
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lalish Theatre: Enacted Bodies, Voices and Spaces in Heterotopias

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to uncover aspects of artistic performances where the lines between real life and artistic representations are quite blurred. To achieve this purpose, we will investigate the interdependencies of the artistic power of *Lalish* theatre, a performance troupe emerging from an oppressed *Kurdish* context, coupled with the human and socio-political dimensions of *Lalish* performances. By adopting a qualitative descriptive analysis of key features of the performances, the research delves into the methods employed in *Lalish* performances to challenge and destabilize conventional dramatic norms, hence the emergence of a compelling form of tacit social resistance. Premised on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, the study investigates the ways *Lalish* performances employ space and artists' bodies and voices to implant viewers within innovative realms, those that expose, upset and criticize societal norms all at once. The inquiry is focused on the concept of enacted utopias, through which *Lalish* theatre disrupts overriding hierarchies and foresees alternative realities. Through diverse cultural connotations premised on the deconstruction of conventional narratives, *Lalish* performances speak a unique theatrical language, one that enhances human understanding and social awareness and supports ethics of equity and human dignity. The research examines how *Lalish* theatre transports audiences into freer spaces where they are allowed not only to interpret performances, but also to contribute to constructing them. It is through such non-chronological presentations aiming at creating a potential broader vision of a more equitable reality that the troupe exhibits aspects of resistance to the objectifying and constraining practices endorsed by conventional dance. By investigating the interplay harmonizing body, voices and spaces, this study reveals how *Lalish* holistic and innovative performances might serve as a powerful artistic tool for creating new realities where human empowerment equity and dignity could prevail.

KEYWORDS

Lalish theatre, Heterotopias, Enacted bodies, Voices, Spaces, Performance, Resistance, Utopias.

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1. Introduction

Modern performance arts today often occur at the intersection of the real and fictive: human factual life and artistic representations with all the multifaceted symbolic dimensions it might bear. Founded by *Kurdish* artists within an oppressed socio-political context¹, *Lalish* theatre embodies such forms of performances that conquer diverse and constantly shifting spaces and themes. They are pieces of art that controversially relate to the traditional notions of time and place, while disconnecting themselves from the real world, thus embodying forms of enacted utopias that implicitly bear real, though sometimes, reversed images of the factual spatiotemporal world. In this sense, *Lalish* performances are related or implanted in utopias; that is to say in those spaces defined by Foucault as "sites with no real place" or "sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case, these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" (1984: 3).

¹ Consult *Lalish Theaterlabor* website for more detailed background information about the troupe: <https://www.lalishtheater.org/>

Lalish theatre very typical performances belong to unknown locations, whilst escaping any confining constraints that may prevent them from reaching various real grounds and awakening multiple conceptualizations in the audiences' minds. Being as such, they could be viewed from a Foucaultian perspective as situated in an area of enacted utopias. They are a sort of elusive art that easily leaks into various implicit, but well targeted locations, mostly public spheres, bearing considerable and rich social, human and cultural load. It is this interweaving relationship between cultures, identities and spaces (time and location) that constitute the keystone of *Lalish* performances, transcending through certain modes the enacted body movements and sounds presented in emblematic spaces and via symbolic productions incarnated in the images and sounds spread through the performers' well trained bodies. While seeking to reach diverse cultural backgrounds situated in current social contexts and/or extending to other historical strata, *Lalish* theatre audaciously, still tacitly awakens the realistic social and cultural identities in the audiences' actual minds and real spaces, hence assigning them innovative roles foretelling mighty changes within themselves and their respective backgrounds. Such inner stimulation instigated by the performers' inner selves and extended to the audiences' minds and real worlds can only be achieved through bodies that strive to challenge the austere rules of the world of dance, whilst blooming in a soil of artistic creativity and empowerment. This genuine interrelation between *Lalish* troupe and their audiences is well pictured in the way they involve the audience in their performances through actions and mutual non-verbal dialogues and even through the way they sit the audience down within the enacted space: "The audience is always part of the performance, [which] is like a ritual, [they] are not spectators, [they] are participants! We have all the time a [direct] contact with them"².

