



Performance and Orality: Aesthetics of Disability in Folk Theatre of Haryana

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Abstract

The purpose of this contribution is to investigate the aesthetic of disability in the folk theatre of Haryana, a northern state of India. Though, Folk theatre, aesthetic and disability are different grasslands of research, discussion, and debate. The earlier is to provide the space for the performative activities in general whereas the latter is to reflect the condition of a particular object of aesthetic which is disabled in self. Disability, the state of being disabled, can be treated in common ways. It does not only refer to those who are unable to make use of part of their body due to injuries, diseases, or unfortunate incidents. In today's digital world, it has been seen that predominantly human activities are being controlled by the rapid advancement of digital space; for instance, social media platforms are the finest embodiments in this category. One can think over that a little recess or obstacle in the smooth movement of such higher priorities can make us disabled in all our networks both physically and intellectually. Such uncontrolled situation may also be argued under the spectrum of disability. Therefore, the visuals of aesthetic disability can be explored in various sectors of social milieus.

The examination of aesthetic disability, usually, in folk theatre is an abandoned curiosity. Recently, the subject of disability has attracted the attention of many scholars, critics, and theatre performers. The theatre of Haryana is not an exception to this apprehension. The theatrical performances of the region commonly deal with socio-cultural theme, subject of myth, political concerns, and local interests. To discover the range of aesthetic disability in various contexts, this effort produces a new affair with the folk theatre of this particular region. Therefore, the author of this research paper endeavours to provide an inclusive sight of the concerned stuff in a dynamic and critical way.

Keywords: *Disability, Folk Theatre, Performance, Culture, and Aesthetic.*

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The term “aesthetic” has been used to designate an experience, the quality of an object, a feeling of pleasure, classicism in art, a judgment of taste, the capacity of perception, a value, an attitude, the theory of art, the doctrine of beauty, a state of the spirit, contemplative receptivity, an emotion, an intention, a way of life, the faculty of sensibility, a branch of philosophy, a type of subjectivity, the merit of certain forms, or an act of expression ... It deals with the qualities of the object, the qualities of an act, or the analysis of a social practice such as art, and even of a certain period or style of that practice. (p.3)

-Katya Mandoki

Introduction

In literature the idea of ‘disability’ and ‘aesthetics’ can be defined in many ways as their new affair with folkloric practices is very thought-provoking. The aesthetic representation of disability in folk theatre is a unique challenge. Folk theatre encompasses a range of artistic elements and cultural expressions found in traditional and community-based theatrical performances. This folk art reflects the cultural heritage, beliefs, customs, and values of a particular community or region. The art of Folk theatre often emerges from oral traditions passed down through generations. The stories, myths, legends, and folklore of a community are re-enacted through theatrical performances, preserving cultural heritage and promoting communal bonding. It tends to emphasize simplicity and authenticity in cultural performances. Costumes, props, and sets are often modest and handmade, reflecting the resources and craftsmanship available within the community. Folk theatre frequently involves active participation from the community. Performers may be drawn from local talent, and audience members may interact with the performers, blurring the boundaries between spectators and actors. The role of music and sound is very vital in theatrical performances. The melodious tune of musical composition always attracts the attention of audiences. It is essential to argue that folk artists always attempt to use folk instruments for their events. One can say that music and rhythm play a dynamic role in such type of theatre. Traditional instruments, vocalizations, chants, and songs are used to create atmosphere, convey emotions, and enhance storytelling. The music often reflects the cultural traditions and musical styles of the community.



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In his *Foundation of Indian Aesthetics*, Vidya Niwas Misra, a renowned author, states that “Indian perception of art has a real significance and relevance to modern day life because it is of the nature of a global universal perception of the nature of transcending boundaries of nations, of histories, of racial histories and of racial memories” (149). Folk theatre often incorporates symbolic elements and ritualistic practices that hold significance within the community. Symbolic gestures, dances, and rituals may be performed to commemorate historical events, celebrate festivals, or invoke blessings. The narrative structure of folk theatre is often episodic, featuring a series of interconnected scenes or episodes that unfold over time. These narratives may draw upon familiar themes, archetypes, and characters from the community's collective consciousness. Folk theatre is adaptable and constantly evolving, responding to changes within the community and broader societal contexts. While rooted in tradition, folk theatre may incorporate contemporary themes, techniques, and influences, reflecting ongoing cultural dynamics. Many folk theatrical traditions are steeped in spirituality, mythology, and religious symbolism. Performances may explore themes of cosmic order, moral teachings, and the interplay between humans, gods, and supernatural beings. The aesthetics of folk theatre vary widely across regions and cultures, reflecting the diverse histories, languages, and traditions of different communities. Each folk theatrical tradition has its own unique aesthetic sensibilities and performance conventions. The aesthetics of folk theatre encompass a rich tapestry of cultural expressions, storytelling traditions, and communal rituals that reflect the values, beliefs, and identities of diverse communities around the world.

