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Munir Chowdhury 's Drama "Kabar" through Social Justice Theatre Practice in Education: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The application and reception of Social Justice Theatre in a student-led performance of Munier Chowdhury's "*Kabar*". It is a case study based on a completed performance. The analysis reveals that students' engagement went beyond acting; they actively connected with themes of social justice, resistance, and contemporary realities. Data were collected through participatory observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of both student experiences and audience responses. This study indicates that the integration of Applied Theatre and Social Justice Theatre transformed the student performance into a powerful medium for fostering social awareness, empathy, and ethical responsibility.

Significance: This study demonstrates that student-centered theatrical practice can serve as an effective pedagogical and transformative tool for social change.

Keywords: Social Justice Theatre, Applied Theatre, Student Participation, Performative Pedagogy, Bangladesh Theatre

Introduction

Theatre has long been recognized as a powerful social medium, not only for entertainment but also for fostering social consciousness, critical thinking, and civic engagement (Boal, 1979; Nicholson, 2005). In particular, Social Justice Theatre (SJT) is a form of theatre that actively engages participants and audiences in reflecting on societal inequalities, injustices, and human rights issues, while encouraging collaborative problem-solving and activism (Prentki & Preston, 2009). Applied Theatre, on the other hand, refers to the use of theatre in educational and social contexts. It provides students with participatory, experiential, and creative frameworks to critically engage with societal and humanistic issues (O'Toole, 2006).

Munier Chowdhury's "*Kobor*" occupies a significant place in Bangladesh's political and social history, focusing on protest, justice, and the spirit of liberation. The student-led performance of "*Kobor*" transcended conventional acting and emerged as a form of social praxis, wherein participants actively connected with contemporary social and political realities. This article aims to analyze the application of Social Justice Theatre in the student-led performance of "*Kobor*", and to assess its educational, social, and ethical impact. Conducted as a case study, this research draws upon the experiences and data of a completed performance to explore the potential of student-centered performance theatre in fostering social awareness and critical engagement in Bangladesh.

Background of Study

Theatre has long been recognized as a powerful medium for social reflection, critical engagement, and transformative learning. Within educational contexts, Applied Theatre emphasizes participatory and experiential approaches that enable learners to engage actively with social, cultural, and ethical issues. Social Justice Theatre (SJT), influenced by the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, extends this approach by encouraging participants to question injustice, develop critical consciousness, and explore possibilities for social change.

In Bangladesh, theatre has historically played an important role in political and cultural resistance. Munier Chowdhury's *Kobor* (1952), written in the context of the Language Movement, remains a significant protest drama that symbolizes resistance against oppression and the struggle for justice. While the play has been widely studied as a literary and political text, limited research has explored its application within educational performance using a Social Justice Theatre framework.

This study addresses this gap by examining how a student-led performance of *Kobor*, informed by Applied Theatre and Social Justice Theatre principles, can foster critical awareness, social responsibility, and transformative learning among students.

Literature Review

1. Social Justice Theatre: Concept and Pedagogical Significance

Social Justice Theatre (SJT) represents a form of performative practice that aims to challenge social inequities, empower marginalized communities, and foster collective awareness through theatrical engagement. Rooted in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), SJT emphasizes dialogue, critical reflection, and transformative participation. Augusto Boal (1979), inspired by Freire, extended these ideas through *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where spectators become "spect-actors" actively involved in social critique and change. As Bell (2007) notes, theatre for social justice encourages participants to question existing power structures and imagine more equitable futures.

2. Relationship Between Social Justice Theatre and Applied Theatre

Applied Theatre is an umbrella term that includes diverse practices such as community theatre, educational theatre, and theatre for development. According to Nicholson (2005) and Prentki & Preston (2009), Applied Theatre operates beyond conventional theatrical spaces, emphasizing participation, collaboration, and social transformation. Social Justice Theatre can be seen as an ideological subset within this field it utilizes Applied Theatre's participatory methods but focuses more explicitly on addressing systemic injustice and inequity. While Applied Theatre provides the *methodological framework*, Social Justice Theatre contributes the *ethical and political dimensions*, thereby linking performance to activism.

3. Munier Chowdhury's Drama "*Kabar*" and Its Interpretations

Munier Chowdhury's *Kabar* (The Grave), written in 1952 after the Language Movement, is one of the earliest political allegories in modern Bangla theatre. The play unfolds in a graveyard where the dead metaphorically rise to protest injustice and oppression, turning death into a metaphor for national awakening. Scholars such as Zaman (1997) and Anisuzzaman (2000) interpret *Kabar* as both political and existential, intertwining resistance with the quest for identity. Its structure, minimal setting, and sharp dialogue make it a powerful vehicle for protest theatre and pedagogical experimentation, especially in educational contexts involving youth and students.