2. Theoretical Framework

Though falling within the borders of the dance world, echoing those rules suggestive of docility and subjugation, as viewed from a Foucaultian perspective (Foucault: 1979), *Lalish* theatre relegates these confines as the troupe does very well in operating beyond such surface level disciplinary canons, transplanting thus the art/artist in, a further, more creative soil. With this in mind, *Lalish* theatre tacitly calls for the audiences' denigration of cultural divides. Their work, somewhat, sets the scene for new perspectives, new attitudes and new inner assertive selves within the audiences' minds; differently put: new persons having new roles. Seemingly divergent from the view contending that the world of dance practice/training implies that "bodies are shaped and molded by society" (Johnson: 1992), *Lalish* theatre does not yield passively to those dance techniques dubbed by Foucault as technologies of the self. Being embedded within a set of dehumanizing canons, such technologies subject individuals to a kind of "self-surveillance" (Green, 2002-03: 100) strictly requiring specific behaviours of dancers. That *Lalish* theatre genuinely steers clear of this far less effective attributes of the world of dance does not forestall the troupe's involvement in a complicated process of techniques, so characteristic of a sophisticated dance school. Still, *Lalish* theatre performance methods deliberately and controversially allow the artists wide grounds for concretizing their own vision of enacted bodies and spaces, their awareness of the self and the reality and their own conceptualizations of individual and collective processes, hence the production of art/artists fueled by issues inherent in a universal human realm, where cultural boundaries are erased and where performance spaces become so emblematic.

Lalish theatre's view of the dancing body seems to chime with Thomas' (1988) perception of the artist as an aware entity, an entity that is capable of contemplating itself "from the 'inside out' where one is aware of feelings, movements and intentions, rather than looking objectively from the outside in" (Green, 2002-03: 101). *Lalish* theatre blurs the borders between the strict rules characterizing the traditional world of dance, implicitly supportive of a "body/mind" split (Green, 2002-03: 102) subjecting both of these major human constructs to the ravaging authority (Johnson: 1992) of dominant cultural values (Behnke: 1990-91) on one hand, and an inventive form of theatre that foregrounds the freedom of bodies and the suggestiveness of performance places on the other hand. It is a novel theatrical form that is capable of discerning and picturing human flaws, one that employs the rules of the dance world, rather than slavishly abide by them, whilst seeking to achieve harmony between body, mind, scenery and place, hence the concretization of the inner self within the performance space. Regarded per se, *Lalish* theatre constitutes a kind of "shift that moves outward from micro to macro dimensions and from self to society" (Green, 2002-03: 102).

Traditional western dance schools are known for adopting strictly designed behavioural rules premised on "disconnecting people from their sensory and sensual selves, through imposing external models of 'ideal bodies', or standards of what a body 'should be' and how it should act" (Green, 2002-03: 103). Perceived as such, traditional models of dance/performance are understood to promote, obliquely, the repression of groups and individuals, and the supremacy of the already flourishing and dominating cultural values, under the yoke of which the oppressed groups gradually lose their freedom of interpretation of their backgrounds and spaces, their sense of "authority" over their bodies, and as a matter of fact, their sense of "authority" over their minds. It is this strict oppressive method of operating that hinders reaching a free theatrical practice that is intertwined with the actual human issues and freed from bodily repressive and objectifying instructions. Through this lens, *Lalish* theatre's relinquishment of that objectifying perception of dancers' bodies, as physical entities conditioned and manipulated by the materialistic ideals of the dance and performance world, seems to be plausible.

² Shamal Amin and Nigar Hasib. Personal interview. Oct. 30, 2020.

The duality of mind and body and the fusion of space, time, artists, objects and all other potential enacted elements are all exemplary of a distinctive form of theatre. It is a theatre where the contours of all of these areas are blurred in such a way that looks away from the "objectified perspective" focused on attaining an ideal body, "a stereotypical" one (Green, 2002-03: 108). In other words, *Lalish* theatre transcends that vision of 'manipulated' bodies subjected to specific physical measures and operating in traditional frozen spaces void of the multidimensionality one typically encounters in *Lalish* performances and spaces. In essence, the objectified body, *Lalish* theatrical practice avoids and transcends, is required to meet specific features, as regards shape, weight and colour, let alone ways of moving, singing and acting within a space that favours the audience/stage divides. Being split from the contextual factors shaping the identity of audiences, artists, and evidently art itself, such mechanical measures might entail hazardous effects on the expressiveness of bodies, voices, spaces and creativeness and unfurling of actions themselves. For objectifying bodies and relegating the inner existence of performers and their free human interaction with the performance spaces and their own cultural backgrounds would inexorably lead to objectifying art itself, hence the freeze of this vital human realm. It is an unfortunate outcome that one often regrettably witnesses in a number of recent productions, forcibly, named by some as art.