Aesthetics in disability refers to the exploration and appreciation of beauty, creativity, and expression within the context of disability. It encompasses various aspects, including visual arts, literature, performance, fashion, and design, that challenge traditional norms and perceptions of disability. It aims to increase representation and visibility of people with disabilities in art and media. It seeks to showcase the diverse experiences, talents, and perspectives of individuals with disabilities, challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusion. Disability can be a source of creative inspiration and expression. Artists with disabilities often use their experiences and challenges as a catalyst for their work, exploring themes of identity, resilience, and empowerment through various artistic mediums. Aesthetics in disability also



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emphasizes the importance of accessibility in art and design. This includes ensuring that artistic spaces, events, and resources are physically and technologically accessible to individuals with different types of disabilities, allowing for full participation and engagement. Aesthetic analysis of disability can stimulate critical discourse about societal attitudes, prescribed norms, and perceptions surrounding disability.

Artistic works that challenge ableism and advocate for social justice can foster dialogue and awareness, leading to greater understanding and acceptance. Appealing in infirmity acknowledges the intersectionality of disability with other aspects of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. It recognizes that experiences of disability are shaped by multiple intersecting factors and seeks to amplify marginalized voices within the disabled community. Aesthetics in disability celebrates the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the concerned community. It acknowledges that there is no single narrative or representation of disability, and encourages the exploration of different lived experiences and cultural contexts. Broadly, aesthetics in the performance of disability highlights the richness and complexity of eccentric experiences, challenging conventional notions of beauty and creativity while promoting greater inclusivity and appreciation of diversity in artistic expression.

In the context of aesthetic in disability, the folk theatre of Haryana is an emblem of rich cultural heritage and reflects the traditions, values, and stories of its people. The sense of aesthetic disability in Haryanvi folk theatre can be experienced through various dimensions of disability. Haryanvi folk theatre, like other traditional art forms, presents a unique challenge for the artists to explore the idea of disability within the context of cultural settings. In many theatrical performances, disabled characters depicted in various major roles to reflect the diversity of human experiences beyond the oriented community. Entry of disabled characters in Haryanvi folk theatre inspiring folk artists to give a new direction to the folklore of Haryana. With the arrival of disabled characters on stage, there is always an exceptional curiosity among the audiences. It is scholarly inquiry that the source of disability in Haryanvi folklore largely draws upon Indian mythology, and socio-political background which presents a unique vision of contemporary socio-cultural folklore. Like every folk sibling, Haryanvi folk theatre is also well crafted in musical instruments to generate melodious effect and acoustic experience for the



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participants and performers. Dholak, tabla, harmonium, flute, clay pot, and microphones are significantly old musical instruments used in various theatrical events.

Highly popular in contemporary Haryanvi rural population, these folk plays blow extensively and rapidly in regional artistic exhibition to produce new ideas and understanding the critical concept of disability. The motive behind the representation of aesthetic disability is to provide a strong appeal for equal participation and access of opportunity that breaks stereotype notions and to encourage a deep sense of connectivity for all types of individuals. Practice of disability on the stage of folk theatre add fuels to the artistic light of Haryanvi folklore. It is a growing quest for the new actors and performers. It has since become one of the most celebrated themes in folklore activities and brilliant instance for the story performers with colourful wit and aestheticism. Such critical pursuit enhances additional value to the folklore society. When the performance appears on the stage in dramatic conditions, it provides more assistance to the performers and brings an exceptional blend into the play. Some of them are disabled characters whose actions and dialogues take the shape of aesthetic qualities. Simi Linton, a prominent scholar on disabled studies, argued that, “Disability studies provides the means to hold academics accountable for the veracity and the social consequences of their work, just as activism has served to hold the community, the education system, and the legislature accountable for disabled people’s compromised social position” (1-2).