4. Interrelation: Social Justice Theatre, Applied Theatre, and *Kabar*

The integration of Social Justice Theatre principles into an Applied Theatre framework allows *Kabar* to function not merely as a text of protest but as a living pedagogical tool. Through participatory performance methods such as role reversal, improvisation, and forum theatre, students transform the play into a site of reflection and dialogue. This convergence demonstrates how theatre can cultivate empathy, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. The re-staging of *Kabar* by students within a Social Justice Theatre framework thus bridges historical resistance with contemporary activism, reaffirming the theatre's power as an educational and transformative practice.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative, practice-based research approach to examine the application of Social Justice Theatre within an educational setting and its impact on learners' consciousness and agency. The research is situated at the intersection of Applied Theatre, performance pedagogy, and critical education, with a focus on student participation and reflective engagement.

The research process involved sustained interaction with student participants through workshops, rehearsals, and performance practices based on Munier Chowdhury's play *Kobor*. Applied Theatre techniques were used to facilitate collective exploration, improvisation, discussion, and embodiment of themes related to oppression, resistance, and social responsibility. Rather than treating the performance as a finished artistic product, the study emphasized the process of participation as a key site of learning and meaning-making.

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and post-performance group discussions. These methods enabled an in-depth understanding of students' experiential responses, emotional engagements, and critical reflections throughout the theatrical process. The researcher maintained reflective field notes to document interactions, rehearsal dynamics, and moments of transformation observed during the project.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis, allowing recurring patterns related to awareness, agency, empathy, and civic consciousness to emerge. This methodology prioritizes participants' voices and lived experiences, aligning with the ethical and pedagogical commitments of Social Justice Theatre.

Discussion / Analysis

Moving beyond an evaluation of *Kobor* based solely on its textual or literary value this study critically examines its performative applicability within the theoretical frameworks of Social Justice Theatre, critical pedagogy, and applied performance practices. Informed by the theoretical interventions of Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Henry Giroux, the research argues that a performative engagement with *Kobor* enables the production of critical consciousness, fosters social and political engagement, and facilitates educational transformation, positioning the play as an active pedagogical and socio-political practice rather than a static dramatic text.

Performative Approach and Social Justice Theatre: A Critical Pedagogical Lens

Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness emphasizes education as a dialogic process through which learners become aware of social contradictions and are motivated to act against oppressive structures. The performative engagement with *Kobor* reflects this pedagogical vision by shifting students from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in meaning-making.

Through rehearsal, improvisation, and collective reflection, learners critically engaged with themes of silence, resistance, and state control embedded in the play. This process aligns with Freire's rejection of the "banking model" of education and affirms theatre as a dialogic space where knowledge is produced collaboratively rather than transmitted unilaterally.

From Text to Praxis: Kobor as Social Justice Theatre

Augusto Boal's concept of theatre as rehearsal for reality provides a crucial framework for understanding how Kobor becomes Social Justice Theatre. Boal argues that theatre should enable participants to rehearse strategies of resistance within a safe yet politically charged space. In the student-led performance of Kobor, the act of embodiment transformed abstract political symbols into lived experiences.

The grave in Kobor, traditionally interpreted as a metaphor of silenced dissent, acquired new performative meanings as students connected historical repression with contemporary experiences of censorship and injustice. This re-contextualization moved the play beyond representational politics toward praxis, where performance becomes an act of social inquiry and ethical positioning.

Thus, Kobor functions as Social Justice Theatre not solely because of its oppositional content, but because of its participatory enactment, which foregrounds agency, dialogue, and resistance.

Social Impact and Public Pedagogy

Henry Giroux's notion of public pedagogy highlights how cultural practices outside formal classrooms shape political understanding and civic identity. The performance of Kobor operated as a pedagogical intervention within the public sphere, inviting audiences to engage with suppressed histories and ongoing struggles for justice.

As a public event, the performance disrupted dominant narratives and encouraged collective reflection on freedom of expression and moral responsibility. Such theatrical interventions contribute to the formation of critical publics by creating spaces where ethical and political questions can be examined communally.

Learners' Transformation: Agency, Skill Development, and Creative Formation

The theoretical alignment between Applied Theatre and critical pedagogy foregrounds agency as both an educational and political outcome. Students participating in the performance demonstrated enhanced communicative competence, collaborative skills, and emotional literacy capacities essential for democratic participation.

