

NIL DURPAN: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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Drama criticism and cultural studies dealt with a lot of theories associated with analysis of both dramatic text and theatrical texts of dramas and many important propositions are made by critics and scholars of all schools. The present paper is an attempt in the same direction. It attempts to consider a communication theory to analyze a play. The theory of supplement proposed by Derrida establishes that spoken word is a supplement of written word and so both dramatic text and theatrical text are equally important and the text (both dramatic and theatrical) is an act of communication. If it is a dramatic text, the communication is between the characters and reader, and if it is a performance, it is between audience and actors on the stage. So, a play like Macbeth may be enjoyed any number of times while each experience is different. But a play is received by the society with a specific set of meaning making, which should be of greater concern. To propound a theoretical frame for analyzing the meaning making, the present paper takes into consideration all the relevant happenings and details to analyze the dramatic text, the theatrical text and the socio-cultural conditions to study the impact of the play through a theoretical framework of social semiotics.

Social semiotics is a term coined by the linguist, M.A.M (Michael) Halliday in his book, *Language as Social Semiotics* in 1978. Widely used by critics and scholars, social semiotics aims at analyzing the texts in their respective contexts. According to social semiotic, the meaning making of cultural frames by audience/reader happens in a specific way depending on a few significant criteria. The two major conditions that lead the meaning making are access, and context. Access is all about availability of essentials like knowledge, education, economic, social and other endowments to the receiver, which would enable him to receive the signals which may be further deciphered. Elaborating on contexts, Holliday writes,

The context of a situation is a theoretical construct for explaining how a text relates to the social processes within which it is located. It has three significant components: the underlying social activity, the persons or “voices” involved in that activity, and the particular functions accorded to the text within it. In informal terms, the situation consists in what’s going on, who are taking part, and where the language comes in. (these are referred technically as “field”, the “tenor” and the “mode”).[10]

Social semiotics approach suggests to consider any text as a unit of meaning which operates within a context. Thus the text unfolds with a specific meaning in a specific context and a variable degree of probability in different contexts. Explaining about the context, noted scholars of communication, Tony Schirato and Susan Yell write,

Contexts can be understood as the particular environments in which communication, texts and meaning making occur, and in which they function as meaningful. Context is the situation in which we make sense of a text or meaningful practice.[110]

Broadening the theory, they elaborate that in making sense of contexts, we take in to account a number of aspects including both immediate situation and the wider contexts. These may include the details of the participants, place, time, the related inter texts, and the role of the text in that specific situation. Thus the three elements of context, field that deals with what is happening, tenor, that is who are the participants, and mode, the medium used should be analyzed to study the context.

To study the field, it is essential to scrutinize what is the social activity performed by the text, or the social occasion in which the text is embedded. Alongside, it is essential to study the subject matter of the text, because there is a great deal of relation between social action and subject matter of the text, though need not determine each other. While defining the tenor, Halliday writes that,

The tenor of discourse refers to who is taking part, to the nature of participants, their statuses and roles: what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved?[12]

Tenor refers to the interactive dimension of communication ie the relation established between the written/theatrical text and the audience/ reader when they come in to contact with each other. To study the relationship clearly and completely we need to consider social distance, emotion or attitude and the power. We will now analyze *Nil Durpan* using the above said theory. This drama is selected owing to a lot of details available regarding this drama and the effect of the communication is quite noticeable and significant in the history of drama.

Nil Durpan is one of the most celebrated and important drama in the history of Indian English drama. The original drama is written in Bengali and published during the middle of September,1860. The printer was Ramachandra Bowmick in Bangala Machine at Dacca, where Dinabandu, the writer was in service with posts and telegraphs department of the British Government. Though the author's name is known soon, initially in the place of author's name, the pseudonym, 'A Traveler' is found, and the title of the play is "Nil Darpanang Natakang: Nilkara-bishadhara Danshan Kalar Prajanikara Kshemankarena Kennochi Pathikena-bhipranitanb"

Nil Durpan holds greater significance for today's theatre critics for more than the fact that this is supposed to be the first Indian English drama. *Nil Durpan* is the reason behind the introduction of The Dramatic Performance Act that curbed the freedom of performing art forms in India ever since 1876. This act enforced by the British is a legal act conceived to regulate public drama/ theatrical performances. This eventually led to widespread censorship and suppression of mainstream theatre which was just then begun. Thus the Indian English drama suffered a major setback. For another five decades its impact was noteworthy in curbing the nationalist movement being mobilized by theatre. Sidharth Narain in his article 'Censorship and the Law' writes how this legal act is revised after the colonial rule and is effective in the contemporary times also,