Folk Theatre as Cultural Identity

The emergence of folk theatre as a cultural energy invites serious attention of various academicians. Folklore plays an integral part in cultural development of a specific region. The performance of folklore can also be understood as a cultural performance. In this context, Heidrun Bruckner’s performative text *The Power of Performance*, argues that, “Cultural performances, such as rituals, ceremonies, carnivals and dramas, but also performances in the linguistic sense, co-called speech events, can be seen as interpretations of social life by the actors themselves and are then exhibited to the participants as well as to the outsiders” (7). The author also states that the term ‘performance’ encompasses a wide range of cultural events, such as various theatrical performances and performing arts, the performance of oral texts, various kinds of political, religious and social rituals and speech event (7).



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Folk theatre, often known as “Lok Natya” in Haryana, is an age-old tradition that blends storytelling, song, music, dance, and drama. These performances have been a reflection of the state’s culture, traditions, and values for centuries. While Haryana’s folk theatre has celebrated diversity in various forms, including its distinctive regional languages and dialects, the aesthetic of disability has been a challenging and underrepresented aspect of society. Historically, disability has been perceived through a lens of stigma and discrimination in many parts of India, including Haryana. Disabled individuals have often faced social isolation, limited access to education and employment, and a lack of opportunities for artistic expression. However, in recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in the way disability is perceived, with a growing recognition of the rights and capabilities of disabled individuals. In this context, Tobin Siebers, a prominent critic and author on disability, in his book Disability Theory argues that,

Unlike the medical approach the emerging field of disability studies defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment. Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression. (p.3)

Keeping in thoughts, this article dynamically investigates the evolving relationship between folk theatre and disability. It researches how traditional performances are adapting to promote inclusivity, and the ethical considerations surrounding these adaptations. Additionally, the paper identifies the challenges faced in integrating disabled performers into the folk theatre scenes and the potential benefits that arise from this inclusivity.

Historical Context: Disability, Social Awareness and Prospectives

To understand the present-day scenario, it is essential to examine the historical context of disability in Haryana. Like in many other parts of India, people with disabilities in Haryana have historically faced various forms of discrimination and exclusion. Disability was often associated with negative stereotypes, and disabled individuals were marginalized in many aspects of life, including education, employment, and social participation. Traditional folk theatre in Haryana,



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while celebrating diversity in other aspects, did not adequately represent or address the experiences of disabled individuals. This omission reflected the prevailing social attitudes and biases of the time. It can not be denied that a huge amount of research is yet to be done to record the historical prospectives on the practice of disability and to index its current exhibition in regional folklores. As Simi Linton says, “we can review what is already known about humans’ response to disability to see that disability has been conceptualized and responded to in a variety of ways throughout history and across human culture” (36). She further noted that, “disabled people have existed predominantly as marginal figures, their contributions and prospectives are not generally noted. Researcher outside disability studies have not been actively interested in this history nor in examining the meaning and function of disability in the lives of the few well-known people with disabilities” (36-37). Introducing the manifestation of disability in Haryanvi folklore is a new challenge which produced mutual contests between various theatre groups. This part of article examines the variation of folk theatre arranged with the response in disability.

Over the last decade, the subject of disability has been shifted in a new direction. Usually, these new concerns do not differentiate in sociological issues such as class, gender or unhealthy treatment of disabled characters in general. The most visible problem is that the voices of disabled people are almost completely remained absent in terms of participation, communication and other various situation of social experiences. To improve this situation several awareness campaigns and initiatives were launched to challenge categorize treatment to endorse the capabilities of disabled people. These efforts and campaigns have played a crucial role in changing general attitudes and boost the confidence level for their maximum participation of disabled individuals in socio-cultural activities. In addition to this, encouraging inclusive education facilitated greater collaboration and thoughtful between disabled and non-disabled persons from their schooling. These fundamental changes in the common prospectives, and consciousness set the ground for a wide-ranging approach to various aspects of life, including arts, literature and social events.

