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Domino: An experience of Theater of the Oppressed Workshops with immigrant women in Tehran

Hamze Aleeyam¹

In this report, the author recounts a series of TO workshops with immigrant mothers in Tehran as the women try to cope with arranged marriages, poverty, sexism, and child-rearing issues. The problems are passed from one generation to the next, but the intervention of TO creates change.



Hamze Aleeyam is an Iranian TO Joker. He studied Cinema at Payam-e-Moaser Art School and Theatre at Soore¹ University. In 2012, Bina Farok and Hamze Aleeyam formed The Forum Theatre Group to work, study, practice, and train TO throughout Iran. From that day until now The Forum Theatre Group has created more than 50 performances with working children, immigrant women, and others performing in places as varied as Youth Detention Centers, schools and universities, public parks and streets, factories, businesses, and even metros.

1

During the Autumn of 2017, I was working in an NGO in one of the poor neighbourhoods of the south-west of Tehran. This NGO has been active against child labor with the aim of defending Children's Rights. I worked there with 7-16 year old children. Those children had to work all the days because of poverty or their parents' disability. And due to this and of course due to high educational costs, they are deprived of their right to education.

Inhabitants of this neighbourhood and families connected to this NGO are from different ethnicities – Persian, Shavsavan, Afghan, Uzbek, Tadjik, etc. – who had to leave their homes and lands. Some of these families fled from war, some due to lack of water, some from unemployment, and some from debts and had to immigrate to southern Tehran in the hope of providing a better life for themselves. But in Tehran they are confronted with a grislier situation.

According to statistics, a family of four living in an urban area with a monthly income below 40,000,000 Rials (roughly \$1,000) is living in poverty, Hossein Raghfar (Iranian economist) told the state-run Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) (Radio Farda 2018). It was a time that many factories and small manufacturers were bankrupted and lots of people were unemployed. Those who could find a job would have to work 12 hours per day for a salary of \$200 per month. Also, they had no contract, no insurance, and no safety at their job. And we should consider that they could only find unstable jobs such as plaster worker, blacksmith worker, construction worker, concierge, dishwasher, cleaner, janitor, etc. Meanwhile, the average rental cost of a 20 square meter apartment in this neighbourhood was around \$200. Therefore, it was ordinary that people had to engage in activities such as sex and drug dealing, robbery, peddling, and organ trade.

One of their most important survival strategies was to sell their children's labour. According to official statistics 142,000 Iranian children were out of the educational system due to poverty, disease, unemployment, immigration, learning disabilities, and lack of interest and motivation (Tehran Times 2019). A large number of these children do not have IDs, so they are not counted in the statistics. In the absence of child support mechanisms, a lot of families with the hope of getting between 150,000,000 and 500,000,000 Rials (roughly \$3,350 to \$11,100) turn to marriage loans from Banks or *Shirbaha* (money as a gift to a bride's mother from the groom's family), forcing their 8-15 year old daughters to get married.

We, the employees of this NGO, had routine sessions in which we discussed our interesting experiences and problems and issues. In one of these sessions, Shadi Sharifzadeh and Hamidreza Mosayebi, two of the social workers of the NGO, and I decided to run a TO project with the immigrant women. With the mothers of children!

In communication with these families, we found out about a cycle of oppression and realized how poverty and misery were transmitted through generations. The cruel situation of children working at carpentry, tailoring, turning workshop, blacksmith workshop, well digging, digging the sewage route of Tehran, shoemaking, car and motorcycle repairing, waste sorting, brick kilns, etc. is a repetition of their parent's childhood. They live in tense situations, and as a result, the communication between the members of the family is based on fear and dictatorship. Parents repeatedly asked me to beat their children in order to discipline them (of course I never did it). Hamidreza and Shadi were familiar with the Theater of the Oppressed and its great powers. So we decided to define and run a TO project with mothers of children studying in the NGO.