This orientation towards blending the physical with the human within sites of enacted utopias is what shapes the core of *Lalish* philosophy. In this vein, *Lalish* theatre represents one of the few escapes available before art/artists at a time when non-art conceitedly competes with serious artistic production either on the web or on the daily proliferating TV channels. *Lalish* theatre's work seeks "the discovery of a new fusion of voice, movement, space and life as a whole. The dissolution of the separation between art and life, between aesthetics and common values, is a decisive factor in our research projects" (Amin & Hasib, 2020). Otherwise stated, universal human issues such as gender concerns, social injustice and cultural divides are understood to be, deliberately, brought together in *Lalish* performances. These are all fused and expressed through physical body movements, dance, sound, music, voices, action, songs and scenery to form one convergent artistic amalgam presented in well selected suggestive spaces (usually public ones). It is no wonder, then, that these structures are viewed by Amin and Hasib as "essential and central aspects of research of the *Lalish* Theaterlabor" (Amin & Hasib, 2020).

3. Methodology

Based on the previously described theoretical framework, along with the multifaceted features of *Lalish* theatre, as performances premised on varied sociopolitical-artistic dimensions, this research makes use of a qualitative-descriptive approach centered on a scrupulous analysis and description of key emblematic instances of *Lalish* artistic performances. Through meticulous observation of the way the performances are presented and thorough analysis of their artistic aspects and human dimensions, the study captures the nuances of the context of the performances, which comprises among other elements the audience interaction with the artists, the detailed features of the performances and the artists' embodied expression. Through this lens, the research attempts to shed light, as well, on the sociopolitical and human dimensions of the performances. Such in-depth analysis involves thematic enciphering and interpretation of visual and auditory aspects of *Lalish* performances aimed at exposing underlying connotations, signs, and cultural inferences embedded within the various instances of the performances. This method is supposed to provide a deep and holistic understanding of the analyzed artistic processes and their effects on participants and the wide-ranging universal socio-cultural landscapes.

4. Analysis of Main Features and Dimensions of *Lalish* Performances

From the very onset, *Lalish* double-edged research-performance work has been empowered with "the ritualistic, experimental vocal- and singing techniques and the originally composed songs" (Amin & Hasib, 2020). As they combine dance, songs and voices, *Lalish* performances are hardly concerned with the stereotyped body ideal infused with the requirements imposed by the media and the docility of bodies in dance schools as described by Foucault (1979). They are implanted in enacted utopian spaces, inspired by contextual factors, yet distanced from direct reality (though strongly connected with it). *Lalish* theatre's spaces are *placeless* (Foucault: 1984) ones. They could exist in every culture, in every mind; they are associated with reality though they are not real. In such spaces, *Lalish* performances are mirrored through bodies, free though well-trained ones. Brilliantly striking the balance between trained bodies and artistic performance inspired by the notion of the universal placeless spaces, the free awareness of inner selves, the Other and the socio-cultural background with its pros and cons is one of *Lalish* theatre's strong points, par excellence. Drawing on this experimentalization on merging the body, mainly as a singing and dancing channel, with mind, as a socio-cultural conscience corroborates the vital role songs play in *Lalish* performances: "they are the source of the rhythm, of physical presence and also the source of action". Songs in this sense are "[made] visible". They "are not only being sung, but they are being done" (Amin & Hasib, 2020).

The end presentations/workshops in the annual ICPS (*International Centre for Performance Studies*) conference in Tangier (in 2016 and 2018 for instance) are illustrative of such multilayered performances where ritual vocality, songs, space and action become indicative of the audiences' concerns. This is evident in the way the audience is seated in a half circle around the performers within unusual convivial spaces (a room in a museum for instance) evocative of mutual understanding and equality: *Lalish* performances, according to Amin and Hasib, are "based on energy exchange, so the [place where the audience is seated] is very important [...]"

