

# IDEALIZATION AND INDIVIDUATION IN GLOBALLY EXPANDING PERFORMANCE PRACTICES: THE PARSI THEATRE

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## **Abstract**

This paper is to roughly analyze different cases of a globally expanding performance practice, the Parsi theatre, from the Malay world, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar with historical methods and from the perspective of current musical practice. Constructions of historical awareness and some nationalist or religiously motivated thoughts may play an important role in reflecting on musical skills and locally individual performance.

This practice-based research involves long term field work experiences, archival work, and interviews with some key figures. This paper should help rationalize historical developments and their meaning for current performance practices in the region. The further idealization of musical dramas on stage was, it is always accompanied by individuation resulting from personal encounters, accidental shifts in arrangements, and the availability of performance knowledge. The paper suggests an open-minded approach to a cultural globalization that started much earlier than the term evolved in academia.

## **Keywords**

Idealization, Individuation, Performance Practice, Parsi Theatre

## **Introduction**

Most of the music and dance practices which were confined and popular among nobles and aristocrats in North India became similarly popular among the upper middle-class population following political and cultural interferences through British colonial administrators during the twentieth century in the North of India. Parsi theatre has been the most enjoyable entertainment event for North Indian people of all social classes in vogue at that time. The main question is: Where did this theatre practice spread beyond North India? How was it idealized and individually transformed?

## **Southward**

Some sources reveal that North Indian music was spread in Sri Lanka during the British rule with the coming of Parsi theatre (Bombay theatre) which largely promoted Hindustani raga-based compositions. These Parsi theatre performances were imitated by Sri Lankan experts in the field by writing scripts and songs in Sinhala language. The Sinhala version of Parsi theatre was named “Nurti”. Prior to Parsi Theatre, the most popular music theatre type in Sri Lanka has been Nadagam which has got a strong South Indian cultural background. Some literature describes that Nadagam declined its popularity after the coming of Parsi theatre which has been nurtured with North Indian classical, semi classical, folk music, and popular dance practices. The dialogues were not very much important compared to the text content of songs in Parsi theatre scripts written in a tone that was following mainly Ghazal poetic structures which have

been widely popular in North India since the second half of nineteenth century. Eclectic features of North Indian performing arts were included in Parsi theatre performances where graceful and skillful song-actresses and actors had inspired the Sinhala people to adopt North Indian performing arts practices. Wijethunga describes it as following (1944):

“Gorgeous and scintillating costumes [sic], colorful and artistic sceneries [sic] before brilliant kerosene-oil footlights, breath-taking spectacular mechanical devices (of marble palaces floating up into thin air and of wondrous magic treasure caves), rapid dramatic sequences grasped in spite of a foreign language. In particular, the irresistible music of the theatre operated as an agent of intracultural seduction: ... and above all, the haunting airs of the music of North India — all these fascinated and captivated the onlooker”.

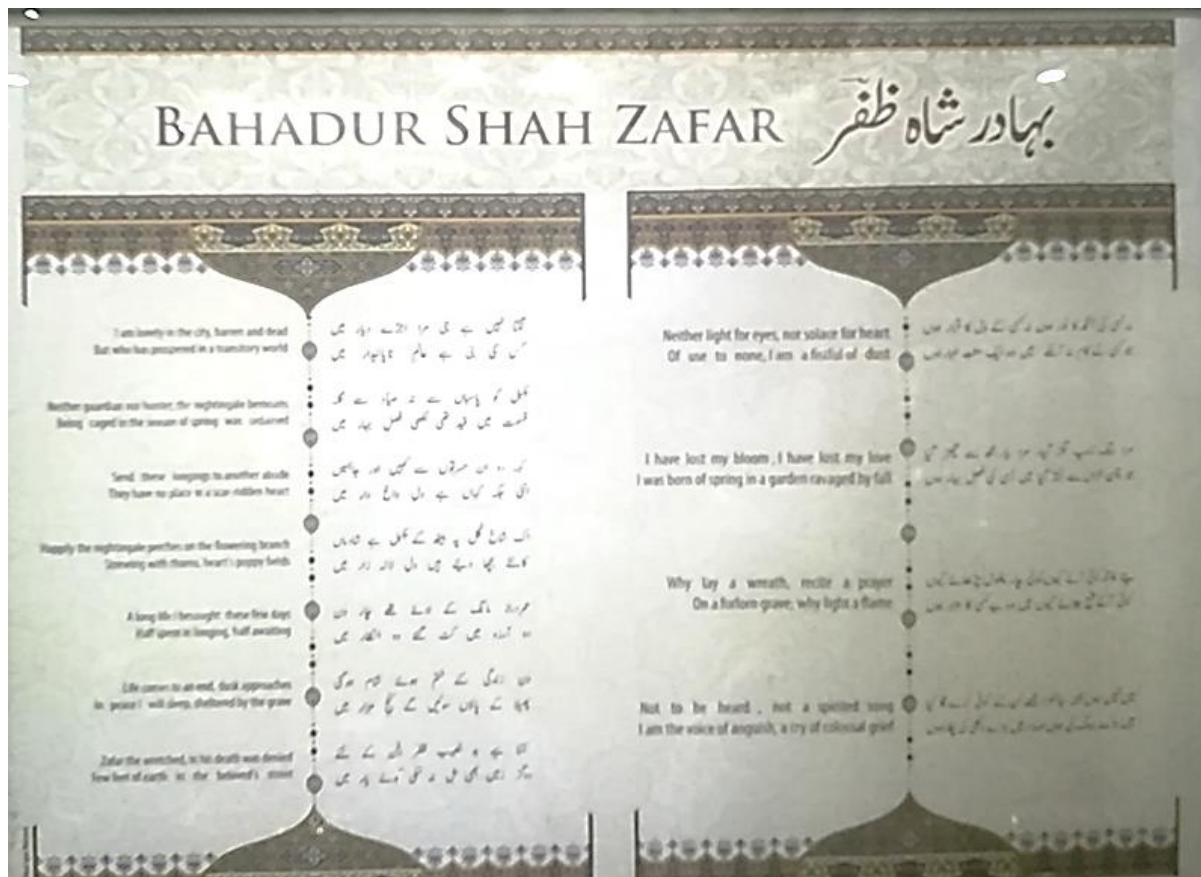
It was nearly five decades that Parsi theatre activities took place in Sri Lanka during the British colonial times.