2

I spoke with members of our theater group and two of them, a retired 62 year old woman named Forough and a 27 year old activist named Mohammad, were willing to participate. The first challenge we had was radical religious restrictions, according to which, not only are women not allowed to participate in the society, but they aren't allowed to talk to, make eye contact, or even laugh with a *na-mehram* (a strange man), let alone engage in theater and artistic activities. So the presence of Shadi and Forough (the two women) was useful. The presence of two men and two women built a balance that could help me as a Joker to establish a sexism-free relation with those women who were fellow citizens and Spect-actors.

Hamidreza and Shadi invited mothers to attend a session about their children's educational situation. This had never been done there until that day. We (Hamidreza, Shadi, Mohammad, Forough and I) were going to gather and work with women who had married in their childhood, had delivered 3 or 4 times by the age of 20, and were banned from participating in society. Our challenge was how to begin. People living in Middle East are different from people of South America (the birthplace of TO). We knew that we would fail if, like Augusto Boal, we started with games. We had anticipated that in the first sessions, those women wouldn't talk very much due to shyness and embarrassment, and because it is basically a sin. They even covered their faces with veils and looked down at the ground all the time. So we decided not to play games and started with introductions and usual conversation.

I asked them about the quality of relations between them and their children. I asked them to tell everyone how are their relationships? And what kinds of problems they have in dealing with their children? Of course, there were self-confident women who participated and discussed passionately and explained their ideas, but the majority were silent and inactive and in order to get them involved I had to ask them a question respectfully. Some of them couldn't talk aloud due to shyness, so they told their

opinions to another woman and that woman told the group, which was good. Sometimes the message carrier said the wrong message and it made the former to become angry and start talking.

Our second challenge was time. We could gather them only one hour per week, because they were all housewives and they had to go back home to do their "feminine obligation."

In the first session, we had difficulty starting dialogues. Women expected us to talk to them about relations between mothers and children. They were not self-confident and their embarrassment was an obstruction. No one dared to talk. I had to repeat every question in different ways. Until one of them said: "I'm tired of my child. He always argues, beats his little brother and never studies. I, in order to silence him, have to beat him."

It is like dominoes. Law and society beat the father, father beats the mother, mother beats the children, older child beats the younger child, and younger child... Once one of them spoke, another started talking and everyone encouraged others to speak. They spoke of their children's violent behavior, naughtiness, envies, blackmailing, and arrogance. As they were speaking, I wrote the title of their talks on the whiteboard, so that later we could review them quickly and pick the common one and focus on that. At the end, I explained the procedure to them, but found out that they were illiterate and couldn't read the board, so I read it aloud. Finally, all of them said that envy is the most important problem their children usually have.

At the end, when I saw they had become a little familiar, I thought to myself: "It's time for a game." I told them, "Each session we will play some practical games, so you can learn it and do it with your children at home." Then I told them to stand up and start walking and breathing while counting numbers. Then, as closure, we played two exercises, a physical exercise (Colombian hypnosis) and a sensory exercise called "What is it?" during which everyone draws a simple painting or writes a word on their partner's

back with finger, then asks: what is this? Then the second person has to guess. Finally, I asked them to play these games at home with their children and check if they had any effect on their relations.

3

Before the second week, we planned to play a physical exercise (Circle of images) and also a memory exercise (Tells tales). If participants could emancipate their bodies, we would continue with Image Theater. At the beginning, I asked for their help to remember what we did the last week. Three Spect-Actors helped us to do it. Just two of them had played the games at home. They said the children liked these games so much. Then we continued with Tells tales game. Our third challenge was that women brought their toddlers to the session. There were so many baby carriages in the room and some of them even had to breast-feed their babies during the session. Because of the babies, I couldn't ask mothers to play the physical exercise, so we did another game as we were sitting in a circle. I asked one person to volunteer and tell us a short real story. Then the person on their right tried to tell that story again, without any changes. The next person on the right tried to tell the same story as the second person. After everyone had told the story in turn, the first woman told her manipulated story again. The story always changes a lot in this verbal transmission.

