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The Method of Character Acting continuously within the Performance Space: A Study based on Mahidi Kooththu

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Abstract:

During the performance of the *Mahidi kooththu* in Sri Lanka, another group comes to place a magic object in the center of the stage and claims victory. It is performed by the oppressed people in the open air, focusing on magic tricks. *Brahmins*, *Sages*, *Malayalis*, and indigenous peoples are the ones who place the magic object in the center of this stage. The Performers who perform in the next round after the center circle interact with the audience. There is no communication between the two rounds. In some villages, those who perform in the second round also perform as informers to the audience about what is happening in the center. They discuss social issues. In addition, the fact that the performers perform continuously in the *Mahidi* and create visual settings on the stage for this is unique from other plays. In performance of *Mahidi Kooththu*, it is not like other plays where people come on stage and act and then leave. They continue to act from the stage. This performance space is notable because it is rectangular in shape, performed in a comedic style, and full of improvisation. Purpose of the study: To reveal how the performers act in the center circle and the next round. Research Problem: Those who act in the central circle do not join the next round. Research Hypothesis: The

ensemble and the pavilions set up in the central circle help the actors to continue performing from within the performance space. Research Methodology: This study uses a descriptive research approach in a qualitative design. Field trips, interviews, and participation in performances are included as primary data as research tools, and related books and websites are included as secondary data.

Keywords: Continuous acting, Comedy strategy, Indigenous, *Mahidi kooththu*, Magic tricks, Performance Space.

Introduction

In a play, actors come on stage and act according to the role assigned to them and then leave. Then they come back on stage and act. This focuses on the plot structure of the play, the stage style, etc. In the *Mahidi kooththu*, the actors continue to act on stage. This stage is characterized by being rectangular, acting in a comedic style, and being full of innovation.

Purpose of the study and Research Problem

To reveal how the performers act in the center circle and the next round. Those who act in the central circle do not join the next round.

Research Hypothesis

The ensemble and the pavilions set up in the central circle help the actors to continue performing from within the performance space.

Research Methodology

This study uses a descriptive research approach in a qualitative design. Field visits, interviews, and participation in performances are included as primary data as research tools, and related books and websites are included as secondary data.

Literary Review

- The book '*Maddakkalappu Marapuvali Nadagankal*' written and published in 2014 by C. Maunaguru discusses '*Mahidi Kooththu*'. In it, it is stated that there are three types of *Mahidi Kooththu* in Batticaloa, and its definition, performance method, characters, and information related to the communities in which it is performed are examined.
- The book '*Vada Elankai Naddar Aranku*' written and published by S. Sundrampillai in 2015. In this book, while discussing the '*Kooththukalin Moolam*' of North Sri Lanka, it is stated that two types of *Mahidi* were performed under the title '*Mahidi Kooththu*', its performance method, the similarities and differences between the Batticaloa *Mahidi* and the *Mahidi* performed in North Sri Lanka, and its characteristics are examined.
- T. Malarselvan, in his 2016 book '*Araiampathi Pradesasa Nadaka Marapukal*', gives information

about the characteristics, style and makeup of the *Mahidi* performed in Araiampathi.

- S. Sivarethinam published the book '*Mahidi Kooththu*' in 2022. This book appears to have published a manuscript performed by the *Kaluthavalai Paraiyar* community. Next his book '*Sadangukalinudaka Maddakkalappu*' published in 2008, he describes the *Mahidi* performed in Vandharumulai as the 'fourth' and the method of its performance.
- A research article written by S. Chandrakumar titled "The Sense of Resisting Power in the Performance of the *Mahidi Kooththu* (Art Form) - A Study" was published in Vol.4, Iss 4 year 2022 of the International Research Journal of Tamil on 21-09-2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34256/irjt22411>. <https://irjt.iopress.org/index.php/irjt/article/view/1173>. In this, the Method of resisting the authority of the society through the body is examined.

