Examining a Postdramatic Theatre of *Opheliamachine* Writing the Body as a Method of Seeking Feminine Subjectivity of Intelligence

Ummay Somaiya[1]

Abstract: *Genealogically, American playwright Magda Romanska's 'Opheliamachine' interweaves a textual evolution of two masterpieces: William Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and Heiner Muller's 'Hamletmachine'. Recently, the audiences of Dhaka experienced a theatre production based on the play 'Opheliamachine' which is produced by the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Dhaka. This research examines how this production has been created and what is the significance of this theatrical work both in the local and global cultural sphere. This study, therefore, aims to explore the textual history of the play as well as the thematic frameworks, acting style, scenography, and post-dramatic horizon as the aesthetic perspective of the production.*

Keywords: *Postdramatic Theatre, Feminine Subjectivity, Semiotics, Visual Dramaturgy, Method of Collage, Sexual Politics, Agency, Plasticity, and Grammar of Foot.*

Introduction

Opheliamachine, a contemporary American postmodern play written by Magda Romanska, is a critical response to a German postmodern play *Hamletmachine* written by Heiner Muller, which was also a deconstructionist response to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Therefore, *Opheliamachine* is a third expression that illustrates a tertiary journey of textual evolution. Both texts, *Opheliamachine* and *Hemletmachine,* have been derived from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The original text of *Hamlet*, at first, was critically attacked by Heiner Muller's deconstructionist literary strategy that had been regenerated in the form of *Hamletmachine*. The *Hamletmachine* aimed at destroying *Hamlet* with masculine confidence. On the contrary, *Opheliamachine* abolishes *Hamletmachine* through a counter-reading method with feminine confidence. If Shakespearean *Hamlet* is a textual expression of Elizabethan English feudalist collective consciousness, then, of course, Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine* is a post-war European disparity and disbelief in the masculine notion of emancipation. Eventually, *Opheliamachine* textually evolved from 2002 to 2012 as a hyperreal post-dramatic text in the context of the new liberal capitalist consumption reality. This play creates a feminine subjectivity which is regarded as a new form of human agency. An academic theatrical production, staged at Natmandal Auditorium at Dhaka for the public audience in May 2024 based on this literary text of *Opheliamachine*, produced by the Department of Theatre

---

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Dhaka

and Performance Studies at the University of Dhaka while the production was directed by the writer of this essay, attempting to read theatrically the intertextual history and content of the play. Hence, using the subjective creative experience and objective method of analysis, this essay explores the meaning of *Opheliamachine* as a piece of postmodern literature as well as *Opheliamachine* as a production of theatre.

Meaning of the (Post) Dramatic Texts

Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* a fundamental deriving source of Romanska's *Opheliamachine*, "is set in a disintegrated European state about to collapse under Fortinbras' invasion, a place where 'something is rotten' for centuries" (Todorut, 2024, p. 1). However, *Hamletmachine* is set in no other place but "the ruin of Europe" (Muller, 1974, p. 53). On the contrary, *Opheliamachine* is situated in such a landscape that "is a cemetery of things, a trash heap of objects d'art, rotten corpses, broken devices, and assorted detritus of Western civilization." (Todorut, 2024, p. 1).

Romanska's *Opheliamachine* introduces its protagonist Ophelia as a diasporic self in the American context of capitalist phenomena. As Ilinca Todorut (2024) argues:

> [Ophelia as] an immigrant to the US, whose 'grandmother's father perished mysteriously somewhere between Prague Vienna'. She spends a lot of time moving about in buses, planes, and airports, like all physically and psychologically displaced cosmopolitan people born in territories smooshed in between empires. She is an adult making ends meet. She is the center of her story. (p.1-2)

In the play *Opheliamachine*, Magda Romanska uniquely reimagines Ophelia as such a feminine entity who is never afraid of articulating herself. The play intervenes in the masculine world, which is squarely dominated by the patriarchal ideology for centuries across the globe regardless of geographic boundary, social structure, and political order. Again, Todorut (2024) argues:

> Ophelia hardly ever spoke before…when she did speak, Muller made 'her heart [into] a clock', the poor object that she is. Ophelia was Europe, her body to be conquered. Ophelia was the body, 'along with […] breasts […] thighs […] womb', Ophelia was the victim, 'the woman dangling from the rope', the item traded, bled, gassed. *Opheliamachine* gives subaltern Ophelia the chance to speak. (p. 2)

The term Subaltern metaphorically can be understood as a repressed entity and refers to a power structure where the subaltern woman is ceaselessly resisted by the patriarchal ideology restricting the freedom of speech. In the patriarchal society regardless of the geographic contexts, women are wretched of the wretched in these power structures. Whether Ophelia can speak or not, this phenomenal situation can be understood through the lens of radical thinker and academic Gayatri Chakrabarti Spivak. In her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak (2010) introduces a critical notion of inaccessibility. (p. 70)

The inaccessibility of women, seen in both texts of *Hamlet* and *Hamletmachine*, to the power structure to articulate their own voices. Inaccessibility is a condition where female subjects are not allowed to get access to the forum from where a female person can speak on behalf of herself. Accessibility is a signifier of power that can allow a person to the platforms or articulating mediums that can resist or permit individuals to stand for themselves by speaking in their own voices. A new critical reading confirms that the 'accessibility is denied both in *Hamlet* and *Hamletmachine*' (Todorut, 2024, p. 4). On the contrary, the accessibility is regained in *Opheliamachine* while Ophelia can speak for herself. In this play, Ophelia is completely emancipated, who can speak for herself, even who can express her sorrow, disparity, frustration, the meaninglessness for her life. The considerable fact is that Ophelia is so very much of capable speaking not only about her life but also the world order that contains her life. In *Opheliamachine*, compared with the other two texts, Ophelia regains the lost speaking capacity. The speaking capacity of Ophelia is entirely lost in the misogynistic play of *Hamlet*, even this feminine capacity is not fully blossomed in *Hamletmachine*.

However, enabling Ophelia's speaking capacity, the play *Opheliamachine* forms a feminine agency, which also can be considered as a form of power, that renders feminine subjectivity to speak with the world in her own words. *Opheliamachine*, therefore, reconstructs feminine subjectivity through the notion of speaking capacity. In *Opheliamachine*, Ophelia emerges as a woman who is in pain, despair, and in a complete thread of masculine world but she is expressive as she speaks throughout the play. Therefore, the power of expressivity makes Romanka's Ophelia different compared to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Muller's *Hamletmachine*.

Meaning of the Postdramatic Theatre Production

This section as the main body of the essay contains six successive subsections: (a) Love Stories are War Stories as the Pleasure and Pain for Beauty and Survival, (b) Metaphor of Typewriting as Indomitable Intelligence of Woman, (c) Horror of the Body, (d) Floating Islands of Feminine Acting Style, (e) Social Semiotics of Scenography as Visual Logic of Freedom, (f) Postdramatic Horizon. These subsections eventually explore the thematic frameworks, acting style, scenography, and postdramatic horizon as the aesthetic perspective of the production *Opheliamachine*.

a. Love Stories are War Stories as the Pleasure and Pain of Beauty and Survival

Dhaka University's Theatre and Performance Studies Department's production introduces the play *Opheliamachine* as a story that affirms: "Do not cry darling, the night is coming" (Romanska, 2024, p. 40). The lines extracted from the last soliloquy of the play signify a theatrical expression of pleasure, pain, and survival to tell a story about a woman who can stand alone on earth and can express freely all her feelings and thoughts. Describing *Opheliamachine* as a love story, Ilinca

Todorut (2024) declares:

