

Kutiyattam and Noh: Commonalities and Divergences

SUDHA GOPALAKRISHNAN

This paper tries to focus on some common points and divergences between two great theatric traditions of Asia—Kutiyattam, the only extant mode of traditional Sanskrit theatre surviving in India, and Noh, the classical theatre of Japan. Both these forms originated several centuries ago, but they have retained their purity and rigour because of their basic formalistic nature and also because of their insistence on classicism and stylization. Kutiyattam is believed to have an antiquity of over 2000 years, though exact evidence of its stage-production is available only from the tenth century. Noh, with its sequel, the comic Kyogen, seems to have evolved from proto-dramatic forms like Sarugaku, until it was reformed and refined by Kan'ami and Zeami in the 15th century.

In a comparative study of Kutiyattam and Noh, it may be seen that both are highly codified, evolved forms of theatre which exploit themes from the mythical stories and classics of their respective regions. In order to suit the supernatural themes, they adopt a highly symbolic method of acting, avoiding realism (in the Western sense of the term) and resorting to a stylized code of dance movements, gesture, and mime. Unlike the Western theatric traditions which by and large followed the Aristotelian dictum of drama as the imitation of action, traditional performances in Asia—be it Japanese, Indian, or Chinese—originated independently and developed their own codes of aesthetic theory and dramatic practice. Kutiyattam and Noh primarily centre round the enactment of poetry. While the repertoire of Kutiyattam includes the celebrated Sanskrit plays of Bhasa, Kalidasa, Harsha and Shaktibhadra, Noh dramatists drew the plots of their plays from a wide variety of mythical and legendary material, and classical Japanese and Chinese literature—the *Ise Monogatari* (Tales of Ise), *Yamato Monogatari* (Tales of Yamato), *Gempei Seisuiiki*, *Taiheiki* (Tale of Great Peace), *Soga Monogatari* (Tale of the Soga Brothers), and the tale of Genji and the tale of the Heike. Since the spectator is expected to be familiar with the narrative outline of the play, his interest in watching the play is not so much in the progression of events but in the depiction of emotional states, and in the total experience which captures the 'essence' of things,

creating an idealized world of non-illusion and make-believe, rich in poetic and symbolic beauty.

The kineasthetic principles of Kutiyattam and Noh are based on a strict adherence to tradition and spirituality. Unlike the Stanislavskian method of acting where the actor concentrates on 'feeling' his role and his spontaneous movements become totally *in* character, these two art forms begin with a formal system which is transmitted from master to disciple (usually both belonging to the same 'family' of actors). The disciple learns the role independently through several years of training under the master. His study does not stop with graduation; it is only through long years of rigorous training under the master, study of classical texts, exposure to and experience on the stage—mingled with his own innate talent (*vasana*) and creative imagination (*bhavana*)—that he develops into a major actor.

Indian theatre defines the ultimate level of aesthetic enjoyment in terms of *rasa*, while the twin concepts of *yugen* and *hana* illustrate the acmé of elegance and beauty which pervades Noh. The term *rasa* has a wide range of connotations from the simple 'sap' or 'juice' to the metaphysical Brahman (the Absolute principle). *Rasa* is a concept that is at once actor-oriented and spectator-oriented. According to Bharata, author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *rasa* is manifested in the theatre under certain favourable conditions, when the Durable Psychological States (*sthayī*) are combined with Determinants (*vibhava*), Consequents (*anubhava*) and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicharibhava*)¹. Through this dictum, Bharata highlights the psychological processes that lead to the spectator's aesthetic enjoyment. According to him, corresponding to the eight varieties of *sthayī*, there are eight *rasas* too, though later theoreticians have added a ninth.