It is noteworthy that the aforementioned studies have been investigated by the respective researchers according to their research objectives, research hypotheses and research importance. This study, titled "The Method of Character Acting continuously within the Performance Space: A Study based on *Mahidi Kooththu*", examines the way in which characters enter the performance space and continue to act in the *Mahidi kooththu* of the *Mahidi kooththu*, the cooperative nature of the stage for that the way in which the central circle and, the middle circle is acted out is examined focusing on the Batticaloa *Mahidi kooththu*.

The way the characters move within the stage

The way the actors in the *Mahidi* play the entire time while standing and on the stage is unique. Generally, it is customary for each character in the play to appear on the stage and act out the story and its ideology. In the *Kooththu* Theatre and Modern Theatre, it is normal for each character to perform their role, exit the stage, and re-enter the stage to perform. The *Modiyattam* of Tamil Nadu is also designed in the same way. In the above-mentioned theatre, each character does not come onto the stage and stand there together and approaches the audience around them, doing so with a multifaceted approach. However, Sri Lankan *Mahidikooththu* has a unique stage technique. This is because each character is designed to walk within the stage in a procession, interact with the people on the streets, move according to the rhythm and song, and continue acting within that stage after their appearance is over. Thus, upon entering the performance space, they sit in the center and inside the pavilion and then get up and perform again.

For example, Brahmin boys and some sages are sitting near the flagpole (*kodiKampam*), the sages are inside the pavilions, and the *Udaiyar* group performs continuously at the same time. These performers move differently and uniquely, with some changes from village to village. The actors perform alternately while standing. Those who come into the performance space express their performance through voice, body, and stage props with satire (humor) throughout the entire time, innovating and recreating. These characters come and perform as needed and then sit in the place allotted to them in the performance space.

In the *Mahidi* performed at *Vantharumulai*, the cottage (*pandals*) is set up by the conductor after the arrival of the sages, and in the village of *Kaluthavalai*, the gurus and disciples come and sit in their cottage (*pandals*) after the arrival. Sitting like this, they get up from there according to the context and need of their performance and converse with the surrounding audience and entertain them. Similarly, along with the core storyline, the people (*Brahmins*, sages, tribal) also sit at the flagpole and perform with their bodies, voices, and visions.

In *Kaluthavalai*, after the arrival dance is finished in the first *kalari* outside, they come to the place where the flagpole and the *kumbam* of Magical things (mantra) are located nearby, perform, and then go around. Then they stay there.

In particular,

"Apart from the main dance, some other songs, humor not included in the written script of *Kooththu*, and magic and trick (stratagem) competitions are held in the second *kalari* where the *kumbhangal* are located. After their arrival and conversations, the actors enter the second *kalari* through the route leading to the *kalari*. Then, they come around the route shown there and act out the play" (Maunaguru, 2014, p. 128).

In the village of *Araiampathi*, the sage and the disciple enter the arena. They walk around the stage and guard the flagpole and the *kumbhangal*. Then, they warn the *Sambalandi*, chant a magic (mantra), and throw holy water and guard it. Then, they sit in one of the pavilions on either side (Malarchelvan, 2016). In this way, until the *Mahidi* theatre is over, all the characters remain on the stage and move around, performing their own

performances. This is the unique stage technique of Mahidi. This technique is not found in Tamil Nadu *Modiyattam*, Sri Lankan *Kootththu*, and European theaters. Sitting and acting around at the same time is a special staging technique for this stage. In addition, when the characters enter the performance space, they sit or stand within it until the end of the performance, creating a scene and acting with their body and voice according to the environment.

For this, a cottage (*pandal*) for the actors is set up around or directly around the pole in the center. There are five, four, or two as needed. This is the staging strategy of this stage. The performer goes to the cottage (*pandal*) after performing, and the other characters continue to sit under the pole in the performance space. They performed standing on the stage with their body, voice, role, dress, and makeup. Thus, those in the stage can be viewed in three stages.