The audience sits mostly in a circle around the performers, or half a circle on three sides. We welcome our audience and show them where they are sitting so that we can secure our energy through this contact"³. In such a well-prepared setting, all forms of splits are erased. It is a space where the distance between the performers and audience is collapsed. Differently, in conventional theatre, those splits and distances are often foregrounded throughout the traditional divides separating the audience from the stage. The workshops presented in Tangier, as most of *Lalish* theatre's works, are presented in public spheres: a museum and a hotel conference room. The choice of the enacted space itself alludes to *Lalish* theatre's purposeful attempt to meet contextual conditions within which the audience involvement in the performance and parity with the performers could be easily achieved. Such "multidimensionality of the space is perceived through feeling and hearing the voices, tones and sounds, so that a feeling of space and spatial awareness can develop amongst those present" Amin & Hasib, 2020). The 2018 end presentation workshop in Tangier international ICPS conference mirrors the general aspects of *Lalish* work premised on an intentional staying away from linguistic communication and a purposeful use of improvisation, lighting techniques, movement and rhythm. The performance in question reveals also a deliberate relegation of space suggestive of universality and placelessness and facilitating the audience involvement in the performance without verbal communication. Yet dialogue, parity and mutual understanding are there, impressively present, in every move, every voice, every gaze and in the very way performers interact with the space and the audience. Constant communication with the audiences is implanted in *Lalish* theatre's continuous attempt to enhance the bridge between theatre and life, the fact that mirrors Amin and Hasib's interest in the field of anthropology (Hamed, 2019) and their concern for issues inherent in human history: issues of freedom, gender equality and human dignity.

The opening scene of the 2018 performance (as shown in the video featuring well-selected and representative scenes from the end workshop), (Haouasse, 2018), echoes that eloquent attempt to establish an unyielding contact zone between the art/artists and freedom/creativity. The performers (males and females) stand still in a semicircular row. The gloominess of the scene, accentuated by the dark walls and floor and black suits, is alleviated as a female performer holding a white bouquet of flowers picks petals and lets them fall on the floor on which other colourful petals lay. The action seems as a gleam of hope in a world of despair and inequalities, as a brave yearning towards the eternity of humanistic ethics and the strength of the bonds with Mother Earth⁴. It is a well enacted purposeful denunciation of the overwhelming materialistic pragmatic splits. The very shape of the way the performers stand close to each other wearing all black simple suits (half-sleeve long gowns for females and half-sleeve T-shirts and trousers for males) is evocative of the highly required solidarity and equality among individuals of both genders and from diverse social strata. What further reaffirms this unified longing for equality and freedom is the way a number of female performers simultaneously leave the half circle as they walk confidently preceded by the singing self-assured Nigar Hasib. Either when standing or when walking around, the performers looking still with their arms left naturally straight along their bodies, bring to mind a very confident aura of determination to reach ultimate goals. Within such a solemn atmosphere, the audience's common consciousness is called upon to join in a long and far from easy, though pleasant, spiritual journey towards a free existence, one that is void of repression and uncreativity. *Lalish* theatre's crave for a free creative existence of artists and humanity as a whole is further embodied in the one-spot lighting focused on one central point of the performance space instead of the performers' bodies or faces. Space in this performance is continually downgraded: it is there but it is not representative of a specific culture or identity. Space is rather absented though it is there reflecting the audience and performers' states of mind (along with their amalgam of diverse cultural backgrounds) mainly through varied actions and a genuine light/darkness dichotomy. It is a universal placeless space: "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (Foucault, 1984: 4). *Lalish* theatre in this sense emblematically favours human psyche and intellect over physical presence, geographical belongingness and bodily docility which rather chime with the traditional dance rules and requirements reminiscent of repressive regimes seeking to tame natural human liberties. Within this semi-dark solemn atmosphere, commences Nigar Hasib's strong singing combined with her expressive gazes targeting the audience involvement in the performance, in such a way that implicitly addresses their consciousness and incites their awakening to perceive the ruthless reality swallowed up into a spiral of dehumanizing predicaments. Actually, Amin and Hasib purposefully focus on absenting the features of the performers' bodies and faces, the explicit linguistic signs and even the chronology of events, often present in traditional dramatic models. In parallel, the space is controversially downgraded yet efficiently and virtually present to mirror the selves and identities of performers and audience alike. This unique nature of space in *Lalish* theatre corresponds to Foucault's concept of Heterotopias which are linked to utopias by "a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror". Such mirror combines both utopias and heterotopias since selves can be seen there though they are present only as "a sort of shadow" and since "the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy" (Foucault, 1984: 4). This implies that Amin and Hasib seek a total split from the old performance/dance schools' canons molded into models and codes ruled by psychophysical control and direct portrayal of places, hence *Lalish* theatre's resolute attempt to foreground and deepen the effect of a typical

³ Shamal Amin and Nigar Hasib. Personal interview. Oct. 30, 2020.

