

# The Creative Launcher

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## Vayala Vasudevan Pillai: A Playwright Par Excellence

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### Abstract

Vasudevan Pillai is an eminent theatre personality who made significant contributions to the development of indigenous theatre concepts particularly to Malayalam theatre. His spirit of inquiry and quest for knowledge in performing arts were so high that he travelled far and wide and interacted with world renowned dramatists like Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner and Bertolt Brecht which gave him new insights into the world of theatre. Though he had acquired the technical skills of different theatres he never tried to imitate those into the native theatre. Following the footsteps of his mentor G. Sankara Pillai, who set a direction to his dramatic genius Vasudevan Pillai attempted to explore the latent indigenous theatre tradition of Kerala. However, Western theatrical techniques had an influence in shaping his dramatic concepts. Though he has a deep knowledge of the philosophy and techniques of both Eastern and Western theatres, he has not tried to deliberately fit them into his composition and presentation. He preached and penned what he thought proper. Thus he became the voice and expression of truth and humanity in Malayalam theatre.

**Keywords-** *Indigenous Theatre, Ritual Performing Arts, Folk Art*

In India, the search for a postcolonial theatre had begun as far back as 1956. During the period of national freedom struggle, as in other areas, in the Indian theatre also new styles came into existence. As a continuation of modern national and international theatre movements, there sprung up a number of organizations with political and cultural objectives. With the intensity of the freedom movement, protest against colonial domination also intensified which reflected in all realms of art, especially in the theatre. But something could be done effectively, only by the end of 1960s and the beginning of 1970s. Through theatre workshops, activists scientifically explored this art form and subjected it to a comprehensive study both theoretically and practically. By the 1970s attempts were made to free it from foreign domination. Theatre enthusiasts came forward for a radical transformation of the

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theatre taking into account our traditional roots and identity, and making them the spirit of contemporary theatre.

In India, 'indigenous theatre' concept was first introduced by Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The pioneers in this field were Santha Gandhi, Habeeb Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, Ritwik Ghatak, Sombhu Mitra, Sheila Bhatia, P.L. Deshpande and Girish Karnad. The IPTA's traditionalism was the first main modern reaction against two deeply entrenched colonial practices: a century long denigration of corrupt indigenous forms by the colonial and the Indian urban elite and the thorough commercialization of the proscenium theatre by bourgeois Parsi entrepreneurs. The IPTA attempted to create a kind of cultural consciousness among the people of India. They believed that theatre has more roles to play than being just a medium of entertainment.

In Kerala, it was M. Govindan who first introduced the word 'indigenous', and was followed by C.N. Sreekantan Nair in his presentation of a paper titled 'Indigenous Theatre'. C.N. Sreekantan Nair's argument was that most of the theatres of the world developed from folk as well as classical traditions of their own countries. He was of the opinion that British theatre evolved from its medieval dramatic forms such as Mystery plays and Miracle plays and modern Japanese drama from their traditional theatre forms- *Noh* and *Kabuki*.

Sreekantan Nair observed that the influence of western theatre paved the way for flourishing of our theatre. He was of the opinion that our drama gets reduced to mere forging exercise as a result of the basic discrepancies of our tradition and the western models, which we tried to incorporate. He wanted to create a theatre by incorporating the essence of 'Thirayattam' and 'Kathakali'. He also dreamt of a theatre of our own in tune with our traditional roots and tried to devise his own performance theory which influenced serious theatre activists like G. Sankara Pillai and Kavalam Narayana Panikkar. Thus *Thanathu Natakavedi* affirms indigenously in two-fold way. It is intended to reveal indigenously of performance as well as that of the regional culture.

When native theatre concept evolved out of the theatre workshops in the later half of the 1960s most of the plays available for presentation were imitations of Western plays. Thus for implementing the concept of indigenous theatre that C.N. Sreekantan Nair's *Kali*, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar's *Sakshi*, G. Sankara Pillai's *Kiratham* and *Moodhevitheyam* were written. They focused not only on the use of verse but on a new concept of drama and theatre as well.