Zeami's concept of *hana* as seen in his treatises on Noh has striking similarities with *rasa*. While Bharata uses the analogy of food to illustrate the idea of relish, Zeami exploits the image of the flower (*hana*) to suggest the highest ideal of aesthetic excellence. Wallace Chappell comments on the use of flower imagery in Noh:

The image of a flower is particularly apt because of the idea of an artist 'flowering' at the height of his powers: the growth of a flower from the bud, to opening, to maturity, is a marvellous concept for the development of an artist.²

Zeami also speaks of *hana* as 'essence'—the essence of distilled experience that leads to a Zen-like understanding of the human condition in a single gesture or turn of the head. Depending on the actor's talent and skill, Zeami speaks of nine levels or gradations in the experience of *hana*. When applied to the audience, *hana* is described as a means of giving rise to



Noh : Kanze School.

Kutiyattam: Ammanur Madhava Chakyar.



the unexpected in the heart of the audience, jolting them into a fuller understanding of the character, the play, and its meaning. *Yugen*, variously translated by scholars as 'elegance', 'grace', and 'beauty', is the highest ideal of perfection in many arts including literature and the visual and performing arts. In Noh the term suggests the idea of graceful acting, imbued with a subdued splendour, perhaps with a suggestion of sadness or loneliness. The twin concepts of *hana* and *yugen*, which finally leads the actor to *joka* (the Highest Fruition), are fundamental to an understanding of Noh.

In spite of the apparent similarities between Kutiyattam and Noh in sharing an idealistic aestheticism, there are significant differences between the two traditions with respect to their acting methods. Kutiyattam employs the technique of *elaboration* in dramatic action, involving dance movements, a highly developed system of hand gestures (*mudra*) and facial expressions. Accordingly, the face is the main vehicle for theatric communication; an imaginative manipulation of the eyes, the brows, lips, and the facial muscles evokes a whole gamut of sentiments, reaching unbelievable heights in their artistic expression. Elaborate *abhinaya* (acting)—whether *angika* (histrionic) of the hero or *vachika* (verbal) of the Vidushaka (the comic character)—leads the performance forward; it takes six to 48 days to present a single act of the play. (Incidentally, in Kutiyattam, acts from complete plays are treated as full-fledged dramas.) The hero subjects a verse from a play to a four-fold method of acting to bring out the multiple levels of meaning embedded in the text of the play. Here the actor, starting from some point in the text, takes off from the main plot and elaborates it imaginatively, the digression itself taking much longer than the narration of the story. Several instances of this phenomenon may be cited from Kutiyattam.

A typical instance of elaboration as a theatric technique may be seen in *Anguliyankam*, the sixth act of Shaktibhadra's *Ashcharya Chudamani*, which describes the meeting between Sita and Hanuman in Lanka. Here Hanuman offers a detailed enactment of the whole story of *Ramayana* lasting for several days.

Let us take a verse (*shloka*) from *Ashokavanikankam* (the fifth act of *Ashcharya Chudamani*) to analyze the acting method of Kutiyattam. The scene presents King Ravana in a love-lorn state, pining for Sita whom he had abducted and held captive in his palace. Here Ravana is addressing the Moon (referred to here as Himakara), telling him that in his present state of separation (from Sita), the rays of the moon are as scorching as fire:

. . . Ravana sits on the *pitha* and renders a *keśādipādam* (head-to-foot) description of Sita. The mild breeze and the cool rays of the moon

intensify his suffering. He thinks: "Alas! This moon confronts me and fills me with agony. What shall I do now? Let me try to tell him something."

In a low tone, he calls out: "Himakara" (the moon—lit. producing cool rays). Watching the moon closely, he asks: "What? No response? Possibly he didn't hear me. Let me call again." Louder, he calls out: "Himakara . . . Still no response? Have you gone deaf?" He calls out a third time even more loudly: "Himakara". Seeing that the Moon responds, he says: "All right now let me tell him."

