

Postcolonial Theatre and the Rewriting of History

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ABSTRACT:

In India, postcolonial theatre is a vibrant cultural arena where power, identity, and history are rewritten, reclaimed, and contested. Playwrights challenge colonial narratives, elevate marginalized voices, and reinterpret national memory from subaltern viewpoints through dramatic performance. By revisiting painful pasts, challenging colonial epistemologies, and re-establishing indigenous cultural agency, postcolonial Indian drama contributes to the rewriting of history. The study examines how dramatic devices like myth revision, counter-memory, allegory, and political satire challenge hegemonic historiography, drawing on plays by Girish Karnad, Mahasweta Devi, Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar, and Manjula Padmanabhan, among others.

KEYWORDS:

Postcolonial Theatre, Indian Drama, Rewriting History, Counter-narrative, Colonialism, Memory Subaltern.

Introduction

In India, postcolonial theatre became an important creative and intellectual force that addressed the psychological, political, and cultural fallout from colonial dominance. In addition to altering economic and territorial structures, the British colonial endeavour also erased local histories, changed indigenous cultural expression, and imposed Eurocentric knowledge models. Dramatists started reclaiming cultural memory as India approached and surpassed independence by rewriting historical narratives from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Theatre evolved into a medium of resistance, an alternate archive that allowed playwrights to revisit, challenge, and reconstruct the past. In postcolonial drama, rewriting history involves more than just flipping colonial narratives or idealizing pre-colonial eras.

I. Postcolonial Theory, Historiography, and Theatre

As expressed by scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, postcolonial theory highlights the

necessity of challenging imperial discourses and recovering cultural autonomy. Historiography becomes a formative process in the context of theatre, where history is enacted, questioned, and reimagined in addition to being recorded.

1) The Counter–History of Theatre

Because it revives marginalized or erased narratives, theatre serves as a counter–historical modality. It highlights the fabricated nature of historical truth and challenges archives that favour colonial perspectives. Theatre confronts the silences of history through representation.

2) Memory and Being a Subaltern

Postcolonial drama frequently emphasizes subaltern experiences overlooked by colonial history. By giving voice to people whose voices were silenced—tribal, women, labourers, and untouchables—playwrights rewrite history from the bottom up.

3) Changing Myths and Taking Back Culture

Indian playwrights often reinterpret myths to challenge colonial and patriarchal power structures. Myth is used as a political tool to show how power structures last over time.

II. Rewriting the Past in Indian Postcolonial Drama

This part goes into great detail about how some Indian plays change history.

A. Girish Karnad: Rethinking Myth and History

Girish Karnad’s plays focus on how myth, memory, and politics work together. His new versions of old stories give them new historical meanings.

i. Hayavadana: Identity, Folklore, and the Breakup of Postcolonial Society

Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana reinterprets folklore to examine the disjointed essence of identity within a postcolonial cultural context. Karnad uses the Kathasaritsagara story and Thomas Mann’s retelling of it to make a play with many layers where myth, ritual, and modern psychological conflict come together. The main idea is that Devadatta and Kapila’s minds and bodies are split, which represents the broken consciousness of a country that is trying to deal with the legacies of colonialism and its own traditions. Karnad shows a world where completeness is hard to find;

people are always trying to balance what they know from myths with what they experience in real life.

The horse-headed Hayavadana represents a strong metaphor for unfinished identities. This idea strongly connects with societies that have mixed cultures. Karnad employs folk theatre elements, such as masks, songs, and direct interaction with the audience. This approach disrupts traditional storytelling and highlights how identity is shaped through performance. It questions colonial realistic styles and brings indigenous ways of performing back to the forefront of drama.

ii. Naga-Mandala – Gendered Histories and the Politics of Storytelling

Naga-Mandala is an example of Karnad's talent to bring back the voices that have been silenced – in particular, the voices of women – through the storytelling power folktales possess. The play revolves around Rani, a wife who is neglected and emotionally isolated, whom Karnad very effectively places at the centre of his dramatic world. To reveal the patriarchal structures which dictate the gendered histories, Karnad relies on the rich oral storytelling traditions and especially the tales told by village women. Rani is the one who, through her experiences, becomes the intersection of the traits of courage, vulnerability, and desire, thus, she contests the notion of women's being simply the side-characters in historical narratives.

iii. The Fire and the Rain – Myth, Power, and Ritual Politics

In the Fire and the Rain, Karnad explores the linked themes of ritual, power, and human ambition by looking in detail at the Mahabharata story. Instead of simply retelling the epic, he remakes it as a work that explores the politics of the spirit and the power of the sacrifice. The play, which is a past prolonged drought, shows the priests, the king, and the hopeful ones who are using religious rituals for their self-advancement. Karnad critically comments on social and political hierarchies of the day through this mythic frame, showing how holy institutions can cause inequality to continue.