From a Freirean perspective, these skills are inseparable from political awareness. Creativity, in this context, is not merely aesthetic but epistemic as students learned to question, reinterpret, and reimagine social realities. The embodied nature of performance enabled learners to internalize complex ethical dilemmas, fostering confidence and a sense of ownership over their learning process.

Theatre as Pedagogy: Beyond Text-Based Learning

Contemporary educational discourse increasingly emphasizes the need for creative, skill-based, and transformative curricula. Giroux's critique of neoliberal education underscores the limitations of purely text-based, exam-oriented learning. This study demonstrates that theatre can function as a complementary pedagogical approach, enriching textual analysis with embodied experience and ethical reflection.

By placing theatrical practice alongside traditional literary study, education becomes a holistic process that integrates cognition, emotion, and social engagement. Theatre thus operates as a critical pedagogical tool that bridges theory and practice, history and present realities, fostering learners who are not only knowledgeable but socially and ethically responsive.

Findings / Results

The findings indicate that integrating Social Justice Theatre into educational practice significantly enhances learners' critical consciousness and sense of agency. Key outcomes of the research include:

Heightened awareness of social and political injustice.

1. Realization of Social Justice and Resistance

Through the performance, the concept of "protest" transcended its theatrical boundary and emerged as a moral and intellectual awakening among students. From rehearsal to performance, students interpreted "resistance" as a personal and collective responsibility. Many participants reported gaining "the courage to speak against injustice," reflecting the Social Justice Theatre principle of "awareness through action."

2. Learning Through Participation

The performance process extended beyond acting; students collaboratively contributed their ideas, emotions, and lived experiences to shape the production. This aligns with the Applied Theatre principle of "participatory learning," where theatre becomes a medium of education. Interviews revealed that the play's characters and contexts resonated deeply with the students' own social and political realities, allowing them to connect performance with lived consciousness.

3. Audience Response and Social Reflection

Audience feedback indicated that "Kobor" was perceived not merely as a historical narrative but as a mirror to contemporary social injustices. One audience member reflected, "The play compelled me to confront today's realities."

This suggests that the performance functioned as a performative dialogue, transforming spectators into active participants in the social discourse.

4. Integration of Applied Theatre and Social Justice Theatre

Findings reveal that the Kobor performance embodied a productive intersection between Applied Theatre and Social Justice Theatre. While Applied Theatre facilitated the educational and reflective process, Social Justice Theatre amplified the transformative and activist dimensions.

The drama was not merely confined to a theatrical production or a performance project; rather, it functioned as an educational and transformative space, where performance emerged as an effective medium for learning and theatre pedagogy. The integration of Applied Theatre, Social Justice Theatre, and active student participation positions theatre as a powerful form of social pedagogy, facilitating the development of students' critical consciousness and reinforcing the play's contemporary relevance.

Recommendations

The integration of Social Justice Theatre as a strand of Applied Theatre has generated a dual dynamic within the learning process. On the one hand, it functions as a pedagogical and

reflective practice; on the other, it operates as an active and transformative intervention. The application of theatre in educational contexts extends beyond the enhancement of creativity—it plays a significant role in cultivating students' critical consciousness, empathy, and sense of civic responsibility.

1. Integrating Theatre in Education

Educational institutions should incorporate participatory theatre practices into their curricula, particularly within the humanities and social sciences. Such integration enables students to engage in experiential learning processes that connect theoretical knowledge with lived realities.

2. Applied Theatre Training

Structured workshops and training programmes should be developed for both educators and students. These modules need to be designed in a way that facilitates a deep understanding of theatre as a tool for social change and transformative learning, rather than merely as a performative or artistic exercise.

3. Community and classroom Based Theatre Initiatives

Student-led performances that address local social issues should be actively encouraged. These initiatives foster community engagement while positioning students as agents of dialogue, critique, and social intervention.

This research demonstrates that performance-based pedagogy can effectively bridge historical narratives with contemporary social realities. Rather than functioning as a mere retelling of the past, such performative practices emerge in the present as powerful symbols of justice, resistance, and social re-articulation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Social Justice Theatre, when practiced within an educational context, transcends aesthetic performance and becomes a powerful tool for learning, dialogue, and transformation. The student engagement with *Kobor* illustrates how performance-based pedagogy can foster ethical awareness, political sensitivity, and social responsibility among learners. By situating historical narratives within participatory performance, theatre enables students to actively negotiate meanings of justice, resistance, and freedom. When *Kobor* is voiced by young performers, it evolves from a historical protest play into a contemporary assertion of social justice.

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