⁴ Shamal Amin and Nigar Hasib. Personal interview. Oct. 30, 2020.

humanistic discourse. It is a discourse that is genuinely distanced from direct depiction of specific sites, though it controversially embodies expressive inverted images of human life.

In a subsequent scene, Nigar Hasib leaves the half circle again followed by the other performers. They look as organized as in the first scene. Each performer knows well their role and physical position reminiscent of individuals' role in real life and suggestive of Foucault's concept of Heterotopias. In fact, the whole group seems to be representative of a human community with its tensions, desires, and especially with its members seeking positive change from within the minds of individuals. Nigar per se takes on the role of a brave woman singing the chant of freedom and leading her counterparts to the path of change. Nigar walks towards a simple wooden bench on which a small music box (dubbed in Indian tradition Shruti Box) is put. According to Amin and Hasib⁵, the Shruti Box is used to "amplify" her song, an artistic fact that is, mostly and regrettably, cut out of the video. Being as simple and motionless as they are, the bench and box apparently stand for serenity, calm and wisdom. Additionally, the traditional box raises vibrant questions related to asserting identities and enhancing equality among people and nations in a modern world ruled by cultural divides. The qualities associated with the objects, moves and sounds employed are all highly required aspects for any potential positive change in human relationships. In that spirit, Nigar picks up the Shruti Box serenely as though it were a cherished object; and as if this action signals the start of the groups' escape, their journey to a land of freedom and hope, all the performers follow Nigar. The previous stillness epitomized in the performers' serene walking and in the very nature of the objects featured in the centre of the performance space (the bench, the Shruti Box and some scattered petals) is stirred now. The performers move towards some stairs in the vicinity, knowing very well where to sit. Again, the space, exemplified in the stairs, seems to be a universal placeless space belonging to all cultures, though not directly claiming to portray a specific location. It is a crossroad of Utopias and Heterotopias, a space that is, all together, connected and disconnected from reality. Ascending the stairs of hope and getting seated there, a female performer holds a bouquet of flowers, and another one offers a male peer a white flower, while another performer puts his pet-dog into a sitting position. The symbolic getting on board by all categories of individuals, accompanied by 'their pets', stands as evidence for their total despair as regards their actual lives and hope in a brighter future. The 'pet' further echoes the strength of the bonds that should fuse humanity with Mother Nature be it human, animal or environmental. This scene, along with other ones, is a call for return to the origins: the natural intuitive moral code premised on parity among people of all creeds and races and respect of natural bounties. The journey has started now to a marine melody sung collectively. Nigar sits in a leading captain-like position. Now, Shamal Amin appears before the passengers playing the role of a conductor. The whole scene is reminiscent of a ship taking the artists to a destination where creativity and freedom itself could be practised far from the paws of repression. Throughout various scenes, the way the performers sit, stand, walk, sing, position their bodies and gaze firmly at nowhere reaffirms *Lalish* theatre's focus on non-verbal language, singing, visual signals (scenery, acting, costumes, lighting etc.), as well as the psychological interaction with the audience and the performance space. This further confirms that *Lalish* theatre keeps away from the old canonized foregrounding of the audience/stage divisions, as well as the traditional formal concern with the superficial features of the performance space and the outward physical appearance of performers, conventionally, joined with subjecting their bodies to taming traditional standards related to shape and weight.



Image I (lalishtheater.org)

In another scene, the performers squat around the wooden bench on which the Shruti Box is placed, and around Nigar who continues her singing, then waves at the group to follow her. The performers stand up and walk in a circle joined by Nigar whose song seems to contribute much to arousing the audience's awareness and willingness to partake in future actions. The half circle of performers is formed again, standing then squatting before Nigar who faces the performers with her gestures and highly vocalised deeply communicative song, with her prudent steps and focused gazes addressing the deepest points in the consciousness of every performer or viewer. Such highly communicative gazes incarnate *Lalish* perspective aimed at involving the audience as active and equal partakers in the enacted actions. Then, continues the journey; the performers are sitting on the stairs as previously described, singing the marine chant with resolute voices and firm gazes, encouraged by Shamal the conductor to go

⁵ Shamal Amin and Nigar Hasib. Personal interview. Oct. 30, 2020.

