in a comic manner. This is an indirect way of enabling performers to criticize the society without causing them a clash (Chaudhary, 2005). Naqqal is also a blend of old tales and contemporary concerns and makes the show more inclusive to the audience. The ability of this storytelling style to make performers adapt their work to the surrounding social environment allows this (Chowdhry, 2003). I think this is the combination of humor and criticism that makes Naqqal special in our opinion. It entertains the audience and at the same time makes them look at real life issues in a simple yet captivating manner.

Performance Structure and Aesthetic Features of Naqqal:

The use of language is important in the determination of the humor in Naqqal performances. Naqqal performers, in contrast to formal traditions in theatrical work, are dependent, to a large extent, on the rich oral language of Punjabi. The use of regional dialects, idioms, and colloquialisms is often used to provoke humour because they are known to the audience (Hansen, 1992). Naqqal performers tend to use wordplay, rhythmic speech patterns and playful exaggeration of accents to create comic effects. It is through this creativity in language that the normal conversations are changed into funny theatrical interactions that are likely to be very memorable to the audience (Richmond, Swann & Zarrilli, 1993). Naqqal performances are mostly improvisational, and, therefore, the language used is often changed depending on the audience and social context. The performers ensure the immediacy and relevance of the performance through the use of contemporary expressions and local references. By doing so, language turns out to be an imaginative device to create humor and enhance the rapport between performer and audience (Bharucha, 2005). I think that language in Naqqal is the primary source of humor since it relates to the real life of the audience. The performance is more relatable and natural due to the use of the local dialects and idioms. The use of words and accents by performers produces immediate laughs and makes the listener or viewer attentive. This is also an indication of the ingenuity of the performer in making

ordinary speech humorous. In sum, language turns out to be an effective instrument that brings Naqqal to life and puts it in the context of culture.

Performance

The prominent naqqal director Gurcharan Singh Channi is a well-known Punjab theatre artist and documentary director. He devoted his life to the ideas of spreading the Street Theatre and social transformation; his play helped him to save the disappearing tradition of Punjabi folk theatre and its strong social principles (youtube, 2017).



Source: YouTube, 2017,

In this performance, the Characters (Nakaliye): The main characters are true-to-life Nakaliye of the Mirasi community. These artists are the ones who carry this art form on; as stated in the video, they are the 7th generation of their family carrying on this tradition.

Samaj te Gyan: Performance de shuruat vich hi gyan te akal bare vadhia gall kahi gayi hai ki gyan ton bina dhyan bekar hai te akal ton bina shakal (personality) da koi mull nahi.

The above sentence stated that performance has numerous great lessons to tell in life, and the most significant to me was the message on the subject of Society and Knowledge, and right at the beginning, the message talks of how meditation is meaningless without real knowledge, and a physical appearance (personality) is worthless without wisdom.

Audience Interaction and the Creation of Humor:

One of the peculiarities of Naqqal theatre is the active participation of the audience. Unlike proscenium theatre where the audience is just a passive spectator, Naqqal performances promote face-to-face interactions between performers and spectators. The viewers tend to

react to acts by performers with. jokes, remarks, and improvisation. Naqqal performers use these reactions in their conversation, which creates fresh comic circumstances in the midst of performance (Chowdhry, 2011). This reciprocal act makes the performance into a participatory cultural experience where humor is collectively created. The mutual experience of laughter affirms the social aspect of Punjabi folk theatre and emphasizes the cultural importance of Naqqal performances (Bharucha, 2005). The interaction with the audience is one of the best elements of Naqqal theatre. The direct communication of the performance is made between the performers and the audience more active and changeable. When the audience responds, it is useful in inventing fresh humor at the moment. This renders each performance distinctive and unlike others. All in all, this communication establishes a great emotional bond. and makes the performance an experience.

CONCLUSION:

Naqqal is a colorful aspect of performance culture in Punjab which provides an insight into the society through a rare combination of humor, satire and improvisations. It is more than a form of entertainment, it is a potent social tool through which artists, with their imagination and resourcefulness, improvise dialogues and situations on the spot on the stage. The simplicity and flexibility of this form of art is the strongest aspect of this art form since an artist, without the support of any advanced technology or costly sets can be able to produce an overwhelming impression only through body movements and voice variations. Naqqal artists create a transition between the past and the present using the traditional folk stories, including Heer Ranjha and Sohni Mahiwal, and combining them with modern social problems.

The real essence of this art form is its linguistic rootedness and its direct communication with the audience. The application of the regional dialects, idioms, and true colloquialisms of the Punjabi language not only creates humour but also creates an emotional attachment with the audience that is deep and visceral. Naqqal, through its satire of social ills, e.g., dowry system, social hierarchies, and corruption is sharply criticized- a criticism which forces the society to look inwardly without causing any open confrontation. Naqqal has lost its popularity because of the overwhelming impact of contemporary media, but it still is a priceless element of the cultural identity and folk creativity of Punjab. It is a reminder of the reality that it is the emotional and social connection between the artist and the audience that is what actually makes any folk art form pertinent and alive.

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