Chapter 4

Actualizing the Abstract: A Comparative Study of Ta’ziyeh and Mudiyettu

This chapter looks at both Ta’ziyeh and Mudiyettu in an attempt at comparing the elements of both the ritual performances.

As we have seen, both Ta’ziyeh and Mudiyettu are inseparably imbedded in their contexts. These contexts are social, cultural, economical and more importantly, religious and ritualistic. They take their origins from organised, crystallised religious beliefs. So, for both these forms religious beliefs are strong driving forces. Religion, as we have seen, needs validation and reinforcement in repeated and codified performances. Here, we need to look at the two diverse sets of beliefs and religious practices that shape these two forms. While Ta’ziyeh takes its form in the monotheistic Islamic beliefs and its ancient tribal history, Mudiyettu is embedded in the multiplicity of the divine proposed by the Hindu belief system. These differences in the origin notwithstanding, the two forms show a remarkable range of similarities in performance that might take us, in the final analysis, to the universality of ritualistic folk performances.

When we say that Tazi’yeh and Mudiyettu are ‘ritualistic’, we reinforce the place of belief and religion in the performance of these forms. Here, let us remind of Schechner’s take on ritual in performance:

Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in action, encoded into actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult
transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed or violate the norms of the daily life.”

As we have amply demonstrated in the last two chapters, both Ta’zi’yeh and Mudiyettu perform the memories of specific communities. While Ta’ziyeh re-enacts the struggles within the nascent religion and reinforces the separate cultural and historical identity of the Shiyaḥs, Mudiyettu encodes the history and culture of gotras. The performance of both the forms are tightly controlled by these histories and memories and is channelized into well-defined aims of communal catharsis.

As Durkheim points out, although the thematic elements are often abstractions and ahistoric beliefs, the performance of the rituals is concrete and the performance actualises the abstract text.

Not only do they employ the same processes as the real drama, but they also pursue an end of the same sort: being foreign to all utilitarian ends, they make men forget the real world and transport them to another where their imagination is more at ease; they distract. They even go as far as to have the outward appearance of a recreation: the assistants may be seen laughing and amusing themselves openly. [...] Art is not merely an external ornament with which the cult has adorned itself in order to disseminate some of its features which may be too austere and too rude; but rather, in itself, the cult is something aesthetic.

This is the case with both Ta’ziyeh and Mudiyettu, though we will also see many variations within. Ta’ziyeh, as we have seen, claims to perform the historical battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein. But the history is often adorned with elements that are purely aimed

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at inspiring specific emotions in the audience. The marriage of Kasim, as we have seen in the second chapter, is one such muddling of historic facts. The aim here is to inspire pity in the audience. But this element of abstraction within the text is actualised in the performance as Kasim’s marriage becomes an important point of relief in the structure of performance. The scene blends to the performance and is embedded into the series of scenes that inspire sadness and anger. Here, the deviation in history is masked by the conventions of theatricality.

Mudiyettu brings out this actualisation of the abstraction more starkly. One needs to consider that the art form brings together diverse sets of legends and myths, borrowed from a variety of sources. Within each myth, there are regional variations. As we have seen in the third chapter, the legend of Bhadrakali finds different versions in the performance of Mudiyettu and in Thottampattu. The myths themselves transform through years of retelling and repeated performances. Koyinbidi Nayar’s narrative is a fine example of this. The character enters the stage and relates the social, economical and cultural milieu. He talks about the need of the performance and goes on to relate the suffering of the people and poverty gripping the land. This may have emerged as the description of the state of the world under the tyranny of Darika but as the time passes on, the character connects the legend to the world around him and the worries of his time. So, in the current performance text what we hear is the tyranny of feudal lords and the suffering of the people under their yolk. This is a fine example of the actualisation of the abstract. The transformation of Darika into feudalism is not accidental but is shaped by history and the emergence of a separate performance text that seeks to actualise the myth in real terms.

Mudiyettu bases the performance on myths and legends that hardly have historical validity. The deities itself are a combination of various traditions rather that a historically codified figure. In Kali itself, we see several traditions merging. As we have seen in the discussion
about Hindu traditions, continuous co-option and evolution are the hallmark of the traditions within the religion. So the text of the art form gets increasingly abstract in its terms and references. It is left to the performer to come up with a performance text that relates to the audience. Also, the various rituals that precede and succeed the performance make use of various theatrical conventions to actualise it. Let’s look at some of the conventions that are played out in the performance of Mudiyettu.

Stage setting and use of light and the effective use of costumes and makeup are some of the conventional elements of modern theatre which find their full use in Mudiyettu. The entry of Kali uses the distribution light to the fullest extent. The bright torches as they reflect on the bright colours of her costume produce a psychedelic effect which converts the magic into the mundane. The audience’s mind is prepared to accept and enjoy the performance as it blends into their systems of belief and everyday practices. Also, the use of makeup and costume helps in the actualisation of the performance. The entry of various characters through the audience’ pace is also another effective theatrical concept that finds its use in both Mudiyettu and Ta’zhiyeh.