Folk Theatre and Disability: A Growing Relationship

The artistic form of folk theatre in Haryana is known as ‘saang’. Swang is a different word which in theatrical sense hardly substitute for the word ‘saang’. Swang is very much



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comical word used in informal context for some humoured situations. The reference of 'swang' can be debated on many Indian mythological stories. The performance of Ras Leela can also be an example of 'swang'. It is closer to the ancient Indian religious culture. In compare to this, the form of 'saang' is more literary and theatrical. Saang is a traditional form of folk theatre in Haryana. The performance of this art provides enough space to celebrate costume, music, dance, storytelling, verbal dialogues, and songs. Folk song is an essential feature of 'saang'. It is commonly known as 'ragini'. The main objective of 'ragini' is to narrate the story with musical compositions. It is frequently occurring at the beginning, in between and sometimes at the end of the ongoing play on the stage. These songs usually sing in regional dialect. Over the last few years, to portray the concerns of disability was highly demanded in theatrical performances. This shift in folk events generated healthy interest not only in many theatre groups but also in audiences. In recent performances, 'saang' troupes have included various themes related to the disability. They aimed to portray the challenges faced by disabled people on various social platforms. To this motive, disabled characters were also encouraged to participate maximum in theatrical performances. It aims to educate the social folks about various social prejudiced faced by disabled community of the individual. To this artistic expression, sufficient efforts have been made towards the inclusion of disabled actors to break down social stigma and to endorse inclusive approach in the study of disability. As a scholar of folklore, it is expressed that this article does not focus on the exploration of the idea of disability exclusively; rather it appeals to give thoughtful space to the emerging concerns of disability in the genre of folklore. To this justification, a handful number of texts have been considered to look the aspects of disability critically.

Textual Resources: Understanding and Approaches

Haryanvi folk theatre is known for its unique performances of folk plays. These plays are widely performed and appreciated on the merit of poetic exhibition and public entertainment. There have been constant attempts to bring inclusive social issues on stage. Since this research article deals with the scope of disability in folk arts particularly; it is very essential to revisit the archive of Haryanvi folklore to find out related plays on disability. The focus on disability is a new phenomenon in regional theatrical activities. As the literary understanding of disability is



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not as much explored as socio-political and religious themes. This novel shift invited new generation to re-check the boundaries of regional folklores. The majority of early folk plays used to explore various mythical stories and tales derived from Indian epics Mahabharat and Ramayan. Later on, the journey of these folk plays diverted towards socio-political issues; hence, plenty of such folk plays added by various theatre groups in the museum of Haryanvi folklore. Over the last few years, theatre artists have been experimented with the theme of disability as an innovative source of energy and creativity in their folk plays. However, to develop the connection between folklore and disability is a challenging task. As it seems that the issue of disability was deliberately kept in different untouched cognitive sphere. To this reference, it would not be wrong to say that these changes in folklore tradition generate excited curiosity among the artists and the audiences. This brief description highlights the depth of personal journey of Haryanvi folk theatre in general.

In this context, folk plays include Rai Dhanpat Singh's Leelo-Chaman, Chanderlal Baadi's Kichak-Vadh and Satyvan-Savitri, Dayachand Mayna's Balwa Mangal Soor, and Thaharo Shyam Dharaudi's Deepak-Saloni. As a critical audience-cum-reader of these plays, it can be debated that these plays sheltered many disabled characters presenting the aesthetics of disability. These plays discover the critical idea of aesthetic in disability afflicting the social situation of disabled characters in view of physical and psychological dimensions. These plays portrait disabled characters of different backgrounds rooted in their social positions. Their appearance on the stage itself appeals metaphorically to eliminate social prejudices prevalent against disabled communities. In these plays many characters are disabled who performed their roles very actively. Prominent disabled characters from these plays are Kisan, from Leelo-Chaman, is a lame character; in Kichak-Vadh, Arjuna as sexually impotent character performed his role which helps Bhima to kill Kichak; the parents of Satyawan in Satyawan-Savitri are blind characters who performed their roles very silently; the title character in Balwa Mangal Soor is a blind character; and the character of Deepak in Deepak-Saloni is also a blind character who performed his roles very skilfully. Their appearance is very poignant which establish a new connection between the performances of these characters and audiences' responses towards their aesthetic and arty expression. However, lack of proper documentaries, recordings, photos,



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interaction, archives, and live performances of these plays tied the hands of the author in limited arguments.

