

Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 8 Summary

HIDDEN FIRES: PeaceWorks' invocation as Žižekian response to the Gujarat massacres of 2002 (Calcutta, India)

by Ruth Margraff

Context

Ruth Margraff begins her chapter on the Indian play, *Hidden Fires*, by contextualizing the work with quotes from philosopher Slavoj Žižek and writer Ralph Ellison that invoke the multifaceted conceptualizations of identity within community.

Hidden Fires addresses the February 2002 Gujarat massacres in India perpetrated by Hindi extremists and resulting in the killing of approximately 2,000 Muslims, the burning of thousands of Muslim homes, the public rape of hundreds of women, and the displacement of more than 200,000 Muslims, many of whom are still living in refugee camps.

In research conducted with the support of Anjum Katyal, Margraff found that national and local governments, the media, and the police both subtly and overtly nurtured prejudice and hatred before the riots. Numerous respected sources reject the description of the riots as communal violence and define them as a state-sponsored attempt at ethnic cleansing. Margraff offers a detailed history of the systemic oppression in Gujarat that led to the 2002 massacres. During their leadership, the extreme right-wing Hindu chauvinist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, instituted numerous anti-Muslim policies, including a radically revised Indian history curriculum blaming current Indian ills on the past rule of Muslim dynasties. They perpetuated a view of Muslims as murderers, barbarians and a fifth column for Pakistan. The government enforced institutional racist policies, and encouraged mob violence.

After unclear events between Muslims and Hindus in which 58 Hindus were burned to death at a railway station, the media agitated susceptible populations with headlines like “Avenge Blood with Blood.” Margraff quotes several reports describing examples of the extreme brutality of the massacres that ensued, and substantive post evaluations concluding that the state sponsored and supported the attacks in many ways. She includes footnotes to many institutional findings. As of her writing, victims’ attempts to obtain legal redress have been ignored, and Gujarat remains largely “cleansed” of its former Muslim communities.

Hidden Fires

Artist Naveen Kishore founded PeaceWorks, a volunteer cross-caste initiative of the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, to actively confront the biases and complacency he saw

in his own Hindu community after the massacre. Kishore was inspired by his belief that the arts foster open-mindedness, curiosity, flexible thinking, and resistance to stereotypes, all capacities that promote peacebuilding. Kishore inaugurated the project by producing the play, *Hidden Fires* by Manjula Padmanabhan. The initiative included sending artists to schools to perform the play and holding workshops on issues like identity, prejudice, the politics of violence, and how history is written and rewritten.

The five monologues which comprise the play vary in aesthetics in addressing the pathology of hatred between Hindu and Muslim populations. In one monologue a Hindu man describes extinguishing the lives, or “hidden fires,” of Muslims who are faceless, sub-human threats. Another illustrates a young anchorwoman's smiling refusal to challenge the government's insistence that the situation is not serious. The monologue, *Points*, refers indirectly to the riots in describing the denial of all sectors of a municipality to acknowledge rampant brutality. It thus extends the play's reach into a universal challenge to all audiences to examine their culpability in the aftermath of violent acts.

Margraff gives moving excerpts from several of these pieces and describes the play's purpose:

Through subtle references, the play seeks to engage with and disrupt the hidden hatreds and abuses of power that led to the Gujarat atrocities. The monologues raise questions about the nature of invisible collective identities, misperceptions about “self” and “other,” and the devastating effects of stereotypes and prejudice. Hindu audiences are forced to probe their own secret attitudes toward their country-men and -women and toward the 2002 massacres. When it was first performed, just a year after the violence, *Hidden Fires* hit hard, challenging audiences to call their own actions into question, and to move forward eschewing violence and embracing peace.

Margraff defines listening closely to the artist-peacebuilders who were involved with *Hidden Fires* as a chapter goal, and she quotes often from Tanaji Das Gupta and Soumyak Kanti De Biswas, teenagers who performed monologues from *Hidden Fires* at many workshops and schools. Because Indian society does not generally honor the opinions of youth, *Hidden Fires* offered these teenagers the rare opportunity to publicly address social issues and thus consider their own agency. The two youth continued on to lead their own theatre company called Tin Can Productions.