We will now look at the specific religious contexts of these performances and their implications on the thematic and theatrical elements of the performance.

Islam, the context and milieu of Ta’zhiyeh, found its origins in the 7th century Arabia. It believes in the existence of one god and the Prophet who is the messenger of god’s word. Ta’zhiyeh in many ways reflects the development of the religion as an organised and structured entity and the historical process that leads to that. As we have seen in the second chapter, the art form reflects that crisis that gripped the young religion after the death of the Prophet. There were disputes within the community around the rightful successor to the Prophet and the community was divided both politically and theologically. These divisions
come to head in Hussein’s sacrifice and martyrdom in the plains of Karbala. This martyrdom forms the crux of the performance of Ta’ziyeh.

Islam, as we have seen in the first chapter, means complete “submission to god”\(^{138}\). We may see this submission to the will of god reflected in the martyrdom of Hussein. We go a step further here and can say that the ideas of submission and sacrifice shape the thematic and performative elements of Ta’ziyeh. We will further analyse this point.

Mudiyettu finds its roots in the remarkably multiple traditions within the Hindu tradition. This multiplicity of traditions, as we have seen, is the result of the willingness to co-opt various divergent sects and tribal and ethnic varieties into the vedic religion. This not a one way process but rather an exchange of kinds that leave both the streams transformed. So we need to look at each and every one of these ritual performances, including Mudiyettu, as emerging from a palimpsest of sorts. There are several layers of traditions encrypted in the performance. But in the case Mudiyettu, as in many other folk performances around the world, we can identify one basic there: The struggle of good vs evil and the eventual victory of the good. Tazhiya, as we will see, will temper this theme in accordance with the religious belief where the mortal man can never approximate the god, the symbol of the ultimate good.

Mudiyettu represents a wrathful mother, created by the gods, taking revenge on the evil incarnate for the atrocities he had committed on the common people. The good vs evil theme is amplified by investing divinity in the mother and elevating her to the status of a goddess who has to be revered and appeased. The war between the good and the evil is played out in front of the audience often making them the part of the performance.

Ta’ziyeh plays out the similar theme but with variations in the plot, that is the result of the religious belief that controls and channels the performance. Here we come back to the idea of

\(^{138}\) Islam USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts. (Usc.edu. [http://www.intute.ac.uk](http://www.intute.ac.uk) 2010-06-04)
the submission to the almighty that is celebrated by Islam. This submission is reflected in Hussein’s martyrdom and death. Yazid’s generals and huge army thwart and kill Hussein’s men and the performance represents each of these deaths with a sense of immense tragedy and impending doom. So, did the evil prevail over the good? Did the good get defeated by the might of the evil tyrant? The answer to this, as given by the performance itself, is a firm no. Here the belief system interferes to temper the thematic element of the performance. Hussein’s martyrdom is not a failure but the way to a higher and nobler end. As Hussein himself points out at the conclusion of the performance the sacrifice is aimed at the salvation of his community from the wrath of god:

Hussein tells his sister Zainab, "The helpless people of the Prophet of God have no rock of salvation to fly to for refuge except Husain. They have no advocate with God on the Day of Judgment except Husain. The way of salvation is shut against them on account of their manifold sins; and, except Husain, none can make a proper atonement or propitiation for transgression. Who could save the people of God from the wrath to come, seeing the empire of Faith has no other king, but Husain"? 139

While in Mudiyettu, the Kali herself is invested with divinity, in Tazhiya Hussein is made an agent of god, and instrument of his will. While Hinduism allows the deification of a tribal member in performance and allows his worship by the people in the duration and space of performance, the monotheistic rules of Islam forbade the deification of Hussein. Instead, the divine intervention transforms him into an instrument of god:

Gabriel arrives with the following message: "None has suffered the pain and afflictions which Husain has undergone. None has, like him, been obedient in my service. As he has taken no steps save in sincerity in all that he has done, thou [Muhammad] must put the key of paradise in his hand. The privilege of making intercession for sinners is exclusively his. Husain is, by My peculiar grace, the mediator of all" (II, 347).

While Mudiyettu allows room for the spectators to interact with the divinity, at this point remember the interactive sessions after the performance, where the Kali blesses the devotees, and allows catharsis through taking part in the killing of the evil incarnate, Ta’ziyeh tempers it to specific religious ends. Catharsis happens through identifying with the sacrifice of Hussein. Also, we need to remember that Islam does not allow visual representation of God or Prophet and it would be impossible, within the rules, for an actor to play this part. This is also reflected in the makeup of the actors in performance. Makeup is minimal to a point where from the distance audience can barely see the faces of the actors clearly. The faces of Imam Hussein and his family are never shown. It is *Haraam* (forbidden) and not recommended to impersonate the Prophet and Imams. But others outside the family and evil characters have clear made-up faces.

Now, we move on to the actual performance of these two forms and see where they converge and if there are huge divergences.