G. Sankara Pillai, already accustomed with folk theatre and folk ritual songs of Kerala developed further the concept and practice of a theatre based on indigenous dramaturgy. Performance of plays in the open air, make-up similar to that used in traditional folk theatre, use of costumes made of cheap, locally available material, stylization in stage movements,

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speech, gestures, stage decor - all these were ingrained into the new tradition of a theatre of the roots. As a result, the spectator had to come to the theatre with an awareness of his cultural traditions. Symbolism, ritualism and stylization pervaded his plays. His idea of a meaningful theatre found its effective completion in the creation of the 'School of Drama' at Thrissur, by the University of Calicut. His term as the chairman of the 'Kerala Sangeet Natak Academy' also strengthened the new tendencies and helped them confront the invasion of the commercial stage companies.

The Indian theatre is generally poetic, and in Kerala, the credit goes to Kavalam Narayana Panicker who retained its continuity. He wrote and presented plays by taking the essence of tribal, classical and ritual theatres and brought their energy into his play. Kavalam poured all his creative energy to form an alternative theatre stream. When the core of our traditional wealth was nearly lost and our cultural spirit almost ruined, he defied the assaults through his strong theatre technology. Kavalam has selected his own production methods which deviated from the mainstream realistic track and has adopted his own style that is original and deeply rooted in Kerala's traditional theatres, and he has written plays suiting his concepts and philosophy. C.N. Sreekantan Nair, however, had not greatly accomplished in materialising his concepts through his own creation *Kali*. But as with Kavalam's works, it could be affirmed that they really provided *Thanathu Natakavedi*. He could well recreate the creative foundations in Malayalam theatre through his skillful works like *Sakshi*, *Daivathaar*, *Avanavan Kadamba* and *Karimkutty*. Thus the proponents of indigenous theatre attempted to revive the native tradition in folk drama and they imbibed the essence of the day-to-day socio-cultural changes and very productively introduced the creative possibilities of acting in all its proportions and intricacies.

Thus the 1970s witnessed an upsurge in Malayalam theatre and dramatic activities. It was in this period that Vayala Vasudevan Pillai began his dramatic career and enlivened the Malayalam theatre. It was a heyday of all types of plays - commercial, professional and amateur. He wished to be a part of it and did his best to contribute to its growth. The profound awareness of the indigenous and foreign dramatic movements was his asset and energy. Both the Indian and native styles of composition have influenced his works. As it is noted by P. K. Venukuttan Nair, a veteran theatre personality in Malayalam, in *Vayala Vasudevan Pillayude Natakangal*:

Vayala is a playwright of rare caliber who tried to raise our theatre to a further stage by following the path shown by G. Sankara Pillai and C. N. Sreekantan Nair, who were the vanguards of a revolution initiated by N. Krishna Pillai in Malayalam theatre and dramatic literature. (Vasudevan Pillai 160)

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He was one of the few dramatists who were fortunate to know the world theatre at close hand. He could travel all over the world and interacted with major playwrights and directors, which provided him with a variety of experiences and insights about different theatrical experiments and technicalities and this shaped his writing career profoundly. It made him conscious of a renaissance that had to be taken place in Indian and regional theatres. Like G. Sankara Pillai, Vasudevan Pillai too believed that an understanding of various theatre movements from the time of ancient Greek plays up to the present would only make the modern theatre stronger and more influential.

Being a strong exponent of alternative stage, he was fortunate enough to work with Sankara Pillai, C.N. Sreekantan Nair and P.K. Venukuttan Nair to advance a new spatial concept in indigenous Malayalam theatre. He carried on the movement fostered by G. Sankara Pillai, by organizing innumerable *Natakakalaris*, workshops and lectures at the School of Drama and Fine Arts. He developed a new outlook and structure for Performing Arts education during his directorship of the School of Drama and Fine Arts from 1992 to 2005 and the chairman of the University of Kerala's Board of Studies in Performing and Visual Arts. He was able to direct more than 40 plays which include the works of Shakespeare, Ibsen and Tagore. Cine actors like Jagadish, Sreelatha and Sunil Sukhada were his disciples whom have grown and developed in his new and experimental theatre named 'Suvarnarekha' at Thiruvananthapuram. His students and disciples revere him as a great man who had tried to understand and love human beings with no thoughts of any rewards.