> Because Ophelia is a woman, because the author is a woman, and love stories are what women write. Love stories are war stories. The plot of *Opheliamachine* follows the courtship between Ophelia and Hamlet, their wedding day, their marriage settled into the routine of her talking- working to a him-devouring-TV-on-a-couch. Along this narrative, bodies float, army boots clobber to death, babies are merchandise, mothers eat children's brains, gunshots splatter brains, and flesh is set on fire. The usual. Intermittently, in the background, the National Geographic channel blasts information on the grim mating rituals in the animal kingdom where love equals consumption. It is obviously a comedy. It is low-class (read: crass) humor, it is 'Making Do' humor (de Certeau). It is as camp as it can get. It is a camp performance as it would be played in a refugee camp, in a forced labor camp, in an extermination camp. (p. 3)

b.   Metaphor of Typewriting as Indomitable Intelligence of Woman

Theatre and Performance Studies department's production examines the characteristic agency of Ophelia in the way where her subjectivity is rediscovered through the notion of speaking. The production of *Opheliamachine* observes the history of textual evolution and stages the play through the esthetic strategies that concentrate this American play in the context of Bangladesh in order to negotiate the idea of speaking femininity through mutual interaction between literature and theatre.

Following creatively the textual suggestion, the production uses a typewriter as a set prop that envisions surpassing the literal meaning of the particular object. Therefore, this production accepts the action of typewriting as a metaphor. This metaphor signifies that writing is an act of intellectual activity. Intellectual activity empowers a female subjectivity to speak aloud. The production transforms the object of the typewriter machine into a metaphor that emphatically implies a process of female empowerment. This metaphorical empowerment functions as a motif in the production that repeatedly accelerates the necessity of the liberated body through the semiotic employment of female performers in the production to reflect that speaking through writing is indeed writing the body. Aston and Savona (1991) say:

> Speaking the text involves speaking with the body. Whenever we converse, facial expressions, gestures of the hand, and so on, come into play. The use of body language helps to fix the meaning of an utterance: 'Yes' accompanied by a nod of the head, reinforces the signification of assent. Or, alternatively, it can 'unfix' meaning and further ambiguity." (p. 117)

During the whole process of thinking, rehearsing, and making, the production sets its aim to create an unsettled meaning and ambiguity and paradox so that the spectators find themselves in a nonlinear complex meaning machine of a feminist theatre. Comprehending Magda Romanka's *Opheliamachine* as a nonlinear feminist textual work, this production employs the idea of the multivalent meaning

of a text that is always already open to interpretation. Also, it understands feminine subjectivity which is closely connected to the idea of feminine intelligence in opposition to masculine desire. Luce Irigaray (2005) argues that "The will of which he [she] speaks does not correspond to a will of the becoming of the spirit nor even of the flesh, that is, to an individuation" (p. 24). According to this line of argument, this production conceptualizes the female subject as becoming an individual. According to Schopenhauer, Irigaray (2005) explains that the will is "masculine, and intelligence is feminine" (p. 24). The production of *Opheliamachine* conceptualizes its thematic framework suggesting that feminine subjectivity is inevitably intertwined with the idea of an intellectual being. The action of the typewriter recurrently metaphorizes this idea that writing is writing the body emphasizing the indomitable intelligence of women.

c. Horror of the Body

The production also realizes the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet in the context of cultural unease where Ophelia is always terrified by the horrors of her body. The sense of horror offers an opportunity to conceptualize the framework of production as Jeffries (2007) states, "The opportunity to challenge this view of them is not taken up, indeed the horror is emphasized, and thus confirmed" (p. 50). The text of *Opheliamachine* emphasizes horror and the production confirms it accordingly. Jeffries (2007) argues that "That sense of the abject as both the alien other who threatens the corporeal and psychic boundaries of the embodied self, and as an intrinsic, but unstable, part of the self resonates with the widespread cultural unease" (p. 50). To resonate the female self with the broader spectrum of cultural discomfort, the production focuses on contemporary visuals and news about the conjugal conflict and masculine violence using projected images throughout the auditorium in the very beginning of the performance to prepare the audience about it's a fundamental topic of horror.

d. Floating Islands of Feminine Acting Style

Opheliamachine envisages a feminist style of acting that attempts to celebrate femininity in 'floating islands,' as the director of this production reinterprets the performance theory of Eugenio Barba, one of the most influential theatre directors around the contemporary theatre world. Barba combines the notion of acting with the ecological intersection of Western and Asian performance theories that suggest a feminist mode of embodiment (Barba, 1986).