The performative elements of Mudiyettu is divided into eight episodes: The dialogue between Shiva and Narada, Darika’s entry, Bhadrakali’s entry, Koinbida Nayar’s entry, Kuli’s entry, The dialogue between Kali and Darika in which Darika disappears and Kali reaches a trance, 

*Mudiyetukkal* which precedes the actual killing of Daruka and removal of the crown and the sacrifice. These episodes are meant to heighten the dramatic element in the performance.

After the first three episodes, the entry of Nayar changes the tenor and tone of the performance. Till this point the performance was progressing in a linear fashion and taking the audience along, often with their active participation. Nayar breaks this linearity of the narrative and takes the audience back to the present. His narrative is a kind of metaperformance, a performance about the performance. This is, as Schechner points out, a “metacommunication”. “Metacommunication is a signal that tells receivers how to interpret the communication they are receiving.”

Nayar discusses the state of the world and the suffering poor around the country and the tyranny of the feudal lords. As we have discussed earlier, this might have originally been the discussion of the state of the world under the tyranny of Drika. Along with that, Nayar also discusses the performance that is underway. Through his interaction with the musicians, he reveals why the performance is being held, and reveals that Kali is seeking to end the tyranny of Darika. This suddenly alienates the audience from the performance and the theatricality and the ‘made-up-ness’ of the entire performance is revealed. One is here reminded of the alienation technique employed by Bertold Brecht. Before further explaining the Brechtian technique, let’s find a parallel to it in Ta’ziyeh.

Towards the end of the Ta’ziyeh performance, we see a similar kind of metaperformance. After the resurrection of Hussein we come to the section where we learn the reason for the very existence of the performance. In this section, we hear Hussein justifying his sacrifice and he says that his martyrdom was the only way the suffering of the people could be put to an end. He was the only one who could save the people from the wrath of god. So in a way

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Ta’ziyeh, while celebrating the martyrdom of Hussein, and also reminds the people that they have sinned and Hussein had died for them:

This issue of pre-destination versus free will was itself magnified due to the tragedy of Karbala because of the questions which it raised in the minds of the umma. Do not forget that the people who committed the atrocities against Imam Hussein were themselves Muslims who believed in Towhid (worship Allah) and another life and said their prayers and made their fasts. How could they behead the person whom their own Prophet would place on his lap and kiss as a child, and not feel guilt? How could they justify having stripped naked and trampled with horses the body of the man called the "Chief of the Youths of Heaven"? After realizing what they had done, how could they have not revolted against Yazid?142

Here again we see the linearity of the narrative. And the audience move from the cathartic phase to an alienation phase. Now, this discussion will not be complete without a discussion of Brecht’s alienation technique.

Brecht’s alienation technique disturbs the familiar concepts of theatricality. Till then, the plot, dialogue and the characters were designed in such a way that the audience were taken along the progression of the play. The theatricality, designed according to the conventional modes of performance, tried to hide behind the veneer of a plot. The audience were encouraged to believe in the authenticity of the plot and the characters. Brecht disturbed these notions by highlighting the theatricality. He addressed the audience and, in a sense, told them that what they were watching was a play and not life. The theatricality of the entire process was highlighted using body movements, sparse settings and by disturbing the plot. This technique

was highly political and was designed to convey ideas rather than stories. The audience was asked to connect to the performance and see what their responses were to the questions raised by the performance. It was mode of disseminating ideas. The aim was, as John Willet points out,

[To] show everything in a fresh and unfamiliar light, so that the spectator is brought to look critically even at what he has so far taken for granted [...] In fact, it is not simply the breaking of illusion (though that is one means to the end); and it does not mean “alienating” the spectator in the sense of making him hostile to the play. It is a matter of detachment, of reorientation: exactly what [Percy Bysshe] Shelley (1792-1822) meant when he wrote that poetry “makes familiar objects to be as if they were not familiar”, or [Arthur] Schopenhauer (1788-1860) when he claimed that art must show “common objects of experience in a light that is at once clear and unfamiliar.”

Alienation effect is probably one of the most important aspects of Brecht’s epic theatre. As Lellis has pointed out,

The playwright and stage director must make the event strange [and wrench] it out of a credible, naturalistic context and produce an effect of heightened theatricality whereby the audience remain constantly aware of the theatrical illusions being represented before him. The purpose of this is [...] to produce observation and criticism of the social process that the audience might take for granted.144

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The performance becomes a discussion of societal issues with the audience taking part in it. Brecht prompts the spectator to justify or abolish these conditions according to what class he belongs to. The technique uses a variety of means to achieve this. The means include the use of placards and verbal headings, music in contrast to the text, and the use of non realistic, geometric grouping of actors on stage.

In this alienation effect, the performer stands outside the performance to interrogate the plot disturbing the spectators out of their cathartic reverie. This is aimed at making the performance a vehicle of social change. The performance is opened to historical intervention and involvement from the part of the audience. The spectator can no longer think that he/she is just watching just a play. He/she is made aware that they are expected to think and understand. And a new category of spect-actor emerges:

In order to understand the poetics of the oppressed one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people — “spectators,” passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon — into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. [...] This spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. [...] It is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined.\footnote{Boal ,Augusto.\textit{Theatre of the Oppressed} (New York:Theatre Communications Group, 1985) 122-138}
This is not to say that the parallels with the folk performances can be stretched to a level to argue that they seek social change. In fact, as we will see later, these performances keep the social crisis and interrogation at bay. My attempt here is to prove that these performances do allow a space where this interrogation can safely played out. Stretching this further, one can say that this is exactly the way these performances contain social crisis.