A rough translation of the original verse from Sanskrit which follows this rendering would be: 'O Moon, with frosty rays, under the spell of Kama (the lord of love) I am scorched by your rays, as though they emit fire. But this is not because of your worth, nor that of Kama himself. O Lord of Night, this is due to the power of Sita, the daughter of King Janaka, (who remains) grief-stricken and distressed.'³ The actor's mimetic interpretation of the verse, and the progression of *abhinaya*, is indicated below:

Your rays emit fire: Your rays shower burning embers over my body. I feel scorched by their heat. Why does this happen? What are your rays made of? *Frosty:* Your rays are as cold as ice. They are pleasant and soothing to everyone. But to me they are not. Why is that? *Under the spell of Kama:* I am totally under the influence of Lord Kama. How is that? Kama tightens his belt, takes up his bow and arrows, approaches me and, taking his aim, showers his arrows all over me. He overpowers me and takes me captive. In this condition your rays scorch me. *This is not because of your worth:* Do not think that you are responsible for this. You are worthless. You are like a speck of dust in the eyes of Sage Atri. So you need not feel proud. *Nor that of Kama:* Is it Kama's power? No. Neither yours nor Kama's. Then whose power is it? *The power of Sita, the daughter of King Janaka:* This happened due to the powers of that beautiful daughter of King Janaka. How is she? *Grief-stricken and distressed:* She is grief-stricken (the actor recites 'grief-stricken' in a sad tone). Why? When Sita was living with Rama (in total misery) in the forest, suffering bad weather and surviving on wild berries and fruits, I went to her, took her away forcibly, and hold her captive in my palace. This has made her sad and grief-stricken. But she is responsible for my present condition. After all, you know all about it. Why? *Lord of Night:* You are the husband of Night. You know about the agony of separation from Night (at the beginning of day).

Ravana recites the second half of the verse again and leaves the stage. The detailed enactment of this address to the Moon takes about two hours,

the actor elaborately sketching each shade of feeling—the heat of love, the coldness of ice, the intensity of passion, Sita's suffering, and Ravana's longing. In such a rendering the action transcends the level of the text and achieves a multi-dimensional significance. Instead of presenting the text through verbal rendering of dialogue, the actor in Kutiyattam transforms concrete ideas from the text into the language of gesture and mime, investing it with multiple meanings, and thus brings out the poetic qualities in the text of the play.

Another distinguishing feature, which is perhaps a natural corollary of the technique of elaboration, is the device of the shifting perspective of the actor to embody several roles at the same time, though actually representing only one tangible character. A pertinent example of this phenomenon may be found in *Toranayuddhankam* (based on Bhasa's *Abhisheka Nataka*) where Ravana, while narrating the glories of the city of Lanka, digresses from the situation and proceeds to narrate the incident of his attack on Mount Kailasa and also describes a minor quarrel between Lord Shiva and Parvati. Here the actor who takes the role of Ravana himself assumes the guise of both Shiva and Parvati and vividly presents the clash between the celestial couple. On such occasions, not only does the actor (known as Chakyar in Kutiyattam parlance) transcend the boundaries of the role, but transcends the boundaries of the character too, which results in a fluid transmutation of *natadharma* (the function of the actor).

Contrary to the principle of elaboration, which is of vital significance in Kutiyattam, Noh seems to *condense* and *minimalize* theatrical action to evoke an atmosphere of subtle intensity and mystery. Zeami ordains that "the less done, the better". Rimer and Mazakazu, citing Zeami's *Kakyo*, observe:

It is often commented on by the audiences that 'many times a performance is effective when the actor does nothing'. Such an accomplishment results from the actor's greatest, most secret skill.⁴

Through these words, Zeami seems to highlight the power of internalized acting. The use of masks in Noh negates facial expressions, and the histrionic/gestural patterns (*kata*) are highly sublimated. On the formalism and refinement of *kata* in Noh, Yasuo Nakamura comments:

... even the *kata* with strong mime elements do not employ everyday natural gestures but are highly stylized suggestions of them. For instance, in the *shiori*, which depicts weeping, the actor simply bows his head slightly and raises his hand—to a position in front of his eyes. He never snuffles or trembles as in realistic crying. Even in cases where extreme grief is to be expressed, he only raises both hands instead of one.⁵

