

Chapter 7

Embodied Epistemologies in Theatre: Indigenous Oral Traditions and the Decolonial Reimagination of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study explores indigenous theatre practices in Bangladesh, emphasizing the embodied nature of oral performance traditions as sites of decolonial knowledge-making. By critically analyzing the spontaneous, unscripted performance style of renowned palakar (folk storyteller-performer) Islam Uddin, the research demonstrates how folk theatre, such as pala gaan (narrative musical storytelling), integrates life experiences, cultural identity, and spiritual beliefs beyond Western stage conventions. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Indigenous epistemologies, the study reveals the political and epistemological power of storytelling as resistance against colonial frameworks. It argues that theatre in rural Bangladesh is not merely artistic expression but a holistic practice deeply rooted in community life, relational learning, and embodied knowledge transmission. Addressing existing gaps, the study advocates for recognizing indigenous theatre forms like pala within academic and cultural institutions, proposing a shift towards inclusive and culturally-responsive knowledge systems.

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INTRODUCTION

“What kind of rehearsal-based preparation do you do before a performance?”—In response to this question, the renowned palakar from Kishoreganj, Islam Uddin, honestly said, “I don’t do any separate rehearsal before performing a pala.”

This simple answer became the main inspiration for this writing. It raises an essential question: how does a folk performer become an artist without formal rehearsals? And how does a performance become more than just preparation and turn into a way of living? In this study, *Embodied Epistemologies* re-understood as knowledge systems where understanding, learning, and meaning-making occur through bodily experiences, actions, emotions, and senses, rather than relying solely on intellectual reasoning or textual sources (Snowber, 2016; Grosz, 1994; Sheets-Johnstone, 2009; Csordas, 1993; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Embodied epistemologies have been widely employed across diverse disciplines, including feminist theory (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 1990), education (Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Bresler, 2004), psychology and cognitive science (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Johnson, 2007), health and nursing research (Ellingson, 2017; Wilde, 1999), cultural anthropology (Csordas, 1993; Ingold, 2000), environmental philosophy (Abram, 1996), and Indigenous studies (Johnson & Larsen, 2013; Simpson, 2017), consistently recognizing the body as a critical site of learning and knowledge production. Within theatre specifically, embodied epistemologies offer an analytical and methodological approach to understanding performance not merely as representation but as active expressions of lived experiences, collective memory, identity construction, and cultural beliefs through the performer's physical presence, voice, and gestures (Zarrilli, 2004; Conquergood, 2002; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Schechner, 2003). The term in Bengali “*dehoj*” (embodied) refers to a body that is not just flesh and blood. Rather, it expresses traditional wisdom, spiritual practice, local philosophy, and a deep sense of identity. This kind of knowledge practice goes beyond Western book-based education and gives importance to oral expression and the representation of the indigenous body. Though simple in appearance, this knowledge reaches the deepest levels of understanding and stands completely apart from colonial thought systems.

In rural Bangladesh, and, particularly in Bangladeshi indigenous theatre traditions such as *pala gaan*, embodied epistemologies manifest through spontaneous, unscripted performances where knowledge is transmitted orally, relationally, and bodily, reflecting deep cultural identities and spiritual understandings rooted in community life (Islam & Mridha, 2021). The indigenous theatre of Bangladesh is fundamentally ritualistic in nature, where performance serves not merely as entertainment but as a socio-cultural and spiritual practice (Tanjir, 2019). As seen, theatre is not seen as a separate, stage-based, or formal act. Instead, it is deeply connected to the lifestyle, beliefs, and everyday life of the people (Conquergood,

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