Games really are helpful and make Spect-Actors familiar with each other. When we were playing, there were moments in which someone made a sudden mistake, and this made others laugh; they could even laugh at themselves. Then we formed Forum. The topic was their children's envious behavior. I asked them to remember a real experience they had in the past and describe it for the group. Some of them spoke. We decided to focus on the experience of Aunt Shirin to examine the issue accurately and find a solution together. She said that she is a house cleaning worker and has three children. One day the lady of the house gave her two blue and one red backpack. But two of her kids wanted the red one, and it made them to fall into a quarrel. Eventually Shirin beat them all, took all backpacks and hid them.

While the kids were sleeping she blackened the red backpack. When the kids found out what had happened, again they started crying. She beat them again and forced them not to cry. Then she told them: "Don't cry. I have suffered so much. If you cry, I will cry too." The kids stopped crying.

The other participants had strong sympathy with the problem of Shirin. They all had similar problems. This encouraged me to ask them spontaneously to build the scene, so that we could understand and examine it better. No one volunteered and everyone was silent. So, the actors (Mohammad, Forough and Shadi) built the scene. I asked Shirin to add to our work. We watched the whole scene and then discussed it. Other participants admitted that it was a common problem and explained their experiences. After a short conversation I asked: "Why don't you take your kids for shopping?"

"Cause kids are always willing to choose expensive stuff, cause they are more beautiful and more attractive, but we cannot afford it."

"How can we explain to our kids not to spend more than we can afford?"

One of the participants was an older woman who had joined us recently. Her youngest daughter was one year older than her oldest granddaughter. Her 16 year old daughter-in-law was also in these sessions. She said:

"Before we go for shopping, I talk to the kids and tell them how much money we've got and that each one can spend as much as a certain amount of money. Not more. If anyone asks for more, I tell him/her that if I buy this for you, others will get less. Then we search till everyone finds what he/she wants."

Mothers decided to try this solution. The second session passed quickly. At the end, again I gave them an assignment to play at home during the week and report back to the group in the next session.

During the first two sessions, mostly we talked, rather than do activities. While most participants were willing to talk, doing physical exercises was tormenting for them, so I tried to intensify, gradually, the practical and theatrical aspects of our workshop by discussion, leading conversations in the Socratic method of questioning, and by dialogue playing the "Why-Because" game. These two weeks helped us establish some kind of community-based dialogues. When we started, participants were not willing to

discuss collectively, perpetually making groups of 2 or 3 and talking in small circles. But that gradually waned and we had collective discussions.

At the end of the second session, we went on stage and built a scene based on their problems and watched it together. Mothers welcomed this experience and by watching the problem, got involved in the conversations. But their involvement was verbal and nobody came on the stage. They explained their suggestions and the actors played them. When they watched their own solutions, it encouraged them to participate more actively.

4

The third week, there were so many toddlers and babies that their clamor overwhelmed us, so Hamidreza took the kids to another room and played with them. We started as usual. We tried to remember what we did on the last two weeks. Two of them had played games at home.

Then we talked about the issue of envy and reviewed the solutions we had found. I asked them about the effects of these solutions on their relations. Aunt Razieh said:

“My daughter keeps asking me to kiss and hug her, but I hate kissing and stuff like that. She tells me to kiss her when I go to school. Moms of other kids kiss and hug their children. But I hate kissing and don’t like things like this.”

I asked, “How do you feel when you kiss?”

She said that because the kids have grown up, she can’t kiss them.

I asked: Who kisses? All became embarrassed. There was silence for a while, until Aunt Fatima said:

“I make the breakfast for my 13 year old son every morning and when he goes to school, I kiss him. I kiss my daughter too. Every night we sleep beside each other, and she grabs my hand and kiss it.”

Aunt Fatima lived in a house with her rival wife.

Their whole life, from birth to death, is work in harsh, unsafe, and hard conditions. Stress and anxiety are their twins. They believed that child labor was normal, because their childhood had been the same and also their parent's childhood and their predecessor's childhood. Working like a machine every day from morning to night made their soul and body hard. It was more evident when we were playing Games. I call this problem emotional illiteracy.

We talked a little about this issue. Then I asked the Spect-Actors to build a scene from a normal life, a scene from what they normally do at home. Shadi volunteered to play the role of an average woman. I asked everyone to change their seats and sit in the other side of the room, so that Shadi could stand opposite them. Then I asked them to tell us what they usually do during the day. They told and Shadi played it. We built a normal scene of their lives.