The parallel with alienation technique is more evidently seen in the case of Mudiyettu, perhaps. In both the art forms, the break in the narration and the apparent alienation are used to ask people certain important questions. The character of Nayar talks to the audience about the suffering of the people. Take a look at his activities.

Nayar is a relief from the ritual intensity. At the same time, he has the performance of a storyteller. He talks about the time of feudalism and relates the misdeeds of the feudal lords, poverty, the sorry state of affairs in temples and such problems\textsuperscript{146}.

Nayar has the role of a clown. Through dialogues that border on the absurd, he engages in social criticism\textsuperscript{147}.

When he relates to the suffering of the poor under feudalism, he is actually standing outside the mythical landscape of the actual performance. He is talking about the intent of the play while also describing the content. The effect is to inspire the audience into a participation that goes beyond the mere act of devotional submission to the deity.

Shehriari finds out a very interesting parallel to Nayar in the modern performances of Ta’ziyeh.

\textsuperscript{146} Rajagopalan. C.R, Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 35

\textsuperscript{147} Rajagopalan. C.R, Mudiyettu:Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 74
Secular storytelling in tea houses in Iran is still a popular profession, specifically in small cities and villages, and it seems to have been greatly influenced by these religious storytellers. These contemporary secular storytellers sometimes change their costumes according to the characters, and carry some props, such as a stick representing the sword in the play of the ancient myths. They may also suddenly stop telling the story and open themselves up to their listeners/spectators to share their feelings about the characters or even the story they are telling. In these moments they speak to their spectators directly not as a character but as a human – as themselves. In all these cases, the storytellers are in different worlds simultaneously: the actual world or in real life, as themselves, and in the characters’ fictional worlds. In other words they travel between the world of the characters and themselves.\textsuperscript{148}

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, \textit{Taziyeh} had reached its peak in the nineteenth century. Hundreds of professional groups existed by then and each of them had their own versions of particular episodes or stories developed according to peculiar talents and creativity. But these differences shared the feature of being developed on stage on the basis of the participation of the audience. Even the characters were shaped according to the desire of the people and the representation’s goal of making the people a unique body.

Now, in the case of Ta’ziyeh one should be careful while applying the parallel. The revelations made by Hussein are an indictment of his community and it inspires them into an act of self-interrogation. By celebrating the martyrdom, they are also making themselves aware of their guilt. As Shehriari explains it, “Do not forget that the people who committed

\textsuperscript{148} Shahriari, Khursow. \textit{Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers}. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.
the atrocities against Imam Hussein were themselves Muslims. How could they behead the person whom their own Prophet would place on his lap and kiss as a child, and not feel guilt?"\textsuperscript{149} This is, as we can see, an act of self-interrogation. This self-interrogation precedes the catharsis. The guilt is expiated in the act of penance demonstrated in the Muharram procession. So, in this reading, the penance is inspired as much by the sense of guilt as it is by the sorrow at Hussein’s martyrdom.

Now we come to the most important element of both these art forms: the involvement of the spectators in the performance. Here, we set out the study by first differentiating between ‘audience’ and ‘spectators’. As Patrice Pavis points out, “The audience is not simply the sum of spectators, it does not obey the same laws as individual psychology; and this authorises our dealing separately with spectator and audience.”\textsuperscript{150} And,

\begin{quote}
Compose of individual (and often individualist) spectators, the audience become a body thoughts and desires and of a sensitive listening that latches on to the actors. It comprises a material body that is very difficult to examine and very easy to disturb: “collective attention creates a magnetic field—if one breaks it, the theatre action becomes derisory, absurd.” The presence of a single spectator can compromise this magnetic field\textsuperscript{151}.
\end{quote}

In both Ta’ziyeh and Mudiyettu, we deal with this multitude of audience—spectators. It is to their collective consciousness that these art forms interact. It is this collectivity that responds to the performance.

\textsuperscript{149} Khosrow, Shahriari. \textit{Iranian Theater} (Tehran: Amir Kabir Press, 1992) 231
First, let’s look at the performance of Mudiyettu and the ways in which it seeks to involve the audience.

The spectators of the folk theatre are not like the audience of the modern theatre. They are no aficionados. The spectators of Mudiyettu are devotees, those who make offerings and organisers. They will be readying themselves to view the spectacle days before the performance. They also have the experience of watching the performances over the years and have the knowledge of the associated rituals. They are no lifeless audience. [...] They have an active participation in the performance. They are fulfilling a social responsibility. The performance, as the yearly festival of the village, will have the presence of families and relatives 152.

The performance makes use of the performance space to heighten the participation of the spectators. Mudiyettu does not use a special stage. The entire temple is a stage. So the entire space where the spectators gather become the space of performance, reducing the distance between the performers and the spectators. The characters are positioned in such a way that they are constantly interacting with the spectators. The character of Kuli is a fine example of this strategic positioning.