The performance structure of Noh may be analyzed with reference to the method of acting the *kuse* scene in the play *Yamamba*. Yamamba is the name of both the play and its central character, a mysterious old woman (or her ghost) living in the mountains. She is depicted as a symbol of enlightenment, but is also pictured as being doomed to suffer. The second half of the play presents Yamamba, first as a she-demon and later as a benevolent person. The source-text and acting method of the stanzas 53-56 cited by Bethe and Brazell run as follows:

Chorus: Then too she sports with people:
Sometimes, when a woodsman rests
beside a mountain path beneath the blossoms
she shoulders his heavy burden and...

... With only the briefest pause and change in expression, the chorus begins to narrate Yamamba's deeds among humans. She helps woodsmen carry their loads and weavers work their looms, yet human eyes cannot see her except as a demon.

The dance enacts this narrative. To straightforward chanting, regular rhythm and ground drum patterns, the Shite enacts each of Yamamba's helpful deeds in dance. The enactment is introduced by the continuation of stamps from *kuse*, a good example of the overlap principle. A Large Zig Zag—these movements are all patterns added to the standard *kuse* dance sequences—gets the Shite to front stage right, where he puts his fan above his shoulder and falls to his knees, enacting Yamamba shouldering the woodsman's burden. This special pattern, unique to *Yamamba*, is emphasized by a retardation of tempo and a raise to high on the word 'burden'.⁶

Unlike Kutiyattam, the main actor (*Shite*) in Noh wears a mask, which completely eliminates facial expressions, shifting the attention to a single, highly complex, intangible meaning which the main figure of the play expresses. On the effect of the mask in Noh, Yasunari Takahashi remarks:

The young woman's mask (*Ko-omote*) worn by *shite* in *Izutsu* is sometimes characterised as 'neutral' or expressionless; but I would rather consider it an expression of a state of 'trance' or 'near-trance', a state which is seemingly devoid of expression, but actually tense with possibilities of possession and transformation.⁷

While the mask in Noh serves to erase the actor's individuality and establish the atmosphere of non-illusion, in Kutiyattam the heavy facial make-up, though it serves a similar function, accentuates the facial expressions. Similarly, in direct contrast to the tradition of Kutiyattam where it takes several days to complete a single act of a play, usually five plays are presented in a single night's programme, integrating the principle of *jo-ha-kyu* (introduction-exposition-conclusion).

In spite of the obvious differences in the aesthetic and performing principles of Kutiyattam and Noh, both are rich and organic theatric

traditions of Asia. Noh has received the attention of theatre enthusiasts and critics from all over the world, and a considerable amount of critical study has already been carried out on the art form. Kutiyattam, by comparison, has not been sufficiently studied yet, and research on it is rather sparse. □

NOTES

1. I have adopted the translation of the terms for *sthaiyī*, *vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhicharibhava* from Manmohan Ghosh's translation of the *Nāṭya Sāstra* (1951, reprint Manisha Granthalaya, Calcutta, 1967), p.105.
2. Wallace Chappel, Foreword to *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*. Trans. J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu (Princeton, Princeton University press, 1984), p.xi.
3. The original *śloka* from *Abhisheka Nataka* is as follows:
Himakara, himagarbhā raśmayastāvakinām
Mayi madanavidheye yena vahnim vamanti
Na tava balamanangasyāpi vā dukkhabhāji
Janakaduhitūreṣā śarvarīnātha śakti.
4. Rimer and Masakazu, *On the Art of the No Drama*, p.97.
5. Yasuo Nakamura, *Noh: The Classical Theatre* (New York, Weatherhill, 1971), p. 277.
6. Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell, *No, as Performance: An Analysis of the Kuse Scene of Yamamba* (Ithaca, Cornell University, 1978) p. 113.
7. Yasunari Takahashi, 'How to Present a Ghost: Touring Europe with a Noh troupe', in *Temenos* (London, No. 11) 1990, p. 16.