on and on singing and persevering to attain their ultimate goals. The sober low-pitched marine song is coupled with Nigar's stronger feminine voice stirring the zeal of the partakers in the adventure. Then, appears again the group of performers standing in a half circle before the bench and the Shruti Box. They stand still, whilst Nigar's highly-pitched singing is heard in the background as if calling upon the conscience of those present not to give up or waver: to continue the fight for a better fate. Nigar's singing is, subsequently, merged with a highly vocalized male voice and with the groups' lower collective singing in a sign of solidarity and determination. Nigar, back to the performers and facing the audience in such a fashion that emulates mutual understanding and unity, leaves the group, continuously, singing and making gestures with her arms, akin to a free flying-bird; then she faces the performers again. These cyclic walks and moves, gazes and gestures joined with varieties of voices and songs allude to the magnitude of communication among people without which humanity can never be extricated from the clutches of cultural divides. In calm steps mirroring wisdom and confidence, Nigar, back to the group of performers again, raises both arms tacitly asking them to stop the singing as she herself pauses. A sense of concord, unison and confidence reigns over the space.



Image II (lalishtheater.org)

Suggestive of solidarity, equality and eagerness to confront the divide challenges uniformly, another ensuing scene displays various voices, sounds, forms of singing, actions and dualities of stillness and mobility. The scene is highly characterized by a deep fusion of such sounds, gestures and actions; the first of which (as shown in the video) is the inspiring marine song heard vanishing steadily in the background. A simultaneous highly suggestive action is that of the female performer holding the bouquet of flowers, while standing still picking and dropping petals on the floor, an action suggestive of optimism as regards the continuity of life in harmony with Mother Earth and human values. The other performers squat soberly except one male performer who stands facing Nigar. The latter, standing as well, holds and moves tellingly the Shruti Box, while the male performer slowly removes his shirt revealing his naked slim torso. The performer's slow action and Nigar's standing position and slight moving of the symbolic Shruti Box remarkably contrast the stillness of the other performers: it is a complex eye-catching action underlining gender equality and feminine and cultural identity all at once. What is stressed in these successive scenes is the set of well designed expressive actions; as for the setting, it is once again relegated. That this complex and significant set of actions is highlighted alludes to the neutral nature of space in this performance: it is an unknown utopian site. Still, its connection to realities across cultures turns it into an enacted utopia or heterotopia. This strong use of symbolism and absencing of linguistic signs comes as no surprise since Lalish theatre purposefully relies on suggestive visual and auditory means to raise profound questions concerning the very human existence. For instance, the judicious combination of various sounds derived from different languages and accompanied with vastly evocative moves and dances affirms this resolute and significant absencing of linguistic signs indicative of the necessity of obliterating artificial divides among cultures. What illustrates this manifold use of sounds and gestures is the way male performers stand, subsequently, in a half circle, while female performers squat on the floor behind Nigar who, powerfully, sings and moves her arms as if trying to reach something before her, as if gathering glimpses of hope from the near future, as if endeavouring to move forward to a better existence. Meanwhile, the female performers join her performing the same movement. This scene is reminiscent of that of the ship since Nigar and the female performers move their arms as if rowing or trying to reach the unknown: Nigar sits in a front position leading the group to a safer and freer shore, the fact that signals their collective longing for emancipation and human dignity. The scene further gets complex as a male performer leaves the group flexibly and harmoniously dancing to Nigar's song in a trance-like indulgence.

Lalish theatre's attempt to spread concepts of equality and erase artificial materialistic splits is confirmed in this scene, in particular, as an abrupt quite long pause ensues tellingly interrupting the precedent slow rhythmic dance, singing and movements. The subsequent 'rhythmic discourse' is marked by a change in the tone, voice and accent, all evocative of Kurdish language and chants.

The scene is dominated by successive pauses and movements of arms which harmonize with the male dancer's moves. The diversity of accents, merged with the flexible moves of the dancer, echoes *Lalish's* philosophy premised on cultural diversity, dialogue and gender equality. This is reconfirmed as the male dancer, back to audience, is faced by a female performer who stands up with her arms straight. She starts singing a hymn akin to a sacred chant as the dancer joins the group standing in a semi-circle. The chant, coupled with the female performer's bird or cross-like arms position, incarnates *Lalish* theatre's call for freedom, equality and religious diversity, the latter pictured in the cross-like position of the arms.

The female dancer stops singing, then lowers her arms. She, unpredictably, turns surprised by Nigar's sudden gestures and chanting-like talk in a new tone and typical accent. The other female performers follow Nigar, while performing similar moves without singing. The dancer joins the rest of the female performers: all of them move as if lured by the seemingly mystical instructions included in Nigar's optimistic spiritual talk. Afterwards, they join the male performers standing in a half circle, while Nigar continues her mystical gestures and chanting, back to the performers, then joins the group. The whole scene alludes to the concord that should unite people of different backgrounds and genders as far as their ultimate positive aspirations towards freedom, equality and dignity are concerned.