Vasudevan Pillai's plays deal with the tragedy of human life. His characters represent and address the issue of identity through meaningful dialogues. As a society comes under the dominance of other forces, people become helpless and lose their face. How globalization affects a man rooted in this soil is also part of the search for identity. The question of identity has come up wherever alien forces have conquered and established their dominance and destroyed the people's native culture. The native forms of performances developed through ages, based on ethnic and cultural elements, have been suppressed by the colonial powers especially in Asian colonial regions. These colonies were later freed from the western rule and when they became free, they began to mobilize their original strength and engaged in performing their creative activities based on their own ethnic, cultural and racial ethos. Such a power can be seen in the plays of Soyinka. Soyinka presents life deeply rooted in the indigenous soil. His wide acceptance is due to the African and ethnic values ingrained in a universal theatre idiom. He is strongly bound by a rich heritage of music, language, myth and oral tradition. Thus his intention is to rescue the surrendered African manhood and creativity through rituals conceptualized in a modern society. Like Soyinka, Vasudevan Pillai has drawn on the native cultural traditions with a view to address modern human issues.

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In Kerala, the indigenous theatre culture draws sustenance from ritual performing arts. We have a large variety of traditional art performances both ritualistic and secular. Some of these are classical and the rest folk. The folk arts are closer to the people. They have myths, legends and history, all combined into a holistic unit, which reflects the tradition of the people. In Kerala, right from the primitive ages, men used to perform rites and rituals in fulfillment of their spiritual love and devotion. Rituals differ from race to race, community to community and religion to religion. It denotes the identity and race of men and are closely related to the traditions followed by them for ages. Such traditions could be found in one's faiths, attachments, conventions and devotions which are passed on to the next generation.

Vasudevan Pillai believed that the Malayalam theatre had only benefited from coming into contact with the western concepts of the theatre. It transformed our concept of the dramatic structure. If in the earlier period it was the comedies of the western dramatists that influenced the Malayalam theatre, later Ibsen changed the whole scenario. The dramatists began to give importance to the plot. Nevertheless, undue influence of the western theatre created some unwelcome trends. With the coming of the proscenium theatre, we lost touch with the traditional folk theatre. The proscenium which we borrowed from the west distanced us from nature. But Vasudevan Pillai envisages a theatre that neither blindly imitating nor rejecting anything but judiciously absorbing various existing trends. He believed that drama could be shaped by both indigenous and western tradition, but purposefully mixing them will not produce good results. Choosing costumes, make-up, choreographic patterns and musical elements from traditional forms alone will not make it indigenous. Instead we have to make sure that the core of our culture is organically absorbed into the theatre form. As G. Sankara Pillai aptly pointed out in his book *Natakadarsanam*:

What really needed is a thorough synthesis of all the three traditions- folk, classical and contemporary- to evolve a new form and a new style of production- a new direction to be handed over as our legacy. (89)

The reality in the day-to-day life and the reality in a work of art are two different things. When it was felt that realism alone is not enough to reflect human reality, other dramatic techniques like surrealism and absurdism were experimented in modern Malayalam theatre. Vasudevan Pillai was influenced by Artaud, Grotowsky, Schchener, Ibsen, Brecht, and Peter Brook. These western dramatists have acknowledged their indebtedness to eastern traditional theatre. They were interested in studying the rich and varied folk arts, myths and magical practices of Southeast Asia and Africa. They assimilated the spirit and beauty of the traditional theatre and experimented their productions as a revolt against conventional ways of play production. Vasudevan Pillai, influenced by Artaud, believed that an actor has to be inspired ethnically. Only then he can go deep into his own self. He believed that an actor's

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strength depends upon his relation with his roots, so he must be fearless enough to take off his masks to wipe out imperialism of all kinds.

Vasudevan Pillai was modest and led a simple life. He was not driven by any ideological dogmas except Gandhian ideals, and his plays very much demonstrate these Gandhian values which ultimately prompted him to shape his characters. He published about 19 books including plays for children namely *Kunji Chirakukal* (Little Wings) and *Swarnakokkukal* (Golden Cranes) , major dramas like *Vishwadarshanam*, *Thulasivanam*, *Agni*, *Varavelppu*, *Kuchelagadha*, *Andubali*, *Akatharo*, and *Udambadi*; one act plays, translations, research papers and critical studies. In his plays he posed many questions of social inequalities, personal purity, dishonesty of politicians and rulers and the ill treatment of the oppressed.

As a teacher, playwright, actor and director at the same time, he thought that writing, acting and directing were complementary to each other. One could identify the progression of creativity in his writing style which stretches from his first published play *Vishwadarshanam* to the last set of his plays. The richness that distinguishes Vasudevan Pillai from other playwrights could be seen from the fact that he recreated indigenous classical - ritual - folkloric art forms to refresh modern theatre and social life.

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