## **Eastward**

Rangoon in Myanmar was under British rule at the time of Parsi theatre troops travelling throughout the world. The most popular theatre genre in Myanmar has been Zat Pwe which was wide spread in the populated town such as Rangoon and Mandalay during the time Parsi theatre arrived in Myanmar. The theatre road during the British time changed into Zi Wa Ka Street which has been once home to the last Mughal king of Delhi, Bahadur Shah Zafar (Hansen, 2018:29).

I witnessed personally Zafar’s tomb and the Mosque where I could meet the Ulama who provided some information on the last king, his poems, and some information of his descendants. He recited a poem put up at the wall (Figure 1). The last king has been a big fan of poems who wrote himself many poems in Urdu Language. Even today, Qawwali troops are annually and occasionally invited from Pakistan and North India to perform. This is a custom.

The musicians in Yangon do not know much about any Parsi theatre activities which have taken place in Myanmar at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, except for the nearly 80 years old Hawaiian guitar player U Thin, who could remember some performances he did with Indian musicians. He could even remember a melody or two. More significantly, Burmese musical instruments and related music repertoires are still unchanged and favored among musicians and people in addition to recently popularized foreign musical instruments and associated pop music. The Burmese harp and drum circle are two of them. Aung said that “The melodies are usually played on drum circles and we sometimes tune them in the middle of an ongoing music piece if we feel the tuning has to be adjusted according to our tunings” (Aung, 2018). A Burmese piano player played piano as if the Burmese xylophone (made of hard wood) is played, especially when playing free meter.



**Figure 1: A Ghazal poem of Bahadur Shah Zafar (photo by the author).**

Hansen (2018: 29) says that the Burmese theatre known as Zat Pwe was strong in attracting the Burmese audience of urban areas. Therefore, Parsi theatre had no chance to survive or influence due to aesthetic preferences of the Burmese audience. Hansen assumes that Parsi theatre groups have shared the same stages that were used by Zat Pwe theatre groups. Zat Pwe is confined to certain times within a year and performances were annually held for specific festivals. Outside these times, there was space for Parsi theatre in the local theatre. Hansen writes that Parsi theater

“...was home to the Jubilee Hall, a well-appointed theatre that seated nearly 800 patrons, as well as hotel ballrooms, clubs, and cabarets. Theatre, opera, ballet, and circus professionals regularly stopped in Burma on their tours out of Europe, Australia, and the United States. This terrain was also frequented by artists from India, notably the Parsi theatre companies that called around the Indian Ocean” (Hansen, 2018:7).

Even Balivala and his theatre company, the Victoria Company, travelled to the court of King Thibaw in Mandalay.

### **Southeastward**

Parsi theatre became popular in the Malay world comprising Malaya, Indonesia, today's Singapore and the many islands between these larger islands and the Malay peninsula, during the last third of the nineteenth century thus creating some imitative theatre genres such as 'Bangsawan' in Peninsula Malaya and Komedi Stamboel in Java. Many long-established cultural forms of India must have been introduced to the people in the Malay world through Parsi theatre from which hybrid cultural activities emerged. Parsi theatre favored Hindustani

music forms such as thumri, ghazal, dadara, and Hindustani folk songs in the performances. The literature provides some evidences for the adaptation of Hindustani ghazal in the Malay world through Parsi theatre activities (Meddegoda & Jähnichen 2016). There are a number of other previous studies on the impact of Parsi theatre, namely Ghulam Sarwar's theatre research papers and later Tan Sooi Beng's writings about the Malayan Bangsawan. Bangsawan can be identified as one of the successors of Parsi theatre provided that was tremendously popularized compared to other theatre genres in the Malay world deriving from Parsi theatre. As the Malay version of Parsi theatre, Bangsawan was known as Tiruan Wayang Parsi in its first fledgling stage of the development.