Next, the audience is overwhelmed by a series of meaningful sounds, chief of which is a dog barking, followed by the marine song reminiscent of the on-board passengers accompanied by their pet and leaving to an unknown better destination. The song is coupled with a female expressive singing followed by an extraordinary talk that is soon merged with Nigar's chanting. Amidst this choral-like mixture of voices, Nigar followed by another female performer, engages in intense moves and gestures. Acting like duellers, the two performers, distanced from each other, walk, abruptly swap places and make gestures. They are engaged in a deep dialogue predictably leading to vital decisions, a dialogue where only Nigar can be heard since she is the one who sings, while the other performers' communication is focused on meaningful gazes, moves and gestures. The whole scene is premised on successive expressive actions, while the space of the performance is once more downgraded. For what chiefly matters is the multidimensional nature of the suggestive actions that could belong to any location and any cultural identity. The scene is evocative of a long humanistic battle against cultural divides. It is this combination of overlapping voices, tones, moods, accents, gestures and actions that shape the conceptual background of *Lalish* theatre: a theatre so associated with human life, sensations and aspirations, a theatre where linguistic signs, along with the traditional rules constraining bodies and spaces, become useless and functionless.

After this series of chants, dances, moves and acts, comes a most emblematic 'climactic' action, one that puts to the test the issue of confronting and thwarting the artificial cultural splits. It is the concretization and the direct facing of the loathed divide. To introduce this confrontation, the symbolic duel stops as the two female performers rejoin the group. A potential victory seems to be on sight embodied in a recurrent optimistic action: that of the female performer picking petals and dropping them on the floor. Shamal's voice is heard in the background giving a solemn speech. Being non-linguistic as the other songs and talks in *Lalish* theatre, the speech remains interpretable given all the rich signals enhancing the performance. Shamal's voice is shortly combined with Nigar's singing and a female performer's expressive dancing and gazes focused on Nigar who joins her.



Image III (lalishtheater.org)

Now, the decisive moment has come: that of confronting the dreadful divide. It is now that the audience would, probably, discern a roll of paper laid on the floor to concretize all forms of borders⁶, particularly cultural divides mostly leading to tragic divergences. To the voice of the female performer's singing and Shamal's sober talk, Nigar fixes the paper to the floor with her feet and extends it before her as she walks forward, making allusion to humans' potential powers capable of controlling and rising above all forms

⁶ Shamal Amin and Nigar Hasib. Personal interview. 06 oct. 2020.

of splits and discords. Nigar holds one end of the paper with both hands, the other end being glued to the floor, and extends the paper-roll placing it on the floor as a long white strip. Four female performers approach the long paper contemplating the scene as though thinking of a way for freeing the humanity from the abhorrent divides exemplified in the white strip laid before them.

A female performer sings in a voice teeming with emotion, whilst moving, gesturing and gazing at the border-like strip of paper. Meanwhile, petals are being dropped incessantly by the aforementioned performer. The two positive simultaneous actions both signal the approaching end of all divides thanks to human understanding and harmony. Amidst her passionate chanting in a novel accent indicative of Spanish sounds and traditional singing, the female performer eloquently steps over the strip of paper, crossing with one foot to the other side, hence *Lalish* theatre's urge for the necessity of real actions endorsing humanism and obliterating artificial splits.

The female performer, suddenly replaces her foot backwards singing calmly then in a higher intonation. She stops singing; then Nigar, who slowly joins her, is heard talking softly. Both of them face the audience and the symbolic divide, singing in diverse tones varying between soft sad cadences and vivacious hopeful ones. The multiplicity of tones and accents highlight once again the concepts of equality, cultural diversity, hope and resistance to dehumanizing pressures. The two female performers leave the scene to join the rest of the group, while the performer with the bouquet continues to drop the petals. Now, Nigar starts a new zealous song, apparently, calling for collective action against the divides. The response promptly comes as the group joins her singing. No sooner does the collective singing start, than a male voice is heard chanting in a different higher enthusiastic tone. The combination of voices sounds as a chant of victory.

