

Theatre audience and social reality english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The drama is the only literary art which is designed for a crowd instead of to an individual. The poet writes for a selected audience. The essayist and the novelist write for readers sitting alone in their libraries. The writer speaks to each of them in solitude. But it is different with a play. And because the drama must be written for a crowd, it must be written in a different fashion, and must devise a different structure for representation, from the other forms of art. Due to this difference, the crowd has exercised a dominant influence upon the dramatist in every era of the history of theatre; the themes, the thoughts, the emotions, are decided by the prescribed agendas of the public. Therefore, to understand drama, it is necessary to inquire into the psychology of the theatre audience and by doing so we can also understand the ways in which theatre can influence the public and change social reality. The theatre audience is typically a crowd. A crowd is a large group of people with a common purpose or set of emotions. The psychology of the crowd as a group and the psychology of individual differ considerably. A congregation of various individuals in a particular time and space with a common purpose--tends to become a crowd, because of this purpose. A crowd has a mind of its own, apart from that of any of its individual members. The crowd reacts in a certain way where individual reaction is not taken into account, Late Ferdinand Brunetière, in 1893, stated that the drama has dealt always with a struggle between human wills or " No struggle, no drama". This conflict or struggle refers to the psychological conflicts and struggles faced by individuals. It was not until nineteenth century that the psychology of crowd was studied. The subject was studied by M. Gustave Le Bon in his *Psychologie des Foules*. According to him, an

individual, when becomes a part of the crowd loses all consciousness of the mental variations by which he differs from his counterparts but he becomes consciousness of all the qualities which make him similar. The variations in mentality that exist among humans are the acquired qualities of intellect and character; but the qualities which are similar are the innate basic passions of the race. A crowd therefore is more emotionally inclined than intellectually. It is less reasonable and more passionate; and hence, as M. Le Bon cleverly puts it, " a man, by the mere fact that he forms a part of an organized crowd, is likely to descend several rungs on the ladder of civilization. Even the most cultured and intellectual of men, when he forms an atom of a crowd, tends to lose consciousness of his acquired mental qualities and to revert to his primal simplicity and sensitiveness of mind." There were considerable developments in the field of theatre as well- in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Europe experienced the advent of romanticism against the classicism that dominated theatre earlier. There were various forms that came into existence they include Romanticism, Melodrama, the Well made plays, the Problem plays of Naturalism and Realism, , the farces, Oscar wilde's drawing-room comedies, Symbolism and Proto-Expressionism in the late works of Strindberg and Ibsen. Various movements in Western theatre that began in the late 19th century they were known collectively as experimental theatre. As the term suggests it was experimental, new modes of production, acting, stagecraft and direction were employed; it was created as a response to the stagnancy in theatre and the cultural crises that the world was going through after the two world wars and the great depression. Despite different political inclinations it was an attempt to change the

notions of reality as perceived by the masses in order to attain this purpose it tried to introduce a different use of language of the body, to change the mode of perception and to create a new, more active relation with the audience. Establishment of this relation was necessary in a world where all belief systems had crashed and meaning was completely lost. One thing that was challenged more and more is the role of the audience in performance. Traditionally audiences were passive observers. Many practitioners wanted to challenge this, so that by making them participate in the performance, they could have been convinced that the reality they live in is not stable and is subject to change but only if they participated in a united fashion. For example, Brecht wanted to mobilize his audiences by asking them questions and not giving them answers, thereby getting them to think for themselves, by indulging them in a dialectical debate with themselves he wanted them to challenge the way they perceived reality; Augusto Boal wanted his audiences to react directly to the action; Artaud wanted to affect them directly on a subconscious level and by doing so wanted them to be aware of their primitive sides which is in contrast to the reasonable and civilized side. Reason forms our reality but there exists another side to us which is dominated by passion, Artaud wanted the audience to recognize this side and not practice an ideological conformism towards reason. Ordinary people can gain power only when they act collectively, otherwise they remain subject to the various social institutions and external forces direct their lives to particular ends and they remain trapped in an illusion created by these external forces- called reality. This idea dominated the late nineteenth century theatre, hence the playwrights and directors developed theories and

modes of representation which would affect the reality the audience believed in, disrupt it and make them challenge it. This purpose could not have been achieved without including the audience in the performance. The theatre was symbolic, it was in a theatre that illusions were created and hence it became the cite to understand and study illusion the only problem in the existing theater was the lack of audience participation, it treated the audience as passive, there existed a fourth wall which separated the audience from the performance and created an aesthetic gap which excluded the audience from being involved in the action of the play. Hence the new dramatists wanted to create a new theatre which would include the audience by inclusion of the audience in the performance their consciousness could have been injected with similar ideas which in turn would lead to the formation of a new social reality. By using audience participation, the performer invited the audience to feel a certain way and by doing so they changed their attitudes, values and beliefs in regard to the performance's topic. The theatre hence became the new cite for crowd manipulation. For this new generation of dramatists the main purpose of the theatre was to affect the audience by including them in the dramatic action, another reason to include the audience might be the fact that the more included the audience are the more collective behavior they would show. The rest of the paper would be dedicated to different playwrights of the modern theatre and their efforts to include the audience and their theories to make theatre an active social institution with the power to mobilize people into a specific mode of action and thinking. First we would focus on The Theatre of the Absurd which was the theatre for absurdist playwrights; the