B. Mahasweta Devi: Tribal Histories and Resistance

In Indian political theatre, Mahasweta Devi's work is a very significant one as it brings back the voices of the tribal whose lives have been a social and historical tragedy of being pushed to the margins. Her

work negates the impartiality, often associated with historical narration; rather, she views history through the pain, fight, and most importantly, the indestructible spirit of the Adivasi people. By doing this, Devi performs a kind of metahistory—one that not only demands emotional truth but also the factual record. Her theatrical renditions detail how even the colonial power and the postcolonial state were actively involved in the erasure, killing, and exploitation of the indigenous people. Through her characters and stories, she politically answers their interlocutors and salutes their dignity and rights.

i. Draupadi as Stage Adaption

In the play version of "Draupadi," Evi transforms Dopdi Mejhen from a tragic character into the one with overpowering political impact whose body exemplifies the clash of forcible state repression and insubordinate individuality. The police chapter in which Dopdi is arrested, tortured, and almost sexually disgraced, is a clear reference to the history of the time when the Adivasi was being subjugated to the violent acts. But the intent of the drama is Dopdi's disobedience. It is her choice of action to resist her oppressors that make her the one who holds in her hand the power of absolute revolt. In the eyes of Devi, Dopdi is a very real person—she is not only brave but also a mixture of different things, familiar to us all, like anger, pain, and most of all, the fact that she in defiance of the state, frightens it. It is by giving a tribal woman the pivotal role of political confrontation that Devi unravels the gendered dismissals of nationalist histories and queer-theory adepts opinions that resistance is of the male heroes.

Historical Intervention

Devi's rewriting of history eschews nationalist ideologies and instead embraces a necessary remembrance of the less palatable past. She urges readers and theatre-goers to acknowledge the realities that official records refuse to disclose: forcible eviction of people from their original lands, oppression of the underprivileged by development policies, the deliberate muting of the voices of the indigenous women, and the continual fight for survival. Her work is a perfect blend of factualness of events and the feelings of the involved persons, and she makes it a show of seeing and listening to the sufferings in her drama. By identifying with the tribal through her literary works and her real-life activism, Mahasweta

Devi becomes a redefinition of historical writing as an ethical obligation. She reminds us that history is not only the record of things that happened; it is also very much alive and influenced by the pain, struggle, and most importantly, the humanity of those people to whom it has been denied time after time that they exist.

C. Utpal Dutt: Political Reinterpretation through Theatre

Utpal Dutt's involvement in Indian political theatre is an intricate amalgam of Marxist historiography, ideological critique, and performative experimentation. His plays intervene directly in dominant historical narratives by exposing the economic and political forces that shape both colonial oppression and postcolonial governance. Rather than taking history as an impartial record, Dutt sees it as the ground of class struggle and state tactics. His theatre refuses to recognize history as a neutral account and sees it as a battleground of class struggle and state control.

i. "Hunting the Sun" and "Barricade"

Through the plays "Hunting the Sun" and "Barricade", Dutt presents the conflict between the ruling imperial power and the resistance of the people. The two plays turn back the historic events not from the point of view of colonial administrators or nationalist elites but of the common people fighting for their rights. "Hunting the Sun" is a work of inquiry into the workings of domination, it demonstrates the manner in which the colonial state establishes its reign through terror, violence, and ideological control. Compared to this "Barricade" displays the revolutionary movements' shared power and it brings out the idea of solidarity as a force against oppression. Dutt in these stories gives rise to the new historiography that recognizes class awakening as the basis of resistance.

D Vijay Tendulkar: Rewriting Social History through Violence and Morality

The art of Vijay Tendulkar provides to the reader a thorough re-reading of social history by depicting the pervasive presence of violence and the moral corruption in everyday caste and gender structures. Instead of glorifying the old political regimes through their official narratives, Tendulkar focuses on those characters that, being the most oppressed, are the ones whose suffering and exploitation have barely been mentioned in the historical accounts. His drama discloses that history is not only the outcome of leaders and institutions but also of those unrecorded experiences

of people who, among the rest, are subjected to humiliation, coercion, and the situations brought about by the inflexible social hierarchies. By bringing these conflicts to life, he changes the stage into a place where the functioning of domination, which had been kept in the background, is uncovered and challenged.

Historical Intervention

Tendulkar's revision of social history is not an appeal for sentimental or moralizing readings. His theatrical productions maintain the idea that violence, discrimination, and thirst for power are some of the main features of social life that influence individual fates as well as collective stories. By unmasking these social dynamics, he reaffirms that history is not a mere record of events but rather a continuous reinterpretation affected by politics, social disparities, and human nature. Hence, Tendulkar's theatre constitutes a moral act through which the artist makes the audience stakeholders of some uncomfortable truths regarding caste-based privilege, patriarchal control, and the political machineries that benefit the oppressors. Social history through his dramaturgy is redeemed as the reality which has to be put under the lens of a sincere inspection instead of being mythified in the form of triumphant

Manjula Padmanabhan: Postcolonial Bodies and Global Histories.