The performers walk around the white strip. They squat, and again the male performer uncovers his torso: it is the looming final struggle. Meanwhile, Nigar uses her Indian musical instrument (the Shruti Box) indicative of cultural diversity to play a typical kind of music that chimes both with her own singing composed of varied accents and rhythms, and with the performer's flexible dancing picturing human struggle against artificial splits. The richness and power of the scene is accentuated as the dancer steps on the white strip and the performer with the bouquet persists in dropping her petals. The action ends as the dancer squats and Nigar leaves the scene. A sound akin to the three traditional theatre blows is heard signaling the end of the struggle. Only the performer with the bouquet keeps on dropping her petals in a way that foretells a promising human prospect. Then, Shamal appears from a darker corner addressing those present confidently and serenely as if telling them about the happy ending of an epic story. The unknown dark place from which Shamal appears further foregrounds the heterotopian nature of space in the performance.

5. Key Results

Having thoroughly described and analysed the main features of *Lalish* performances, it has become quite evident that it is through such non-chronological presentations that *Lalish* theatre addresses the audience's conscience allowing them a free and broad space where they can think, interpret and react freely to the scenes and sounds being displayed before them. Despite this freedom of interpretation, the essence of the performance seems to be quite clear and straightforward as Nigar's analysis and interpretation of the voices⁷, dances and actions predominantly corresponds to my personal interpretation, as a spectator, of the most significant moments of the work. It is a performance that deals with universal issues of freedom, equality and the right in a dignified life. Even the appellation *Lalish*, derived from a Kurdish name referring to a temple belonging to the Yazidi faith, mirrors this orientation as it refers to an enlightened life (Awad, 2015): a life where freedom and equality reign. Hence, the works of the troupe and even its name relate to their interest in advocating the right of all humans in a free dignified life, a life where creativity and innovation would never be restrained. That *Lalish* theatre supports human freedom and dignity is exemplified in the multiple actual origins of the performers partaking in the troupe's performances, as well as the various identities exhibited through the multiple linguistic sounds, rhythms and dances they perform. It is a diversity that is eloquently unified as the performers sing, dance and move in highly harmonious manners suggestive of the troupe's philosophy based on freedom and equality. What further confirms this harmonious diversity is the absencing of space as a traditional codified setting to allow a broader interpretation of heterotopian spaces situated between the virtual and the real. *Lalish* theatre's work implicitly speaks of a 'unified' diversity where the text, with its events, chronology and linguistic messages, is purposefully deconstructed and absented, where innovation and experimentalization on space, scenery, performance, actions, movements and sounds prevail (Naim, 2005).

6. Conclusion

Being committed to universal themes of freedom, equality, and human dignity, it is evident throughout this analysis that *Lalish* performances eschew conventional theatrical forms abiding by the norms of chronological narratives. Instead, *Lalish* theatre calls upon the audiences to freely consider and interpret highly suggestive performances, those that speak of multiple human and sociopolitical themes within liberated innovative spaces. The blend of linguistic voices, identities, attitudes and messages conveyed throughout various channels in *Lalish* performances, simultaneously, underscore a deeply rooted philosophy in *Lalish* theatrical

⁷ Shamal Amin and Nigar Hasib. Personal interview. 06 oct. 2020.

works as shown through the analysis of various key instances of the performances. It is a philosophy founded on unity and equality molded within a diversified context. Lalish concept of unity in diversity is concretized, as discussed previously, in the purposeful steering away from conventional special boundaries, hence Lalish's experimental approach premised on the rejection of constraints of all kinds. The troupe's work is an empowered artistic expression resisting against constraining norms and advocating for a world governed by integrity, free creativity and individual human rights.

7. Limitations and Future Studies

While the study attempts to delve into multiple innovative aspects of *Lalish* theatre as a form of artistic resistance against sociopolitical constraints, it is important to highlight certain limitations. A number of performances constituted the focus of this study, the fact that provided deep insights into their nature and dimensions. The qualitative analysis of specific aspects of these performances might not have been highly efficient in capturing other potential features of the troupe's work. Future research could be directed towards a more in-depth investigation of the sociopolitical factors involved in the emergence and development of *Lalish* artistic work. Further contextualization of the performances is also possible through a more detailed and methodological exploration of the ways *Lalish* theatre impact its audiences. Studying the troupe's work through comparative approaches would also allow to uncover the artistic and cultural roles of the troupe particularly within its Kurdish artistic context. Such in-depth contextualized comparative investigation of *Lalish* work could trigger similar artistic expressions and more research in the field, hence the emergence of novel avenues in artistic creativity, innovative research in performance studies and potential positive social change.

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