Braginsky and Suvorova's article (2008) "A New Wave of Indian Inspiration: Translations from Urdu in Malay Traditional Literature and Theatre", explores the nature of Malay adaptations from Urdu works such as theatre scripts and Indo-Persian stories written by Indian and Persian writers. They discuss the cultural background of Malaya in the time when these Urdu works were translated, localized, reshaped, Malayised or appropriated. The long journey of the Parsi theatre from its origin to its life in India and Malaya is elucidated in this study. The social situation in Malaya and some parts of Indonesia is described referring to extant historical accounts and Urdu adaptations such as the Hikayats, Syairs and the Parsi theatre. Some essential profiles of the authors, the impresarios and the challenges they underwent while writing, printing and staging during the British colonial period are conferred in-depth based on a good background of understanding musical migration patterns.

Cohen (2001) deliberates the Komedi Stamboel which is a theatre genre mainly thrived in Surabaya and Bhatavia in Java representing the period from mid-19th to mid-20th century. Referring to the sources, Cohen assumes that it is not only Komedi Stamboel which originated through the interaction with the Parsi theatre and Bangsawan, but there are also many other theatres which were generated from the same sources in the late nineteenth century. Providing information on theatre genres practiced in Java and Sumatra, Cohen finds similarities, interaction and contacts with the theatre genres in Peninsular Malaya. He includes relevant information referring to music used in the Parsi theatre and its offshoots and finds a musical piece known as lagu Parsi that is still performed in the repertoire of Lenong, a popular theatre genre practiced in Jakarta.

In certain areas of Southeast Asia, Parsi theatre was known as Komedi Parsi, as the term Komedi stands as a generic Malay term for entertainment (Cohen, 2001: 319). The stories performed in Parsi theatre were familiar to the people in the Malay world given the vernacular translations of these stories from Urdu works were already available in the Malay world before the Parsi theatre arrived (Van Kerckhoff, 1886: 302,303; Cohen, 2001: 319, 320). Many following studies took up some ideas from these writings yet without any profound addition to what is found in previous literature. A living source of information is Rahman B. who is still having his house in Kuala Lumpur. He was and is collecting different artifacts from his earlier times living within Bangsawan travelling troupes. Rahman B. (2012: ARCPA2064) reveals what he heard from early dramatists of Bangsawan that "Parsi Theatre is an Indian theatre that came to perform in Pulau Pinang. But a lot of people liked it because at that time there was no other entertainment. No culture, so, no entertainment. So, all people, Indians, Chinese, Malays, even rich people all came to watch. There was a time that the performance (performers) has no female, all males. But during the performance, there were females, because the male performers

dressed like females.” This and many other stories may contribute in an exciting way to get a clearer picture about globalizing times without mass media impact.

## **Conclusion**

The Idealization of an early urban theatre entertainment through travelling Parsi troupes and the following Individuation in various places of Southeast Asia is fascinating and points towards future developments. The Parsi Theatre appeared in all the described contexts as a cultural channel between South and Southeast Asia. At the same time, this cultural channel was indicating a differentiation in urban music practices that took place along important trade routes and the centres of modern power. Possibly, the speed of urbanization caused different approaches to urbanized entertainment practices as the example of Myanmar has shown.

Other interesting observations is the fragmentation taken from immigrated theatre performances such as, for example, the Malay ghazal or the application of an eclectic way in composing stage plays can prove. These facts underline the early beginnings of globally expanding performance practices that were only later reinforced through mass media.

In general, there is a misconception of the beginning globalization that is far too often associated with mass media and, explicitly, with the world wide web. These tools are contributing immensely, yet these tools were also preceded by highly developed approaches to spreading the arts and driven by economic pressure in the home regions of art production. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this movement of reducing local bonds for the benefit of reaching out to larger audiences, new performance markets, and the creation of new entertainment needs, is visible throughout the entire world. Most prominently appeared such art innovations through crossovers and adaptations in the context of urbanization and the growth of urban infrastructures even in rural areas around these complex social settlements. When discussing globalization and changes of traditions, a term that is also a product of this development, the entire flow of historical events has to be seen as the backdrop of current issues. Idealization and Individuation are only two small aspects that may support awareness of historical processes that started far earlier and will not end in any near future. In order to be prepared for coming challenges, much more aspects have to be taken up and undergo a detailed analysis while developing new methods in scrutinizing social movements connected to, expressed through, and being result of art performances.

Intense future studies may lead to a clearer picture regarding these first insights that tried to cross the border of primary comparison. It is of importance to always contextualize historical movements, musical practices and personal encounters included.

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