

Keynote Address

Arts and Reconciliation

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27 February 2018 at the Hector Kobbekaduwa Research Centre

Dear friends, I am very much thankful to Mrs Malraji from the Norwegian embassy and Mrs Kaushalya and Saumya from the Sevalanka foundation who invited me to address this occasion.

I have been invited to deliver a key note on arts practices and its impact upon peace building and reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. As it appears in my mind, I would say that the question of how performing arts can be utilized to uplift the nation building process and developing empathy between divided communities is a tough question. To me this is not a question but a hypothesis through which Governments and non-Government agencies and researchers try to grapple serious socio political issues and try to come up with possible resolutions. Today some researchers have gathered here to discuss and share their thoughts.

The heart of this hypothesis lies within the philosophical and historical question of how art can be used as a social transformational tool and how awareness and consciousness raising could be enhanced through communal practice of performing arts. Writing a wonderful chapter to her book titled *Method Meet Art*, Professor Patricia Leavey argues how arts based research can be utilized to enhance the cultural value systems and consciousness raising among human beings. Particularly in Music, many researchers have conducted research on how healing and empowerment could be cultivated through music education and practices. For instance, Daykin 2004, Malchiodi, 2005, 2012, Vaillancourt, 2009 have done ample research on the psychological and physiological healing process of music. In recent years, a multi-faceted project was initiated by Annabel Cohen including 70 researchers all around the world to investigate Inter-disciplinary research in Singing. One of the key themes of their research project was to explore the relationship between singing and wellbeing (Leavey 2015, p. 121). They have found that not only participation and listening to music can benefit and enhance the wellbeing, but further, singing can also be beneficial for psychological and social wellbeing (Clift, Nicol, Raisbeck, Whitemore, & Morrison 2010 cited in Leavey 2015, p. 122). Researchers argue that performing arts and particularly tonalities, meter and musical forms can play a key role in music as a mode of knowing. As we all know, in the Western culture, music can be written as symbolic structures and it operates as a sign system similar to a spoken language. Robert Walker argues (1992) that the

visual, symbolic forms “act as mnemonics for the physical actions necessary in the production of musical or spoken sounds” (Cited in Leavey 2015, p. 122).

Philosophers have identified the importance of music and other arts forms as developing social awareness and consciousness raising. Among them German philosopher Theodore Adorno is prominent. Adorno has taken the importance of music as a social element long before the social science identified it as a key player in social sciences and social anthropology. Adorno is a philosopher whose thinking had been highly influenced by Marx and his political economy. Adorno combines music with his Marxist analysis of political economy and explains how music as a social phenomenon can play different roles in the social milieu. He argues that music is not only a tool of raising positive responses in human agency but also can be used as shaping ‘social consciousness’ (Leavey 2015, p. 123). Yet this social consciousness can be operated in two different ways: one way seems to be that popular music propagated by the market economy can create “false consciousness”. And the other way is that music can also be operated as a tool to enhance anti-social sentiments or “altered social consciousness” and develop resistive capacities among masses (ibid, p. 123). The most important point raised here is how arts can be used or operated as a “false consciousness” in the creative industries. In this sense Adorno challenges the idea of the neutrality of arts product and its circulation in the discursive domain of the society. Arts can be beneficial and at the same time can be used as an ideology to suppress some social sectors. Compliance with Adorno, Economist Jacques Attali also argues how music can be oppressive ideological apparatus within current capitalistic social structures. According to him music sometimes operates as ‘an agent of social control’ (Leavey 2015, pp. 123-124). In our daily life various sounds and noises play a key role in developing our consciousness in different ways to perceive the outer world. Various ethno and social music are used to demarcate our social structures, hierarchies, identities and power relations. Furthermore, in different social and personal situations, Even though we perceive music as a tool of social harmony and culturally integrative tool, or in popular jargon, a universal language, it is not only oppressive in some instances, but also used in execution of power and social divisions (ibid).

The operation of “false consciousness” or the “ideology” within the practice of arts production and its utilization has been a long standing philosophical question and a difficult question to tackle. In recent years, artistes and social workers have attempted to use theatre, music, film and other arts forms in conflict resolution contexts and peace building process in countries where internal conflicts between communities have been going on as civil wars. However, the question seems to be how to cultivate empathy among communities and how various arts practices can be utilized to do so. The main assumption behind this question is that it is believed that ‘arts can bring reconciliation’ among human beings. My point is it is not an easy question to answer and this assumption is vaguely constructed within the classical literary assumption that ‘arts reflect and operates as a mirror’ reflecting human and social conditions direct or indirect ways. In that

sense, these assumptions are developed within the social structures where all the ideological assumptions are developed as a process of current practices of political economies. If we go back to the Marxist literary theory, then it is the question of form and content.