Manjula Padmanabhan's theatre not only questions the validity of postcolonial theory but also dives deep into the three interconnected aspects of the body, science, and capitalism. In these works, one can trace the contours of a new world order, which, while dressed in the rhetoric of globalization, operates through a familiar logic of colonial rule. Padmanabhan shows the global market as alive and well, only trading in bio political systems with exploitative themes rather than in formal empires. She uses the body as a metaphor for these global histories wherein the most private spheres become the battlefield of international power play.

i. Harvest (1997)

The play "Harvest" by Padmanabhan presents a Mumbai scenario of the near future that has with great difficulty managed to live through a nuclear disaster. The protagonists enter into a contract that involves the transplantation of the body parts of a rich Western man. Om's body thus becomes the one to be "bought and sold" by showing the global capitalism

logic that is the cause of the poor sold in the market of flesh. The drama also shows how the Global North becomes a consumer and the Global South a sacrifice for the sake of neo-colonial patterns of dependence and extraction. Among the other functions that surveillance technology performs is that of a cruel agent of the colonizer's emotional repertoires – monitoring the family's activities, feelings, and even relationships of a sexual nature.

Historical Intervention

Padmanabhan's drama battles against planning global situation triumphant sounds by putting forward the idea that global history, along with human labour costs, should also include bio political control and bodily commodification. The global network capital and technology are operating through, in her opinion, is only one more trick of the past that keeps its hierarchy intact. She uses the vehicle of the Harvest to tell a story of postcolonial past that goes beyond the idea of the state showing how the power structures implemented internationally are the ones that have the same colonial patterns just under a slightly different façade. Padmanabhan's move is to uncover the layer of these connections and let the global history reckon with that fact of the bodies that are under constant watch, control, and oppression.

III. Rewriting Through Performance, Form, and Technique

Postcolonial Indian dramatists are heavily reliant on varied stage performance planned to revise past narrations of events and to show their sheer reaction to cultural subjugation. Their artistic formal achievements have a double function of not merely contesting the colonial art forms but also of reviving the native cultural memory and even calling the audience to be more culturally aware.

1) Folk Theatre Traditions

Numerous playwrights have brought back the folk forms such as Yakshagana, Tamasha, Jatra, and Therukoothu, thus re-establishing their artistic and political roles in the contemporary theatre. These theatrical forms oppose the Eurocentric dramatic models of the colonizers' time and at the same time introduce the local histories and identities of performance.

2) Brechtian Devices

In addition, dramatists implement Brechtian methods when they

also include in their works features such as characters directly talking to the audience, non-linear story, and the narrator singing or commenting on the action which creates a more reflective engagement of the spectator and the less emotional one. Such institutionalizing ideas serve as instruments to place the people in the position of questioning authorities and the politics of historical representation.

3) Allegory and Symbolism

One of the most effective ways a voice could be heard in the era of repression and constraints, allegorical stories offer an option to express the disagree towards the suppressor. Symbolism then turns into a sure means of communication of the shared past, colonial domination, and the intricacies of socio-political resistance

4) Fragmented Narration

Fragmented memories and non-sequential narratives are used by these authors as a kind of counter-narrative to colonial historiography that characterizes history in a linear, orderly, and authoritative way. By means of disjunction, polyphony, and temporal rupture, they convey the idea of a fragmented and even multidimensional reality of a postcolonial world

IV. The Politics of Memory and Representation

Postcolonial drama powerfully insists that memory is a political issue, influenced by the power structures, and is a significant aspect of cultural identity. The decision to either preserve or erase certain memories exposes the workings of power in history, which not only supports the voices of the ones in power but also keeps the oppressed in silence. The writers of the plays revolt against this injustice by showing how the histories of the dominated groups are not heard because of the silence of the official histories.

1) Counter-Memory.

The majority of dramatists are using the concept of counter-memory to confront and dispute institutional narratives. Through reconstructing the instances which have been left out or falsely represented, they not only recover the voices that were in the past left out of the accounts given by the state but also subvert the power of the dominant historiographical trend (Foucault 160). The theatre is turned into a place where the experiences that have been forced into silence – especially those of subaltern groups –

are not only taken back but also are critically reinterpreted.

2) Gendered Histories.

Women writers and female characters take the most significant part in dealing with the absence of patriarchal history. Their works bring into the light women's emotional labour, resilience, trauma, and agency and thus move the focus of the attention to the experiences which have been at the margins of the canonical narratives. Through this reorientation, postcolonial drama unpacks the idea that not only women's bodies but also their memories are the recorders of historical atrocities and at the same time powerful weapons of resistance.

3) Dalit and Adivasi Historiographies

Dalit and Adivasi dramatists – for example, Om Prakash Valmiki – and critics like Nandi Bhatia reveal the history that the elite narratives are always turning their backs to. Their theatrical productions narrate the past of the oppression of the caste system, the taking away of land, systemic violence, and the endurance of the culture and thus, giving the alternative to the dominant historiographical traditions.

Conclusion.

Postcolonial Indian drama through its characters and stories teaches us that to remember is essentially a human feature which is influenced by suffering, tenacity, and the need for respect. With the help of plays, the forgotten voices get out of the closet and into the open revealing how the past has been the territory of those in power for a long time and people of the world, especially the marginalized ones, have been left out of its camp. This theatre demands that memory, being a communal heritage, should not only be shared and questioned but also, if necessary, reconstructed so that the community may get back its belonging and truth.

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