Kuli can enter from any corner of the temple. The entry is announced using specific rhythms and songs. When it is announce, young men and children take up sticks and brooms and start chasing Kuli. When they approach, Kuli tells them her identity and asks them for her mother. She then goes near the women in the audience and looks for her mother among them. She even picks out some women and calls them mother. This is a point where the spectators become involved. When she realises that the mother is not among the women, the spectators

152 Rajagopalan, C.R, Mudiyettu: Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur: Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 40
accompanies her in her search for mother. In between, because of the comic element of her performance, people ask her several questions. She gives prompt and funny answers. There is a comic repartee in progress when suddenly she runs into the spectators following her. She picks out a man or a woman and calls him/her her son/daughter. People try to escape. This is performed like a game with the active involvement of the audience. This is an example of heightened spectator involvement. They become performers.

In another instance, Dariks tries to run into the spectators crowd to escape from Kali and Kali follows him into the crowd. But in this case, unlike in the case of Kuli, the spectators are taken over by the hatred and fear for Darika as well as the awe for Kali. In all these case, the spectators go beyond the spectatorial duties and become performers. And these are spontaneous reactions to the situations and none of this preplanned. Another performative text emerges from the interactions between the actors and the spectators.

Ta’ziyeh follows the same pattern of spectator involvement in its performance. The structure of the Tekiah and the use of the pace by the performers are important to this spectator participation, as we have pointed out in the second chapter. Peter Chelkowsky, as we discussed in the second chapter, points to the performance of the Ta'ziyeh play called "The Marriage of Kasim" as an example of heightened spectator participation. This part of the play, Chelkowsky points out, also acts as the dynamics of the interaction between the audience and the actors and the performers use of the Tekieh. Actors and the audience together make preparations for the marriage. The preparations are being made on the central stage and in the area surrounding it. During the wedding, the actors distribute goodies among the audience. The party is disturbed by the appearance of Ali Akbar’s lone horse from behind the audience. Both the actor and the audience come to a standstill. Kasim proceeds to the battlefield behind the audience and comes back leading the procession carrying Ali Akbar’s dead body through the audience. The whole audience rises to its feet and weeps. And since it
is a custom that everyone should help in carrying the dead body, the audience also take part in this funeral procession. Those who are at the far end will stretch their hands towards the direction to symbolically indicate their participation. As we notice, in the entire process the audience has a dual role: "They are both on the plains of Kerbala, symbolically representing the forces surrounding Hussein and his followers, and simultaneously in the present-day world, mourning because of the event." 153

In the case of both the art forms, the performance finds its meaning in the participation of the spectators. Moreover, this participation leads to the crystallization of the social relationships in repeated performances. As Erving Goffman points out,

> A “performance” may be defined as all the activities of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. […] When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise: defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or an audience of the same persons 154.

This spontaneity of ritual performances is pointed out by Victor Turner:

> Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performance. […] A performance is a dialectic of “flow”, that is, spontaneous movement in which the action and awareness are one, and


“reflexivity”, in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen “in action,” as they shape and explain behaviour. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another’s performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.\textsuperscript{155}

This active participation of the spectators also demand improvised reactions from the actor. This leads us to the question of how much room does a ritual performance allow the performers to improvise?

Strictly speaking, performing rituals is not “acting” at all in the theatrical sense. The doer is not performing but acting. It is not acting because most rituals involve no impersonation. [...] Persons performing rituals do prescribed actions, wear designated costumes, and in other ways enact highly codified behaviours. [...] the virtuosity of the performer as a stage presence is not highly prized in itself as it is in theatre. [...] In rituals, the meaning and consequence of the ritual action as authenticated by the presence of the actual person enabled to enact the ritual are what count.\textsuperscript{156}

But the folk ritualistic performances like Mudiyettu do leave the space for improvisation:

Although Mudiyettu has a text of its own, the performers evolve a performance text in each performance. This performance text varies in each performance. The liveliness of the performance depends on the virtuosity of


the performer and the level of involvement on the part of the spectators. All
performers have the liberty of improvisation and the authority of the text is
limited\textsuperscript{157}.

This shows that there is room for improvisation within the codified acting styles prescribed
by rituals, at least there is in the case of Mudiyettu. This possibility is called “de-formation”
by Patrice Pavis: This de-formation is not the elimination of the traditional form, but a
reformation into another kind of gesture, inspired by the tradition and which prepares for the
next stages of re-elaboration\textsuperscript{158}. This de-formation does not slip into obscurity as the codes
are well known to the receivers. They do not find it difficult to comprehend and enjoy the
improvisation as they decode the new messages without difficulty. They have the experience
of watching the performative codes over a long period of time.

Whenever improvisation is a performative strategy in ritual, it places rituals
squarely within the domain of play. It is indeed the playing, the improvising,
that engages people, drawing them into the action, constructing their
relationships, thereby generating multiple and simultaneous discourses always
surging between harmony/disharmony, order/disorder, integration/opposition
and so on\textsuperscript{159}.