The woman washes the dishes in the kitchen; kids are watching TV. Dad comes home from work, but he has no communication with any of them. He sits alone and asks for tea. She brings tea and says "Hi." She brings dinner. Everyone eats the dinner, and then goes to sleep.

After completing the scene, we watched it several times and discussed it. Then I asked about a good and ideal home. I asked how a very good life would be. Aunt Zahra said:

"There is peace. Husband has a good job. We have money. When you don't have money, you can't live at all. If you have money you can live, so if the kids want anything, we can buy it for them."

I asked them all to help me build a scene from an ideal life. First, we imagined all the spaces of an ideal home and built a symbolic one by items we had there. Aunt Monir volunteered to play the role of the ideal father. She came to the stage and stood there. Everyone helped to describe the characteristics of the ideal father. The ideal father, Abbas Agha, is a very good employee of the municipality. He earns \$1,250 per month, a very good salary. Then Forough volunteered to play the role of the ideal wife of the ideal household. This family has two ideal kids – an ideal 8 year old daughter, and an ideal 10 year old

son. Mohammad and Aunt Zari volunteered to play the roles of ideal son and daughter. Abbas Agha comes home at night, bringing stuff he has bought. Kids are sitting, watching TV. Mom is working in the kitchen. Spect-Actors already know the procedure of TO. The scene was being played, and when they had any idea, shouted: "stop!" The show stopped and they propounded their suggestion. Aunt Zahra said:

"When father comes home, the kids are happy and run toward him. Mother realizes that father has come and goes out of the kitchen to welcome him."

We watched the scene once again. Aunt Samaneh said:

"When Father comes, before anyone realizes, he says "Hi, I am home" aloud.

Another one said that mom and dad should hug each other and kiss. We watched the scene once again. When mom and dad were hugging and kissing each other, everyone was laughing.

We repeated the scene several times and completed it with the participation of all Spect-actors.

Dad comes home and he is welcomed warmly. Mom takes the shopping and carries it to the kitchen. They sit around together and talk. Then mom goes to the kitchen to cook. Dad goes to help. Mom and Dad bring the dinner together. They all sit at table happily and eat their dinner, and together they clean the table.

We watched the complemented scene of an ideal life. The Forum was formed quickly and we started a discussion about it. Then we compared it to the one that was about real life and discussed the differences between the two lives. Time was over, and we had no chance to build the transmission scene. But all of the Spect-actors participated in this session and some of them entered the stage for the first time.

5

Between third and fourth weeks there was a holiday, so we decided to start a new program.

In the fifth week we just played Games. Everyone was happily laughing. For them I wasn't a male anymore, I was just a human being. We played four games. Two concentration games, a motion game, and finally, confronting the Oppressor game. I asked them all to make groups of 2 people, stand in front

of each other, and one of them pick number one and the other number two. At the first phase, I told them to think for one minute to remember one person who has oppressed them. At the second phase, I asked number one to imagine they are in front of that oppressor and tell him/her whatever they like. At the third phase, number twos did the same. At the fourth phase, we sat in a circle and formed the Forum. I asked them to take turns and tell the group about the injustice their partner had suffered. There were shocking issues. One of them named Aunt Samaneh had talked to her father and had asked him why he has made her life miserable. She was married at the age of twelve to a thirty year old man by the force of her father, and now at the age of 24 she had three daughters, age 9, 7, 5 and was 5 months pregnant. She had attempted suicide three times in order to escape marrying that man. After the third suicide attempt, her father told her:

“If you die, you belong to the cemetery, and if you survive, belong to Ali.”

On her wedding night, she dressed in a black dress. She was beaten and forced to wear a white dress. After four years of living with her husband, she found out that he is methamphetamine addicted. Now it was eight years later during which she had done all she could to get him off drugs but had not succeeded yet. Throughout these years, in order to provide the expenses of life and her husband's rehabilitation, she had done jobs such as laboring, cleaning, and gardening. She has tough hands that showed her labor. A few years ago, she told her father that she is going to divorce, because her husband is addicted and does not work. Her father said “Ali is your husband, and you are not the husband to make decisions instead of him. Go and live.”

