

Liberating Indian Theatre: Examining Kantorian Postdramatic Influence in Deepan Sivaraman's *Dark Things*

Jasmin Baby¹

Abstract

*This paper explores the intersections of Tadeusz Kantor's postdramatic aesthetics and contemporary Indian theatre through an analysis of *Dark Things* (2018/2019), directed by Deepan Sivaraman and Anuradha Kapur. As a pioneering work in Indian avant-garde theatre, *Dark Things* embodies the postdramatic principles articulated by Hans-Thies Lehmann, rejecting text-dominant dramaturgy in favour of materiality, physicality, and sensory engagement. Drawing on Kantorian methodologies, the production dismantles subject-object hierarchies, elevating mundane objects to active agents in performance. By addressing socio-political issues such as displacement, labour exploitation, and global capitalism, *Dark Things* transcends formal experimentation to deliver a compelling critique of systemic inequities. This study situates *Dark Things* within the broader context of postdramatic theatre, highlighting its radical approach to text, collaboration, and audience participation as tools for social commentary. The paper underscores how Indian theatre continues to innovate by integrating global theatrical traditions with local realities, pushing the boundaries of form and function.*

Keywords: Postdramatic theatre, Tadeusz Kantor, Indian avant-garde theatre, subject-object hierarchy, socio-political critique

1. Introduction

The term "Postdrama," introduced by Richard Schechner (1934–) and Andrzej Wirth (1927–2019), gained prominence through Hans-Thies Lehmann's seminal work *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999), translated into English in 2006. Lehmann's study marked a watershed moment in theatre studies by coining the term "Postdramatic Theatre," which

¹ Assistant Professor, School of English, De Paul Institute of Science & Technology (DiST), Angamaly, Kerala, India. Email: jsmn4jesus@depaul.edu.in

encompasses avant-garde theatrical practices that deconstruct the traditional text-centric model. These practices prioritize materiality, physicality, and the aesthetics of performance over textual dominance, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between theatre and drama.

2. Discussions

This paradigm shift began in the 1960s and gained traction in the 1970s, challenging conventional dramaturgical norms and introducing experimental forms that emphasized non-linear narratives, anti-representational aesthetics, and collaborative processes. Lehmann's findings catalysed changes in European and North American theatre, heralded by iconic practitioners like Tadeusz Kantor (Poland), Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson (United States), Robert Lepage (Canada), Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek (Austria), and Heiner Müller (Germany). Their work eschewed traditional mimesis and linear storytelling, focusing instead on the dynamics of the performance space, interrelation of elements, and the audience's sensory engagement.

In India, the Postdramatic wave resonated with avant-garde theatre practitioners such as Anuradha Kapur, Maya Krishna Rao, Amitesh Grover, Deepan Sivaraman, and Abhilash Pillai. These artists embraced the anti-representational, non-linear, and non-naturalistic aesthetics of Postdramatic Theatre, using them to explore pressing socio-political and cultural issues. A notable example is *Dark Things* (2018/2019), co-directed by Deepan Sivaraman and Anuradha Kapur, which epitomizes the Kantorian Postdramatic style through its integration of multiple disciplines, performance languages, and radical dramaturgical techniques.

Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990), a visionary Polish theatre director, remains a key figure in understanding the

Postdramatic aesthetic. His revolutionary works, such as *The Dead Class* (1975) and *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1981), dismantled traditional theatrical hierarchies and redefined the role of objects, actors, and space. Kantor's performances fused the animate and inanimate, creating environments where living actors interacted seamlessly with objects, transforming them into what he called "bio-objects." These objects were not mere props but integral elements with autonomous "lives" independent of the narrative content.

Lehmann underscores Kantor's significance, noting that his "postdramatic theatre, with its mysterious, animistically animated objects and apparatus, [is] crucial for understanding the most recent theatre" (Lehmann 59). Kantor's approach sought to dissolve the dichotomy between human and non-human entities, instead emphasizing their interdependence. He described this as the "reality of the lowest rank," where mundane, damaged objects—such as broken chairs or dusty tables—were imbued with intensity and vitality. By integrating these objects into the performance, Kantor deconstructed traditional subject-object hierarchies, allowing the audience to engage with a multi-layered theatrical reality.

Kantor's influence is evident in *Dark Things*, which employs similar techniques to interrogate themes of displacement, labour, and exploitation. The production's emphasis on non-linear narratives, fragmented imagery, and the interplay between human and non-human elements reflects Kantorian aesthetics while addressing contemporary socio-political concerns.

Performed by students of Ambedkar University, Delhi, *Dark Things* exemplifies the Postdramatic ethos by integrating diverse performance languages and disciplines to explore the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. The production delves into the struggles of those displaced by conflict,

poverty, and systemic inequities, including migratory workers, victims of trafficking, and industrial labourers. Through its fragmented, sensory-driven approach, the performance critiques global capitalism and its complicity in perpetuating exploitation, refugee crises, and profit-driven wars.

Unlike traditional dramatic theatre, which prioritizes text as the central vehicle for meaning, Postdramatic Theatre views text as one element among many in the performance's semiotic landscape. In *Dark Things*, text is reimagined as a fluid, dynamic component rather than the foundation of the production. Dramaturge Purav Goswami and author Ari Sitas reworked Sitas's analysis of the modern Silk Road, reconstructing the narrative through collaborative processes with the directors and performers. The result is a text that complements the physicality of the performance, resisting mimetic representation in favour of a presentational style.