These folk plays artistically appeal for social equality. The approach of social equality is itself an idea of aesthetic. The aesthetics of disability in these folk theatres of Haryana encapsulates a rich tapestry of cultural expression, social commentary, and human resilience. Through the portrayal of disabled characters, often depicted with depth and nuance, Haryanvi folk theatre reflects the complexities of the human experience and challenges conventional notions of ability and normalcy. One of the central themes that emerge from the exploration of disability in Haryanvi folk theatre is the celebration of diversity and the affirmation of individual worth regardless of physical limitations. Disabled characters are not relegated to the margins but are instead integral to the narratives, their presence serving as a testament to the multifaceted nature of humanity. Moreover, the aesthetic treatment of disability in Haryanvi folk theatre underscores the power of storytelling as a vehicle for empathy and understanding. Through intense performances and emotional narratives, audiences are invited to confront their preconceived notions about disability and recognize the inherent dignity and agency of individuals living with disabilities. Additionally, the incorporation of disability into the fabric of folk theatre highlights broader socio-cultural dynamics, including the intersection of disability with various venues of sociological dimension. By illuminating these intersections, Haryanvi folk theatre not only entertains but also substitute critical reflection on issues of social justice and enclosure. The aesthetics of disability in the folk theatre of Haryana is a topic that sheds light on the intersection of culture, performance, and inclusivity.

The participation of disabled performers into the folk theatre not only challenges traditional perceptions of disability but also adds a unique and diverse dimension to the inventive expression. The performers' abilities, rather than their disabilities, become the focus, breaking down stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive and accepting positive social treatment. Furthermore, the folk theatre of Haryana serves as a symbol for the empowerment of disabled individuals. By offering them unrestricted opportunities to showcase their talents and skills contributing to changing general attitudes towards disability. This not only benefits the disabled performers who directly involved but also has a wrinkle effect, inspiring others to see beyond



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physical or cognitive transformation. The aesthetic choices made in the presentation of disabled characters within the folk theatre productions encourages to a broader conversation on the representation and diversity in the art of folklore. These choices, whether in costumes, makeup, or character development, challenge preconceived notions and foster a more nuanced understanding of disability. These theatrical instances serve as a medium for education and consciousness. By incorporating disabled characters and themes into their performances, these theatrical productions become a powerful tool for promoting understanding and empathy in society. This not only educates the public about the challenges faced by disabled individuals but also encourages more inclusive and compassionate culture of expression.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to show how, nowadays, Haryanvi folk theatre as a genre of folklore dynamically concerned with the subject of disability in theatrical performances. It presents a long-lasting view that reflects the changing attitudes and values of societal custom. The author's concerned with the aspects of disability and its theoretical parameters, staging of disabled characters, space of disability in folklore, aesthetic consideration and artistic presentation have reshaped the vision of folklore and its dynamic approach to disability. A collective approach towards aesthetics in disability is a testament to the growing awareness and rights of inclusivity. Moving forward, it is essential to continue the dialogue on disability in folk theatre and address the practical and ethical considerations that arise. By doing so, Haryana's folk theatre may become an inclusive and representative form of art, reflecting the rich diversity of its society while promoting the principles of equity and social righteousness. To this extent, the aesthetics of disability in folk theatre of Haryana represents a testament to the resilience of human spirit and the transformative power of art. Through its portrayal of disabled characters and narratives, this folk theatre challenges stereotype, amplifies marginalized voices, and ultimately promotes a more comprehensive and compassionate society. As a vibrant and evolving form of cultural expression, Haryanvi folk theatre continues to inspire audiences and reaffirm the universal truth that every individual, regardless of ability, possesses inherent worth and dignity. It does not only contribute to the artistic richness of performances but also play a pivotal role in reshaping societal perceptions. By embracing inclusivity, challenging stereotypes,



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empowering individuals, and nurturing awareness, this folk theatre becomes a catalyst for constructive social transformation. As the narratives continue to evolve, the folk theatre of Haryana stands as a testament to the transformative power of arts in shaping an open-minded world. But this is not sufficient to the scope of disability in folklore; it is somehow an initiative to project a future of disability at individual, cultural and socio-political ground theoretically.

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