Other participants said that they had married like this and that they knew other women who had cried at their wedding night. Time finished soon. We all agreed to work on this form of oppression in the next weeks. They had accepted that this kind of suffering and labor was normal and nobody can avoid it. One of them said that it is not like that – that all the girls cry at their wedding night. Some get prepared

for the wedding, and even that some kids are happy because they are wearing wedding dresses and because they are in the spotlight.

6

Sixth week, after games and introductory conversations, we sat around and formed the Forum. The subject was the oppression Samaneh had experienced. There were many solutions she had already tried and were of no use. We decided to reexamine some of them. Samaneh rebuilt the scene and we watched many solutions and discussed them in Forum. At first, everyone said:

“Take him to detoxification center.”

“During these eight years, I took him there so many times. Every time he quit, after four months started again. While he was at the center, I worked at construction. Even when I was pregnant, I worked at dairy farms. I had different jobs, just to help him quit. I gave him all the money I had earned. My hands are as tough as men’s hands, because I worked with shovels and pickaxes. He never thanked me in any way.”

We decided to play the last conversation between Samaneh and Ali – the last time she had tried to build the future of her and her children’s life. Samaneh played as Ali and Aunt Razieh volunteered to play as Samaneh.

Samaneh: “Ali, don’t you want to find a job?”

Ali: “No, there’s no job. What can I do?”

Samaneh: “Why do others have a job? Why my brother and father have jobs? Only there is no job for you?”

Ali: “I don’t work among cows. Why should I labor?”

Samaneh: “So what about the kids?”

Ali: “Go to Hell”.

Samaneh: “What the heck? Let’s build a good life, let’s make the kids happy.”

Ali: “I have backache, I can’t work.”

Samaneh: “My dad also has backache. He is bent. He neither drinks nor smokes, yet he is working all the day.”

Again, we formed the forum and discussed this solution. They all had an addict among their relatives and had different experiences. We examined each solution many times and in different ways. After each intervention, we formed the Forum and everyone participated in the discussion actively and talked about their experiences in confronting this situation.

We examined all solutions. Mothers tried to change the situation. Samaneh rebuilt the scene in response. Moms came to the stage, took the role of Samaneh and tried their solutions. Samaneh played the role of Ali. After two months, everyone agreed that she must divorce, but she said that she can't divorce with four kids. She should have divorced years ago, when she was young (at the age of 24, she considered herself old!) and didn't have all these kids. Yet everyone insisted that in order to save herself, her kids and Ali, she must divorce.

A few months later, she got the divorce at the age of 25, provided that Ali doesn't pay anything, neither to her nor for the kids. In this way, there would be no more kids! A week later, with the help of her mom and sister-in-law she gave birth to her son at her home. Three months later, the landlord evicted them. She took her furniture to her dad's house. A few months later, she got a job at a tailoring workshop with a salary of \$150 per month.

7

"There are certain sores in life that, like a canker, gnaw at the soul in solitude and diminish it" (Sadegh, 2013 p. 16). Maybe that's why we invented the theatre. As Schopenhauer says in *The World as Will and Idea*:

What gives all tragedies their characteristic drive for elevation is the working out of the recognition that the world and life cannot provide any just satisfactions, and thus our devotion to it is not worthwhile; the tragic spirit lives on in that insight, and it leads from there to resignation.

But I know for sure that TO as the medium worked, helping us to make life better than it is. TO allowed us to watch ourselves in life and change it, away from fantasy.

We formed theatre to cultivate and purify ourselves. But now theatre has reached its maturity. And neither showing suffering nor having catharsis is enough anymore. Just now theatre would help us to trespass the borders.

“It is through the creation of the new that that which has not yet existed begins to exist. To free yourself is to trespass. To trespass is to exist. To free ourselves is to exist. To free yourself is to exist.” (Boal p. xxii)

To free yourself is to exist.

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