Considering the notion of a 'floating island' as a feminist mode of acting, this production explores performers' free mobility of expressive levels to obtain ecological fluidity and flux in acting. In this case, this production utilizes the choreography as a feminist method of acting that subverts the masculine compositional style of performing bodies on the stage. Therefore, the choreography of this production conceptualizes the human body as curbed and diagonal instead of a static straight line. The relationship between the human body and space and

time makes a complex sense of eurythmic mobility that not only enhances but also affects the spectators' presence and awareness of the semiotics of the performing bodies. As Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress discover "the ideological implications of spatial relationship, arguing for the physical interrelation of bodies in space as the 'most fundamental' dimension of the semiotic situation" (qtd. in Aston and Savona, 1991, p. 154).

This production intends to create a social semiotic situation where the female body appears as the most fundamental dimension of the production. The production follows a symmetric performance language that incorporates the idea of interval which reinterprets a dramatic scene through body language. The production endeavors to invent a new femininity in the performance context of Dhaka. The feminine body language contests the Aristotelian linear progress of the scene and classical dramatic characterization. Instead of linearity, this production experiences a choreographic ensemble as a semiotic reinterpretation of each scene of the play. The production aims to enhance the theatrical possibility of tackling the textuality to regain the conceptual significance of the *Opheliamachine*. From the director's point of view, it is possible to reassert critically that the production of *Opheliamachine* trained the Dhaka University theatre students during the rehearsal process in a way so that the students-performers could regenerate their phenomenal bodily expressions and presence in terms of feminist choreography and Grotowskian 'plasticity' (2002). In the creation of feminist choreography Grotowskian plasticity of body language, this production has also been esthetically informed by Tadashi Suzuki's grammar of the foot that empowers the performer to compose herself "on the basis of [her] sense of contact with the ground, by the way in which [her] body makes contact with the floor" (Suzuki, 1986, p. 8).

The production of *Opheliamachine* takes "the task of reading the body in a constant state of flux and action" (Aston and Savona, 1991, p. 116). The production recreates the image of the body in relation to the statement that 'I am here in this space,' as a result, this notion "is achieved both by verbal and gestural deixis. In speaking the dialogue, the actor is also using the body to point to her/his relation to the on-stage dramatic world, her/his action within it" (Aston and Savona, 1991, p. 116). For instance, Gertrude [Hamlet's mother], one of the vital female characters of the play, has been reimagined as a dialectical victim of capitalist consumption in this production. The physical utterance and psychological foundation of this character create a specific stylization. As Umberto Eco (2010) argues the "stylization of figures is not just a decorative element […] is not merely a matter of outer style, [rather] it is above all an inner one" (p. 369). Through the bodily appearance of the "inner", the production questions and critiques the dominant patriarchal viewpoint of society. As Jeffries (2007) states:

> The apparently unstable female material body, viewed negatively from a patriarchal viewpoint, has been one of the ideologies that feminism has sought to

> question and/or celebrate. It is also one of the great challenges to women in the twenty-first century, presented, as they are, with ever more technological ways of making their bodies 'perfect', so that there is less excuse for imperfection, and thus more potential 'blame' attached to the imperfect female. (p. 19)

Thus, the feminist acting of the production attempts to converse the patriarchal ideologies where patriarchy is considered as a political institution. Kate Millett determines eight areas where patriarchy as a political institution plays a role to subordinate females in terms of gender politics of identity. Analyzing the psychological subjugation of women, Millett (2000) argues "A tendency toward the reification of the female makes her more often a sexual object than a person" (p. 54). Nonetheless, the acting style of the production critically subverts the patriarchal idea of sexual objecthood and reclaims that each female character should be treated as a person who has the agency to speak in her own voice.