1. Those who perform magic tricks in the center. They can also be considered as those who put the magic and those who take it.
2. Those who act in the second round, are equal to the center. Their actions are different. This can be divided into two.
 - A group of characters who stand and act in the arena from the beginning to the end of the performance. These include people like *Udaiyar*, Police, Vidhanai.
 - The second type of characters who leave after performing. These include Parangian, Parangichi, Vellaikaran, Vellaikari, Nunakkadan, etc.
3. The third person is the facilitator (conductor) who establishes a connection between those present. He

is the one who communicates with the center, the characters in the next round, and the audience.

Characters continue to live within the stage for perform

The character of *Udaiyar* and the other supporting characters who come with him alive on the stage with vitality. The role of the *Udaiyar* is what binds everyone and is seen as everyone's favorite. Therefore, this role needs to be innovative, creative, and perform with unwavering physical strength in the performance. In *Therukkooththu*, the builder usually performs on the stage with different acting expressions throughout the performance.

There is continuous movement around. While performing, their conversation and physical movement continue. This is also one of the unique features of the performance of Mahidi. Along with the *Udaiyar* who is cast in this way, the police and *Vithanai*¹ continue to perform through the performance. The Satire technique supports this sequence of movement. The other roles have a rest. The sage comes and performs his performance and sits down. *Kamakshi* and *Meenakshi* sprinkle water and go inside their pavilion. They come out only when needed. When the *Kuravar* play magic, they play against each other and go around talking to the people. The sages guard the *Kumbham*, play against those who come to collect the particular *Kumbham*, and the Brahmin boys stay there to protect the *Kumbham* at the foot of the flagpole. In this way, the characters act when the visual environment they need is right and when they need to be.

¹ *Vithanai*: This was an administrative post in Sri Lanka.

But what keeps the audience and the performance connected emotionally and visually is the continuous living through the comedy (humor) of the *Udaiyar* troupe (group). They are the ones who captivate the people with the intertwined emotional state of the Mahidi and the audience. In particular, the *Udaiyar* is the main one who connects the audience while performing. If the continuous dialectical state is not within the framework of the performance, the Mahidi becomes as a ritual. The audience looks at the *Udaiyar* and the sage with sarcasm and mockery (ridicule). In particular, the *Udaiyar* is the one who takes the lead in looking at the sarcasm and mockery. In the *Sandiveli* and *Vandharumoolai* of Mahidi, the continuous movement of the *Udaiyar* troupe is strong when performing. Although the Mahidi has a sage, a ritual structure and an Amman, there is no belief in God.

Instead of the role of the *Udaiyar*, the movements of characters like *Vakuththaiya*, *Sambalandi*, *Vellakkaran*, *Vellakkari* also come in different village Mahidi. The *Vakuththaiya* moves around the performance area and engages in magic games in the center, the *Sambalandi* moves around and frequently throws ashes and acts as a scarecrow, and the *Vellakkaran* (white man) and *Vellakkari* (white woman) perform during appropriate scenes. Although they are within the framework of the performance area, they only come out when necessary and in the appropriate environment. This gives them a chance to rest. This can be seen in the *Araiampathy* and *Kaluthavelai* of Mahidi.

The special feature of the *Mahidi* is that even though they are within the performance area for three

hours, some characters move when necessary, sit down, and some characters continue to move.

Conclusion

It is unique that in the *Mahidi* performed in Sri Lanka, when the characters enter the stage, they continue to act from within the performance area. The stage settings have been made accordingly. In addition, this performance area is rectangular. Apart from this, the comic element enables the characters to live continuously within the performance area. Furthermore, the main feature of Mahidi is that the actors interact with the audience and perform for three hours in a state of reverie. This is supported by like a ritual magic trick play.

Recommendation

1. Pluralistic theatre
2. Safe theatre
3. Flexible theatre – adding characters, discussing, opposing. But, in Vadamodi kooththu and Thenmodi Kooththu, characters cannot be added like this. Because, these are the art forms of power that are based on the stories of the Bharata Ramayana.
4. Dialogue theatre.
5. Opposition theatre – The opposition to power is shaped in a cultural context. It is shaped in a ritualistic and ecstatic way.
6. A light theatre for ordinary people to celebrate and enjoy.

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Research Article

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