The interaction between the performers and the spectators can also be seen in terms of the
idea of environmental theatre. The concept of environmental theatre involves reducing the
distance between the spectators and the performers. It refers to the use of space concretely
and organically.

\textsuperscript{157} Rajagopalan, C.R, Mudiyettu: Nadodi Nerarangu (Trichur:Centre for IK/folklore Studies, 2003) 40
\textsuperscript{158} Pavis, Patrice. Dancing With Faust: A Semiotician’s Reflections on Barba’s Intercultural Mise-En-Scene
(TDR: The Drama Review 33 no.3:1989) 39-40
\textsuperscript{159} Drewal, Margaret Thomson. Yoruba Ritual (Bloomington: Indiana University Press.1992) 7-8
Environmental theatre can be defined as a performance which can only be done in a particular place or site. The physical constraints and characteristics of the site are used as part of the performance. One of the greatest dramatic opportunities of site-specific theatre is that, by staging its action in appropriate real-world settings rather than in emulations of those settings within traditional theatre spaces, it may invest its performances with greater authenticity and audience engagement\textsuperscript{160}. A secondary definition of environmental theatre is used to describe any production that attempts to immerse the audience in the performance by bringing the action off the stage area.

Modern theatre, as Schechner points out, demands a uniform response from the audience while clearly segregating the audience from the performers. Possibly the development of a theatre as special place which can accommodate many different kinds of performance is styled to urban cultures where space is expensive and must be clearly marked out for uses\textsuperscript{161}.

But in the rural landscape where Mudiyettu takes place, these space constraints dissolve. The performers use the entire space around the temple for performance. Although the main action takes place in front of the sacred lamp lighted of the temples, the scenes of war, \textit{kudiyattam}, and entries can take place from any corner of the temple. The stage also encompasses the audience. The performance transforms the entire temple compound into a stage and using environmental acting they create the atmosphere of an ancient nature theatre. The properties and even costumes go with this natural setting. The stage also encompasses are all the trees, shrubs, walls and fields. So the stage for Mudiyettu is an open space. Pavis’s idea of this openness of the space can be read with this: Pavis deduces equations between the space and temporal settings of a performance:

\textsuperscript{160} Environmental Theatre. www.wikipedia.com.08-12-2009
According to this equation, “open + infinite = open space, infinite time”. As Pavis points out, when we have an open space for performance; it also can contain the possibility of infinite temporal setting. This analysis suits the performance of Mudiyettu as the performance also takes place based on a myth that occupies a time frame that approaches the infinite.

But Ta’ziyeh presents a similar equation of space. Ta’hziyeh began as street performances. But the contemporary performances are held in a special structure called Tekieh. But this structure is also, usually, an open air space. So the equation of open space and infinite time can be applied in this case too. Although the performance is based on a definite historical event, there is muddling of history in the actual performance, as we have seen earlier. This special and temporal setting can also help in erasing these historical slips, going by Pavis’s equation.

In the contemporary performance of Ta’ziyeh, Tekieh has gone through special variations. It has been adapted into houses and places. This special transfer of performance may interrupt

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in the communication of all the codes to the receiver. Tekieh may also be constructed to accommodate large crowds and live animals as in many scenes dozens of players come on horseback and with real weapons. The monarchs and the well-to-do built Tekieh, as a religious service. Some of them could accommodate thousands. The space is specially structured to help the performance.

There are contemporary variations of setting and even theme (there is now the happy Ta’zieh performed during marriages and birthday celebrations) may interrupt with the reception of specific codes. And we need to ask how effective and authentic these performances are. The same is happening with Mudiyettu, as in the case of many other ritualistic folk performances which have found global audience and inter-cultural spaces of performance. Forms like Mudiyettu are nowadays taken out of their traditional ritualistic setting and performed for academic and tourist purposes. All these art forms have their roots in myths and legends and a religious belief system that has embedded its codes on the performance and its reception. These myths and beliefs are bound to specific cultures. And the performance seeks to communicate to the members of that specific cultural background. These codes are context specific and find its complete expression in the traditional spaces of performance. So do they succeed in transferring the codes when they are taken out of their traditional contexts? Do the receivers in a cross-cultural setting comprehend these codes? This debate has to be seen in the context of the current discussions on inter-cultural performances around the world.

Although, the religious strictures do not allow an extremely involved improvisation from the part of the actors, as some studies have revealed, Ta’ziyeh still leaves space for improvised acting.