e.   Social Semiotics of Scenography as Visual Logic of Freedom

The production employs a method of decoding the textual signs and the strategy of collaboration. As Aston and Savona (1991) argue "the director decodes the text, initiates a process of commission or collaboration with a production team and arrives at a mise-en-scene" (p. 142). Mise-en-scene is formed by the scenic object, performer's body, and space that delimit the textual borderlines. As a result, the production aimed at a transcendental journey to create a very locational meaning of the text of *Opheliamachine* bringing the idea of speaking female bodies to the local audiences in an intimate spectatorship. Hence, the production reconstructs a space that dealt with the idea of the intimate relationship between actor and spectator. Jiff Veltrusky says:

> The most common case of the subject in the drama is the figure of the actor. 'The figure of the actor is the dynamic unity of an entire set of signs, the carrier of which may be the actor's body, voice, movements, but also, various objects, from parts of the costume to the set. The important thing is, however, that the actor centers their meanings upon himself, and may do so to such an extent that by his actions he may replace all the sign carriers… (qtd. in Aston and Savona, 1991, p.102)

This relationship is based on a post-dramatic understanding of the spatial relationship between performers and audiences. The diverse points of entry and exit reimagined an encounter between theatre and its receptors in terms of the deconstructionist approach of reconfiguring the proximity between actors and spectators. This production dreamt of inviting the audience to a creative collusion as Aston and Savona (1991) argue that, "the spectator is invited to work, in a creative collusion with dramatist and actor, towards a more complete realization of the enacted text" (p. 91). This production materializes a performance theory towards a more complete realization through the sensorial and phenomenal experiences *Opheliamachine* offers.

Thus, this production attempts to apprehend the spectator's presence as an organic appearance. Doing so, this production relocates the actor's position within the audience's sitting arrangement. Therefore, the production post-dramatically appreciates that the spectator is an inevitable semiotic agency that can contribute to producing the ultimate meaning of a particular theatrical production. Hence, the production of *Opheliamachine* interiorizes space design and visual dramaturgy and scenographic elements reconfiguring the popular mode of spectating an aesthetic performance in the current context of theatre-making in Bangladesh.

However, in order to explore the scenographic context, the production of *Opheliamachine* does not follow the predominant rules of design. Instead, it focuses on the free spirit of form that celebrates the post-dramatic notion of visual dramaturgy where scenic forms appear as independent image-text. In ground-breaking research titled Postdramatic Theatre, Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) argues:

> Postdramatic theatre establishes the possibility of dissolving the logocentric hierarchy and assigning the dominant role to elements other than dramatic logos and language. This applies even more to the visual than to the auditory dimension. […] Visual dramaturgy here does not mean an exclusively visually organized dramaturgy but rather one that is not subordinated to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic. (p. 93)

Employing the process of developing own visual logic, the staging procedures and spectatorial presence become the vital components of this theatrical production. Because *Opheliamachine* considers that staging is not a physical uttering of a text but rather envisions an active receptive role of spectators. As Patrice Pavis argues-

> It has now been understood and accepted that staging is not the mere physical uttering of a text with the appropriate intonation so that all can grasp the correct meaning; it is creating contexts of utterance in which the exchanges between verbal and nonverbal elements can take place. The utterance is always intended for an audience, with the result that mise en scène can no longer ignore the spectator and must even include him or her as the receptive pole in a circuit between the mise en scène produced by artists and the hypotheses of the spectators, artistically involved themselves in the mise-en-scene. (qtd. in Aston and Savona, 1991, p. 121)

f.   Postdramatic Horizon

The production is situated in a new theatrical aesthetics that can be termed, rearticulating Hans-Thies Lehmann, as 'postdramatic theatre.' Heiner Muller states that the post-dramatic text is the 'description of a picture' while being critically informed by Muller's idea, Lehmann (2006) determines that

> [P]ost-dramatic theatre: the limbs or branches of a dramatic organism, even if they are withered material, are still present and form the space of memory that is 'bursting open' in a double sense. Even in the term 'postmodern', wherever it is used in more than a token sense, the prefix 'post' indicates that a culture or artistic practice has stepped out of the previously unquestioned horizon of modernity but

> still exists with some kind of reference to it. This may be a real-on of negation, declaration of war, liberation, or perhaps only a deviation and playful exploration of what is possible beyond this horizon. (p. 27).