term was coined by Martin Esslin in his essay "Theatre of the Absurd". The theatre expressed the belief of Camus as expressed in his 1942 essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" i. e. in a godless world, no meaning exist and man is trapped in a vicious circle, in this world all logical construct fail to establish any meaning and since language is a logical construct has no meaning and fails to express. It is important to discuss the theatre of absurd because it challenges the reality that people believe in and by mocking at its meaninglessness challenges the audience to find an alternate reality, in a deconstructive sense by saying the world is without meaning we establish a meaning of meaninglessness e. g. in Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" by mocking at the meaningless waiting of the characters an alternate reality is created where no divine purpose is attached to human life and meaninglessness is the only reality which exists. The absurd plays usually portray a world where either meaning doesn't exist or is controlled by external forces beyond the control or understanding of an individual. The main characteristics and themes of these plays are comic elements mixed with horrific or tragic images; characters caught up in hopeless situations, actions which are repetitive and monotonous; dialogue full of clichés, wordplay, and nonsense; plots that are cyclical or expansive. By using these techniques the playwrights fulfilled two purposes firstly to parody the realist/naturalist well made plays, secondly, by such representation the audience is made aware of the illusion that they live in and the absurdity of the roles they play and actions they do. Theatre did not represent the illusion/reality of life but represented the underlying meaninglessness of that reality and by doing so disrupted the fixed notion of a meaningful and stable

reality. Laughter was used as an important device by the absurdist playwrights, but this laughter distanced the audience from the action of the play and forced them to think about it. Laughter is infectious in a crowd but its effect upon an individual's mind is different, by capitalizing on this infectious nature of laughter the audience could have been forced into a dialectical debate about meaning, hence the purpose of the playwright was attained. Next was the experimental theatre which encouraged the directors to make an attempt at changing the society, its values and beliefs on a particular issue and provoked them to change it. The experimental theatre challenged the traditional modes of theatrical production and tried to change the traditional roles played by the writer and director. The performers started to play a vital role in this kind of theatre this was due to the fact that it was the performers who interacted with the audience on an active level. Hence they were given more opportunities to interpret the script and directions. The performers were given freedom to use various modes to achieve the desired results. Director started playing an ideological role or he presented an idea which was to be executed by the performers within the framework of the script, this was a sort of democratization of the theatre, power was equally distributed among the director, actor, writer and the audience. Such democratization was essential because the theatre had to change itself first before it started changing or influencing the social reality. The playwrights and directors were not satisfied with the traditional theatre, they rejected the themes, stage, the mode of representation, in a nutshell the entire form and content of the traditional theatre. All of them believed that theatre had a social role to play and wanted to enforce this role through various theories

that they propagated. They believed the theatre had the power to influence and force people to change their present condition, politically, economically and historically. In the next part of the essay we will study Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud's theories and look at the ways they wanted to change the social reality. Brecht created an influential theory of theatre—the epic theatre—it was based on his belief that theatre was an instrument of social change, he once said " I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply it to theatre". He firmly believed that a theatre which merely interpreted the world accepted the world uncritically. He questioned the " given" in drama i. e to say that in a given circumstance a character behaves in a particular way and creates another circumstance, the Stanislavskian actor researched these given circumstances and held a belief that these given circumstances were not subject to change, to Brecht this was a sort of conformism towards the reality and external forces that create it, he believed that the given is changeable and since the naturalist theatre did not portray this trait of reality it was misrepresenting it. Hence he established the epic theatre where he attempted to prove that there was nothing absolute about the sequence of events, by doing so he wanted to encourage his audience to stop accepting that their lives were determined by some pre determined force and was impossible to better. The epic theatre was different from the dramatic theatre in many ways but the primary difference was that of sequence, the epic theatre did not follow a tight sequential order and the sequence of events was continuously broken by songs to tell the audience that the characters in the play were not living predetermined lives, this

effect is known as the alienation effect. Unlike the dramatic theatre he did not want his audience to identify with the characters rather he wanted to make the character subject to critical analysis. The cathartic effect that the dramatic theatre had stopped the audience from thinking for it wanted them to emote. He wanted his audiences to critically examine the situations and develop a perspective which would help them recognize social injustice and exploitation and then bringing about a necessary change in the social reality. The disrupted order of the play also reminded the audience that the play was a representation of reality by showing his audience the constructed nature of the play, he wanted to communicate that the audience's reality was equally constructed and was subject to change. Artaud believed that it was reason that constructed reality, but reason and language both were incapable of affecting the audience to such an extent that they start living passionately. His primary enemy was language; he once said " one has to smash language to touch reality". Why did he consider language as social enemy would be our area of speculation. To him language had two problems, first, language doesn't have the power to communicate the higher reality to the audience, and secondly he believed theatre needs a metalanguage based on visual and auditory mediums to communicate these higher and mysterious truths. To him there existed another higher reality and the reason why language could not express it was that language was a logical construct and reason doesn't define everything. He wanted his theatre to affect the audience on all levels of consciousness; therefore he used a combination of lighting, sound, and other performance elements in a strange manner. In his " theatre of cruelty" he defined the word cruel as the raw determination to shatter the false

reality. To Artaud imagination was reality, dreams, hallucinations and thoughts were as real as the social reality. His continuous emphasis on the multiplicity of reality opened new areas of speculation for the future theorists. The Theatre of Cruelty wanted to include the audience into the centre of the action, forcing them to get involved with the performance. This was cruelty, for Artaud, yet it was necessary to shake the audience out of dormancy. To him, reality was an agreement, an agreement similar to that of the agreement audience accept when they enter a theatre to see a play according to which believe that the performance is real. If the audience realizes this fact that reality is not absolute and as unreal as dreams and illusions then a new worldview would have been created and this world view would form a new reality for everyone and change the way they lived. The theatre has the power to change the way we look at the world, but this power comes with its own dangers, the change brought about by the theatre would not be less an illusion than the existing reality. A social setup depends on order and stability and if it is made unstable the instability or chaos becomes the order. Hence, quite contrary to Brecht, it is important to understand reality than to change it for understanding is in itself a change.