Zizekian Analysis

Margraff furthers her analysis of *Hidden Fires* within the context of the philosophical studies of Slavoj Žižek. First, she emphasizes the importance of high artistic quality to Kishore and actors Kanti and Tanaji. Kanti explains, “If you want to go deeply into any issue to convince people—you have to first go deeply into the character and to think very deeply about what happened in Gujarat from the character's point of view and how it

should have been different.” Based on this strong desire to enter and understand another's psyche, good acting nurtures empathy. In driving to the essence of motivation, even with an antagonist, the actor battles alienation from the “other” for herself and her audience.

Margraff postulates that the empathy that actors in *Hidden Fires* were able to arouse is due to a Žižekian “split” in social identities. In Kishore’s play the abstraction of the Muslim victim's trauma is embodied by the Hindu actor, so this “split,” is the experience of holding both ethnic identities within one body. Identity becomes expansive and flexible, rather than fixed and predetermined, as audience members become aware of how it feels to be a Muslim victim, while still maintaining their own positions as Hindu viewers.

A further example of subverted identity is seen in the monologue of the Hindu Rioter. The family of the perpetrator, who so easily describes his brutal acts, is later targeted and killed. The understanding that anyone—Muslim or Hindu—could find himself in an inverted situation, contradicts the usual emphasis on difference and separateness. Again, both the protagonist and the antagonist are recognized within the body of the same performer. The dramaturgical shape of the play is also provocative by asking the audience to empathize with the antagonist.

Margraff expresses a belief in the effectiveness of this challenging work:

On a basic level, *Hidden Fires* provided a forum for Hindu artists and audiences to explore and express their identities as distinct from the identities of the silent and passive Hindu majority, complicit with the extremist state, police, and media. The actors were able to express, and the audiences to witness, identity as fluid and complex, not bound or defined by ethnic, religious, or political affiliations. What is revealed in the process is the agency and choice each person has about her identities and actions. So that, for example, a Hindu policeman choosing not to react to an ethnic riot raging across the street might become more aware of the fact that he is making a choice, that he has the agency to resist....

Creative Structures and Western Comparisons

Margraff makes clear that her analysis of the play is post-development and performance, and that those involved firmly point to their personal, not political or theoretical, motivations for their involvement. She also contrasts her experience of Western theatre with the creative structure of *Hidden Fires*. Describing her respect for the play, she states, “I continue to be fascinated with the subtle inversions of playwright Manjula Padmanabhan’s dramaturgical structure; first, boldly embodying the antagonist figure of the Hindu extremist, then satirizing complicit and dominant forces of power in media and government,

and then turning the candle of enlightenment toward the audience and herself as she uses the spectacle of theatre to create a live invocation acknowledging injustice and commemorating the unspeakable losses of Gujarat.”

In contrast, Margraff laments the western hierarchy of self-reflective, singular point-of-view productions that support the protagonism of the powers that be. She is critical of the convention, especially in American drama, of the well-drawn character who merits empathy, but still exists as 'other' through a western-minded lens, separated from the interior of the action or violence.

She sees these metastructures as exclusionary of more complex stories that promote a constructive engagement with emotions such as humiliation and fear, and detrimentally support American self-centered over-identification with singular empathies and fixed identities. In her view “poetic” approaches such as *Hidden Fires*, open space for empathetic identities that are able to transform and embrace multiple points of view.

Kanti explains, “We were standing on stage and all the people were hearing us speak about the fact that these were our own brothers and sisters, and they were killed for no reason. And then, if people think about it a little, they have to realize that it was people like us who killed people like us. And that itself was very new and very, very different from what we had already heard about Gujarat.”

The Promise for Peacebuilding

By portraying Muslim victims, the performance marked these Hindu actors with the “other's” real experiences of shame, exclusion and loss. This capitulation could be seen as a release of part of one’s own social power. Margraff postulates that this yielding of position to amplify the “other” provides the structure for eventual peaceful coexistence. The play invalidates the destructiveness associated with a blind fixed identity and educates audiences to grapple with multiple (often contradictory) truths, identities and narratives.

Audiences witness a kind of identity built around humanity and empathy, rather than strict ethnicity and religion. Margraff indicates that this beneficial embrace of a more complex reality entails long-term processes of attitudinal change and advancement of alternate value systems.

Margraff concludes with a quote grounded in hope and catharsis. Kishore states, “Justice often doesn’t happen at all. What happens is a kind of fragile peace. I don’t know if forgiveness happens but there is a process which stems from a desire for peace. There’s no specific point that can ceremoniously pinpoint the moment when the healing takes place. The healing is left smoldering underneath.”