Seeking zeal from post-dramatic theatre, this production partially incorporates the idea of character and partially celebrates 'the death of character', which focuses on "the deconstruction of dramatic character" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 1). Though the production rejects Heiner Muller's masculine confidence in *Hamletmachine*, it reemploys the creative stratagem from Muller's post-dramatic method of collage. As Lehman (2006) explains:

> [M]ethod of collage is not yet sufficiently utilized in theatre. While the large theatres, under the pressures of conventional norms of the entertainment industry, tend not to dare to deviate from the unproblematic consumption of fables, the newer theatre aesthetics practice a consistent renunciation of the one plot and the perfection of drama - without this implying a renunciation of modernity per se. (p. 27).

Furthermore, as an example of post-dramatic theatre, the production of *Opheliamachine*, on the one hand, incorporates the "older aesthetics" of modernist elements; on the other hand, it employs "playful exploration" in terms of scene device, splitting in characterization, ambiguity in identity between performer and character, rejection of scenographic unity and celebration of disintegrated visual dramaturgy (Lehmann, 2006, p. 27).

Conclusion

This production can be seen through the political dimension of post-dramatic theatre in the praxis of intercultural arts. It aims a new theatrical site that semiotically synthesizes Western text and Bangladeshi context utilizing local performance techniques with diverse modes of performances from the widespread horizons of Western cultures. However, Maria Pia Pagani (2024) reads *Opheliamachine* asking "still is Ophelia a victim or a threat for Hamlet?" (p. 15). Though the production engages this question but not in terms of victimization. Instead, this production envisions a reunification of opposites. The production represents Ophelia as neither a threat to Hamlet nor even a victim of Hamlet. Conversely, in the production of *Opheliamachine*, Ophelia seeks a new feminine living principle of life that celebrates the notion of conjunction opossum or the possibility of reunion of opposites.

References

Aston, E., & Savona, G. (1991). *Theatre as sign-system: A semiotics of text and performance*. London, UK: Routledge.

Barba, E. (1986). *Beyond the floating islands* (J. Barba, Trans.). New York: Olympic Marketing Corp.

Eco, U. (2010). *On beauty: A history of a Western idea*. London, UK: MacLehose Press.

Grotowski, J. (2002). *Towards a poor theatre* (E. Barba, Ed.; P. Brook, Preface). New York: Routledge.

Irigaray, L. (2005). *Between East and West: From singularity to community* (S. Pluhacek, Trans.). Delhi, India: New Age Books.

Jeffries, L. (2007). *Textual construction of the female body: A critical discourse approach*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; Palgrave Macmillan.

Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic theatre* (K. Jurs-Munby, Trans. & Intro.). London, UK: Routledge.

Millet, K. (2000). *Sexual politics*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Muller, H. (1974). *Hamletmachine and other texts for the stage* (C. Weber, Ed. & Trans.). New York, NY: Performing Arts Journal Publications.

Pagani, M. P. (2024). From silence to American techno-solitude (M. Rose, Trans.). In M. Romanska (Ed.), *Opheliamachine* (pp. 9–17). London, UK: Methuen Drama.

Romanska, M. (2024). *Opheliamachine*. London, UK: Methuen Drama.

Spivak, G. C. (2010). Can the subaltern speak? In R. C. Morris (Ed.), *Reflections on the history of an idea* (pp. 21–80). New York: Columbia University Press.

Suzuki, T. (1986). *The way of acting: The theatre writings of Tadashi Suzuki* (J. T. Rimer, Trans.). New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Todorut, I. (2024). How to lose a guy in ten wars: Introduction to *Opheliamachine* (pp. 1–8). In M. Romanska (Ed.), *Opheliamachine*. London, UK: Methuen Drama.