In July, 1998, the issue of censorship of theatre in India became the subject of world wide attention when angry protestors prevented the staging of the play 'Mi Nathuram Godse Bolty', leading to the Maharashtra government banning the play following the advise of the congress government at the centre.[3]

The translated version of the play (in English) became controversial and eventually led to a libel suit against the supposed patron of it, James Long, basically a clergy man. This legal battle is popularly known as Long v/s Queen trial, only one of its kind in the history of translations in India. *Nil Durpan* is also very important in the history of Indian drama as it is the reason behind the production of the unique darpan trio, written and produced in India, they are, *Nil Durpan* by Dinabandu, '*Zamindar Darpan*' by Meer Mosharaf Hussain and '*Cha- Kar – Darpan*' by Dhakshinaranjan. These three dramas aim at projecting the three major problem areas of Bengal society during early mid nineteenth century. This ultimately caused transfer of power from East India Company to British government.

The characters portrayed in Ni Durpan are very close to the audience/readers(both Bengalees and Europeans) soon after it is written. Shanker Sen Gupta who extensively researched about this play writes,

The tortures of the planters, as appeared in the drama *Nil Durpan*, are no exaggeration than what was reported by commission, the only difference, the dramatist had given fictitious names of the planters, characters of the drama and places of occurrence, but reality of atrocities of planters were vividly reported in the play. And in the report of the commission, real name of the places, real characters etc. were documented. These were collected from the peasantry by way of direct evidence.[viiiL]

The emotion involved was that of apathy and struggle for freedom. According to principles of communication, power is the statuses in which sender and receiver stand. Anyway power contact and effect are neither fixed nor predetermined elements of context. Every time these elements change, meaning making changes. Therefore, if *Nil Durpan* is staged in now, it would perhaps not evoke the same reaction by the Bengalees or the British which it evoked during late Nineteenth Century. The text unfolds with a variable degree of probability in different contexts. The present theory of social semiotics suggests the study of the relation between text and context to understand and predict the meaning making of the communication. In *Nil Durpan* the social activity is going on in lower Bengal, where the atrocities of Indigo planters were unbearable. Happy extended middle class and peasantry was reduced to mere beggars and was ready to revolt as Nabinmadhab in the play does. The role of the text was to stir the nationalistic feeling among the Bengalees and awaken British government to realize the East India company's mercantile wing's activities. The text and context here are not only interdependent but also, shape each other. Indigo planters in India, especially in Bengal were using their money power to torture the ordinary farmers. The troubles of the peasants were multifold. Shanker Sen Gupta writes, "----*Nil Durpan* is more a sketch or a design for dramatic representation than a full length drama."(LXXXV). Thus this play projects these social and economical problems that Dinabandu witnessed. This was immediately after the British government received the report from the Indigo Commission in 1860 which says,

Acts of violence—occasioned the death of natives, there wer also illegal detention of natives in confinement, especially in stocks, the illicit

infliction of punishment by means of ration or otherwise on the cultivators or other natives. August 1860.[Patna judges court recorded]

Two planters in the drama represent Indigo planters, J.J. Wood and P. P. Rogue. the brutality is shown in forcing the raiyats to cultivate indigo sans remuneration, confining the natives, beating and corrupting the villagers, violating the native maidens and encouraging prostitution. They corrupt the judiciary to support them. Golak Basu is one such victim who is the owner of land and leads a decent life with the product of his land, he is robbed of his land and forced to do indigo cultivation. Nabinmadhab, Golak Basu's eldest son wants to file a suit against the planters, but Golak Basu prevents him from that. After a series of events the matter is taken to the court of law but the judge favours the planters out rightly.

So according to the theory of social semiotics, the field is analyzed and coming to the tenor, the relationship between the sender and the receiver of message should be probed. The audience/ reader of this drama of 1870s are very closely connected to each others, as we discussed, they were part of the society. So the relationship establishment was almost instant. The performances made a strong impact on the audience and the European spectators understood the ability of theatre to incite audiences. So the play was an instant success among native circles and also among the Europeans when it is translated in to English. The result of the success is the introduction of Dramatic Performance Act by the British government.

The communication theory of social semiotics thus is suitable to analyze the meaning making of a communication act and it may be applied to study the drama. We have seen how the text and context are related to each other and how they produced significant results. Thus this communication theory is appropriate to analyze a drama.

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