The production's physicality and sensory engagement are central to its impact. Drawing from Kantor's biomechanical style, *Dark Things* emphasizes movement and motion over language and illusion. Actors are not confined to portraying individual characters but serve as components of a larger theatrical ecosystem. This aligns with Lehmann's observation that, in Postdramatic Theatre, "the dramatic process occurred between the bodies; the Postdramatic process occurs with/on/to the body" (Lehmann 163).

One of the defining features of *Dark Things* is its dismantling of subject-object hierarchies, a hallmark of Kantorian theatre. In Kantor's work, objects are elevated to the same status as human performers, challenging the traditional notion of props as passive tools. This technique is evident in *Dark Things*, where actors and objects interact in ways that blur the boundaries between the animate and inanimate. For instance, scavengers on stage manipulate metal drums, mud, and water,

creating a visceral tableau that evokes the dehumanizing realities of labour and exploitation.

The scene depicting scavenging exemplifies this approach. Six actors move metal drums to the centre of the stage, spinning them to produce jarring metallic sounds. They then enter the drums, which are sealed with lids by other performers carrying water and mud. The actors emerge, struggling to breathe, and wash themselves with soap and water from the canisters, their actions underscoring the physical toll of scavenging labour. The absence of explanatory text compels the audience to interpret the scene through sensory and emotional engagement, embodying Lehmann's assertion that Postdramatic Theatre prioritizes "sense perceptions generating from the concreteness of the performance situation" (Lehmann 186).

Music and choreography play pivotal roles in *Dark Things*, enhancing its Postdramatic sensibility. Songs adapted from Xu Lizhi's poetry highlight the systemic exploitation of labourers at Foxconn's iPhone manufacturing plant. The choreography amplifies this critique through repetitive, mechanical movements that mirror the dehumanizing nature of factory labour. For example, three workers perform a sequence of repeated falls, symbolizing the collapse of individuals under unbearable workloads. Concurrently, cannonballs are hurled across the stage, their weight and impact emphasizing the physical and emotional burdens faced by workers.

These elements contribute to a performance that resists mimetic representation, instead creating a dynamic, multi-sensory experience. By focusing on movement, sound, and visual imagery, *Dark Things* invites the audience to engage with the performance as an immersive, interpretive experience rather than a linear narrative.

While Post dramatic Theatre is often associated with formal experimentation, it is not devoid of political and social

engagement. *Dark Things* exemplifies this by addressing pressing global issues such as labour exploitation, migration, and systemic inequities. The production's fragmented, non-linear structure mirrors the complexities of these issues, challenging the audience to confront uncomfortable truths without offering simplistic solutions.

As Lehmann notes, Post dramatic Theatre rejects the traditional "illusion of completeness" associated with dramatic forms, instead embracing "aesthetic strategies that foreground incompleteness, fragmentation, and multiplicity" (Lehmann 86). *Dark Things* embodies this ethos by prioritizing the method and process of performance over textual interpretation. The production's emphasis on collaboration, physicality, and sensory engagement creates a theatrical experience that is both intellectually and emotionally resonant.

In Postdramatic Theatre, the spectator's role shifts from passive observer to active participant. *Dark Things* positions its audience as co-creators of meaning, encouraging them to interpret the performance through their sensory and emotional responses. This aligns with Lehmann's assertion that Postdramatic Theatre "does not offer a pre-interpreted world but instead opens up spaces for interpretation" (Lehmann 186).

By immersing the audience in the physical and sensory realities of the performance, *Dark Things* fosters a deeper connection between the spectator and the subject matter. Scenes of scavenging, factory labour, and displacement are not presented as abstract concepts but as tangible, visceral experiences that demand the audience's engagement. This approach challenges the traditional boundaries between performer and spectator, creating a shared space of reflection and dialogue.

3. Conclusion

Dark Things exemplifies the transformative potential of Postdramatic Theatre in an Indian context, drawing on Kantorian aesthetics to address contemporary socio-political issues. By deconstructing traditional hierarchies, prioritizing physicality and sensory engagement, and positioning the spectator as an active participant, the production reimagines the possibilities of theatrical performance. Its fragmented, multi-layered approach challenges conventional narratives, offering a compelling critique of global capitalism, labour exploitation, and systemic inequities.

Through its innovative use of text, objects, and performance elements, *Dark Things* embodies the essence of Postdramatic Theatre while remaining deeply rooted in the realities of its time. It represents a bold, experimental approach to theatre that not only pushes the boundaries of form but also engages with the pressing social and political concerns of the contemporary world. By embracing the principles of Postdramatic Theatre, Indian practitioners like Deepan Sivaraman and Anuradha Kapur continue to expand the horizons of Indian theatre, creating works that are both artistically innovative and socially relevant.

References

- Barry, P. (2009). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (3rd ed.). Manchester University Press.
- Carroll, J. (2013). Phenomenology and the postdramatic: A case study of three plays by Ewald Palmetshofer. In K. Jürs-Munby, J. Carroll, & S. Giles (Eds.), *Postdramatic theatre and the political* (pp. 233–254). Bloomsbury Methuen.
- Danan, J. (2014). Dramaturgy in postdramatic times. In K. Trencsényi & B. Cochrane (Eds.), *New dramaturgy: International perspectives on theory and practice* (pp. 3–17). Bloomsbury Methuen.

- Fischer-Lichte, E. (2005). *Theatre, sacrifice, ritual: Exploring forms of political theatre*. Routledge.
- Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic theatre* (K. Jürs-Munby, Trans.). Routledge.
- Romanska, M. (2020). *Theatermachine: Tadeusz Kantor in context* (K. Cioffi, Ed.). Northwestern University Press.
- Sivaraman, D. (2013). The future of Indian theatre (D. Punjani, Interviewer). *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques*, 8. <http://www.critical-stages.org/8/the-future-ofindian-theatre/>