Ta’ziyeh encourages the audience to relive the past. And it creates a stylised atmosphere to create this effect. The actors have to bridge the borders and gaps in time and cover up
historical slippages. And all that is achieved through an involved performance that helps overcome these gaps. As Sheriari points out,

No barrier between acting and non-acting in this theatre can be imagined. It is where acting and life become one, where the depths of the contemporary world are revealed to both spectators and actors as they are put in a real situation and are compelled to react. This situation releases an enormous amount of energy from the actors/spectators. Their interference in the performance or their reactions cannot be predicted and controlled.\footnote{Shahriari, Khursow. \textit{Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers.} A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.}

At the height of their identification with the tragedy at Karbala, the actors and spectators may respond to their own most interior voices and react even in irrational ways. There are even records of killing another actor who paradoxically is playing the victim role, although logically others should sympathize with him and not kill him.\footnote{Morier, James, 1812, \textit{A Journey Through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople in the Years 1808 and 1809}, Paternoster-Row, London.}

Shehriari paints the picture of the great oustad or the master of the performance. He is not only the master of the actors and the director of the performance but also the master of the audience. He is the one who draws together the complicated lines between the stage and auditorium or between the actors and spectators. He could even have a grip over the emotional response that the spectators give to the performances. He is the cornerstone of the relationship among the actors, the characters they represent and the spectators who respond to the performance. He trains the actors and instructs them in how to get into the skin of the characters. His attempts are aimed at achieving the union of the actors and characters and the spectators and the actors.
The master has an important role in helping spectators forge in response to the performance. In addition to allowing actors to improvise their parts, he directs the audience to various responses. They respond to him and start singing, dancing or crying when he gives them a hint, and the whole theatre turns silent in a minute when they receive his signal.

He is, indeed, at the centre of a circle, defining the radius between actor, character and spectator. Standing at the very heart of the drama with absolute power, he is there to join all the complex and contradictory images played on the stage, in order to unite and bring together the most important elements in the theatre – actor and spectator – and to exceed all the boundaries in a perfect, absolute and united picture, called theatre. He plots the beginning and the end of the entire dramatic action. He signals changes in the direction of an action or puts an end to a scene or starts a new act. He is everywhere while he is also strangely ignored.\(^{165}\)

The actors communicate freely with the audience. As Shehriar points out,

Actors are on the stage to express and share their experiences and emotion, on the one hand by acting a character, and on the other by sharing a character’s experience and emotion in the process of acting him/her. It is through this intricate web of sharing experience and emotion, and not through the Brechtian style of alienation, that a *taziyeh* actor achieves self-alienation. An actor can stop playing a character for many reasons, including:

- to show his emotions as an actor/spectator in present/contemporary time (as when he cries, laughs or beats his chest in mourning)

\(^{165}\) Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.
• to sympathize with the character he is playing

• to sympathize with the other character/characters, as a fictional character in the past

• to ‘be himself’, when he sits smoking or takes tea or talks to a friend while waiting for his turn to act.\[^{166}\]

The performance rises to a level where spectators may even beat the actors who are playing the role of soldiers and throw stones at the actor who is playing a protagonist such as Shimr. They sigh, groan and show their anger as the situations arise. Their physical proximity with the players because of the particular structure of the Tekieh adds to the spontaneity of their reactions.

The spontaneity of the spectator reactions rises to a stage where it even becomes impossible to control them. In big Tekiehs which house thousands of spectators it becomes riotous and uncontrollable. When a character sings, the wave of responses from the spectators gradually flows throughout the entire theatre. The master does control the responses. But is becomes uncontrollable in the later stages of the performance when twenty thousand people start dancing or singing. It is this spontaneous spectator reaction that enlivens the art form.

Perhaps, Pelly sums it up in the most effective way:

_Taziyeh_ is singular in its intolerable length; in the fact of the representation of it extending over many days; in its marvellous effects upon a Mussulman [Muslim] audience, both male and female; in the curious mixture of hyperbole

\[^{166}\] Shahriari, Khursow. _Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers_. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.
and archaic simplicity of language; and in the circumstance that the so-called
unities of the time and space are not only ignored, but abolished.\textsuperscript{167}

As we have seen in the case of Mudiyettu, the performer who plays the role of Kali often
goes into a trance in playing out the divine. Trance acting is a characteristic feature of
ritualistic folk performances. “It occurs when performers are taken over, or “possessed” by
non-human beings—gods, spirits, demons, animals or objects.”\textsuperscript{168}

Trance acting is the opposite of the Brechtian acting. Brecht asked actors to
maintain a critical distance from their roles. He wanted actors at one moment
to be in character and at the next to step outside the role and comment on the
social situation of the character and the action. For Brecht, the ability to
choose to control history in its small details, was very decisive. He wanted
actors and audiences to practice a consciously politically engaged relationship
to the drama. In trance acting, the actor has little or no agency. The trancer is
“taken over”—sometimes willingly, sometimes forcibly—by beings and/or
forces more powerful than the performer. Trance performing is so widespread
and popular because it provides actors and spectators alike an extraordinarily
powerful “total theatre” experience. People enjoy giving over surrendering to
all-powerful forces, melding into the community, congregation, or crowd\textsuperscript{169}.

This definition of trance acting gives us a new entry point to analyse the performances of
Mudiyettu and Ta’ziyeh. Brecht’s alienation does not happen at the level of the performer in
the case of ritualistic folk performances. It happens in the total performances. Ta’ziyeh,

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
which follows strict rules of Islamic religion, has a performance that is well-controlled. There is no scope for trance acting here.