In the contemporary theatre setting, Augusto Boal's theatre practice as a social transformational tool has been widely used in many countries. In Sri Lanka, many community theatre activists, agencies and non-governmental organizations also utilize Boal's Forum mode of theatre in so called various 'community building' projects. Yet my question is that it is not an easy task to apply such theatrical or artistic practice as a political tool to upheaval social issues and transformation. In these projects what lacks is the aesthetic and philosophical basis of the theatre.

In early 19th century, under the Stalin's regime, the doctrine of social realism was theorized and all the artistes were led to produce 'social realistic literature' to cultivate the proletariat consciousness. Lenin for instance at the congress of proletariat writers in 1920, strongly stated that 'it is a literary activity which can least tolerate a mechanical egalitarianism, a domination of the minority by the majority. There is no doubt that in this domain the assurance of a rather large field of action for thought and imagination, for form and content, is absolutely essential' (Eagleton 2009, p. 39). Lenin argued the important role that arts can play in the social transformation and social development, yet ways that it can be used in such a process is a complex matter. As Terry Eagleton writes, that Tolstoy had an incorrect understanding of the future of the Russia and its social revolution but that did not prevent him producing great art (Eagleton 2009, p. 39). Now today what we attempt is new ways of finding a utilitarian ways of using arts similar to what Stalinistic sentiment operated in centuries back with the idea of 'Social Realism'. The doctrine of social realism believed the utilitarianism in arts and it was operated as a propagandist tool to create 'false consciousness', that 'arts can change the society'. What I point out here is, that I am not sure whether we as contemporary artistes, follow the same principle in manipulating artistic practices and creative outcomes through utilitarian ideology? In recent years, I have observed that many funding agencies have attempted to provide funds to develop arts projects based on ethnic harmony and community engagements. These arts projects have attempted to address direct social, cultural and political issues pertaining to Sri Lankan society and try to come up with solutions. However, conventional arts practices which deals with political, cultural or social contents seem not to be highly recognized or ignored in those funding activities. Aesthetic outcome as a means of communication and as a strong empathic tool for conscious raising has been neglected or marginalized. Rather, outcome-based artistic practices are encouraged and they are monitored, evaluated and further audited due to financial involvements. In this 'auditable arts practices', the aesthetic values and artistic intervention have been the least components to be worried about. In that sense, our neo-liberal arts practice is anti – social in its crude sense because auditable arts creates anti-thesis within its own practice.

In other words, we are going back to the 'platonic utopianism' where aesthetic sentiment is subjugated and the utilitarian arts practices are privileged and promoted.

I want to discuss another key point now in brief before I conclude my talk. As seen in the previous discussion, what we attempt to do in utilitarian or I would rather say 'auditable art' is cultivating consciousness, awareness and understanding of values pertaining to social harmony and peace building. However, we cannot forget the fact that the artist and her own practices cannot be ignored in this process. As observed so far, artistes' standpoint or her position of representation in the process of making arts is not addressed and discussed in detail. All the artistes assume that their positioning in this process is neutral and unbiased. However, I argue that we need to take the account of how the artistes create her art and what ideological position she represents during and after the creative process. We cannot forget the fact that artistes' minds are not neutrally defined or constructed; rather they are mirrors of how and in what ways contemporary social ideologies are operated and reflected. If I use a popular jargon that "arts represent the social reality", that popular jargon also applies to the author and her relationship to the work of art. So, in this text, we can say that artiste's consciousness could also be represented as a mirror through the work of art. In our society, the problem of "Other" is the core of the issue. However, as we see, arts practice and its reception is already a split and structured as binary-oppositions: Composer-listener, writer-reader, painter-perceiver, actor-spectator etc. what I argue is we cannot make a big change without restructuring these power-positioning and relationships.

In concluding, I would like to congratulate all the researchers who are going to present their research findings today. Again must thankful to Norway embassy and Seva Lanka foundation in providing me this opportunity to share my thoughts. Thank you.

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