In the case of Mudiyettu, trance acting has an important role in the performance of the role of Kali. At various points of the performance, Kali slips into a state of trance. And the singers and musicians have to make her cool off.

Figure 12 Trance acting in Mudiyettu: Kali in trance

In the case of Mudiyettu, Schechner’s description of trance acting becomes relevant. The performer is taken over by the divine and in the state of trance the performer inspires awe and respect among the spectators. In the state of trance the performer approximates to the divine and he continues to be in this state even when he interacts with the spectators. As Schechner points out this trance acting provides the spectators with a total theatre experience. In the case of Ta’ziyeh, the performance takes the spectators to a state of trance and it culminates in catharsis. And we move on to the idea of catharsis.
Catharsis or katharsis (Ancient Greek: Κάθαρσις) is a Greek word meaning "cleansing" or "purging". It is derived from the infinitive verb of Ancient Greek: καθαίρειν transliterated as kathairein "to purify, purge," and adjective Ancient Greek: καθαρός katharos "pure or clean."

Catharsis is the emotional cleansing of the audience and/or characters in the play. It results from strong feelings of awe, sorrow or laughter. This aims at purifying the audience or the characters of the same feeling. Terms like restoration, renewal and revitalization are also used to denote the idea of catharsis.

The idea of catharsis was first used by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in Poetics. He referred to the sensation or literary effect that would help in providing the cathartic effect. He had previously used the term in its medical sense, referring to the evacuation of the "katamenia", the menstrual fluid or other reproductive material. Before Poetics, the term was a purely medical term. Catharsis can be seen as purification, an experience that brings pity and fear into their proper balance.

Ta’ziyeh has strong cathartic effect on the spectators. As we have noted earlier, it takes them to a state of trance and then release of powerful emotions. As Chelkowsky’s analysis of the Ta’ziyeh scenes have noted, the audience is there for the ritual catharsis. The process of watching the performance ends in the audience completely identifying with the tragedy of Karbala.

Taziyeh, a passion play depicting the Muharram tragedy, was developed, in which the people were not passive spectators, but provided the emotional response, weeping and beating their breasts, and joining their own sorrows to the suffering of Imam Hussein. The rituals provided an important safety valve. As they moaned, slapped their foreheads, and wept uncontrollably, the audience aroused in themselves that yearning for justice, who is at the heart of
piety, asking him or her why the good always seemed to suffer and evil nearly always prevailed\textsuperscript{170}.

As we have noted in the second chapter, the performance of Ta’ziyeh reaffirms the community members’ sense of belonging. The history that is presented is that of their ancestors, it is presented as their history and the performance itself demands their participation as players. And at the end the entire audience is united in communal grieving and they go away as one. This brings us to the important social function of the performance of folk ritualistic performances.

The ritualistic folk performances have important social functions to play. As we have noted in the analysis of Ta’ziyeh and Mudiyettu, these performances breed the idea of community into the members of the community members. And we should not forget the fact that the viewing of these performances is a community affair. Victor Turner discusses the characteristic developmental relationship from ritual to theatre, and lays out the relationship of both to “social drama”. He argued that “every major socio-economic formation has its dominant form of cultural-aesthetic ‘mirror’ in which it achieves a certain degree of self-reflexivity.”\textsuperscript{171}

These considerations ... led Barbara Myerhoff (1978:22) to distinguish “definitional ceremonies” as a kind of collective “autobiography”, a means by which a group creates its identity by telling itself a story about itself, in the course of which it brings to life “its Definite and Determinate Identity” (to sight William Blake). Here, meaning, in Wilhelm Dilchey’s sense, is engendered by marrying present problems of the living present to the rich ethnic past, which is then infused them into the “doings and understandings”

\textsuperscript{170} Hasan Sojodi , \textit{Taziyeh in Iran}, (Tehran: Ghatreh Publication, 2006) 36
\textsuperscript{171} Schehner, Richard and Willa Appel. Ed. \textit{By Means Of Performance}
(to quote John Dewey) of the local community. Some social dramas may be more “definitorial” that others, it is true, but more social drama contain, if only implicitly, some means of public reflexivity in their redressive processes. For by their activation groups take stock of their own current situation: the nature and strength of their social ties, the power of their symbols, the effectiveness of their legal and moral controls, the sacredness and soundness of their religious traditions, and so forth.

Thus these performances are part of the social project of connecting the present with the past and the larger project of writing the autobiography of community. In repeated and ritualised performances, these art forms give the community its identity and its sense of belonging. They mask the social crisis and give the sense and appearance of harmony to the community.

We conclude this analysis with the words of Turner that celebrates the ritual performances and their multicoloured, multifaceted possibilities.

Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted system of preindustrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos, interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and solemnity, and uses all the sensory codes, to produce symphonies in more than music: the intertwining of dance, body languages of many kinds, song, chant, architectural forms (temples, amphitheatres), incense, burnt offerings, ritualized feasting and drinking, painting, body painting, body marking of many kinds, including circumcision and scarification, the applications of

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lotions and drinking of portions, the enacting of mythic and heroic plots drawn from oral traditions\textsuperscript{173}.