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Natyashastra to the Postcolonial Stage: Tradition, Colonialism and Resistance in Indian Theatre

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Abstract: *Indian Theatre traces a continuous history of dramaturgy from Bharata's Natyashastra to the post colonial present. Folk- Modern Hybridity in Indian theatre after 1947 constitutes decentring the European drama by exploring the indigenous thematic concepts. It is also accomplished through the narrative techniques that the post-independent dramatists employ in their dramatic performances. The inculcation of pre-colonial past in the forms of indigenous performances like rituals, myths, folktales, history, music songs, dance, local settings, and oral style of storytelling, turn out to be effective devices in dismantling the dominating forms of western drama. These incorporations make the postcolonial Indian theatre a site for articulating resistance by the once colonized subjects. This paper aims to examine how tradition, colonialism and resistance have been able to shape the present Indian theatrical tradition.*

Keywords: *Indian Theatre, Hybridity, pre-colonial, post- colonial, resistance, folk theatre, cultural identity.*

Introduction: The dramatic tradition emerged and developed in India even before Greek drama came to the knowledge of the Indians. "Bharata's *Natyasastra* (5th e. B.C.) and Aristotle's *Poetics* (330 B. C) enshrine the highest achievements in dramaturgy in the Indian and Western worlds, respectively. These two seminal works are empirical in nature, being based on perspective observations of facts in dramatic practices of their predecessors and contemporaries." (Kushwaha 45) Brahma, "the creator of *Natyasastra* has extracted the art of recitation from the *Rig Veda,* the art of song from the *Samaveda,* the art of action from the *Yajurveda* and the emotion and the aesthetics from the *Atharvaveda*." (Budholia 3) Even the contemporary dramatist, Girish Karnad, has mentioned in *The Fire and the Rain* that "Brahma, the Lord of All Creation extracted the requisite elements from the four Vedas and combined them into a fifth Veda and thus gave birth to the art of Drama. He handed it over to his son, Lord Indra, the supreme God of the Skies. Lord Indra, in turn, passed on the art to Bharata, a human being, for the gods cannot indulge in pretence." (2: 107) Then "Bharata, with the help of his hundred sons and some nymphs specially created by Brahma for the purpose, staged the first play." (Karnad 2: 299) In this regard Supriya Shukla also states that "The origin of Indian drama can thus be traced back to the Vedic period. It is believed that the dramatic tradition of the ancient Hindus was fully developed even before the Greek drama came to their knowledge." (Tandon 3)

Natyasastra elaborately discusses the poetics and stagecraft of drama "Indian tradition preserved in the *Natyashastra* the oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama, claims for the drama a divine origin, and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves." (Keith 12) Various aspects of drama, including plot

construction, characterisation, stage setting and music have been dealt with in this treatise. The ancient practitioners like "Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Visakhadatta and Sudraka who breathed life into the theatre represent the golden age of Sanskrit Drama." (Bhatta 3)

Sanskrit Drama flourished in its glory till the eleventh century but thereafter Indian drama activity almost came to a halt following the Islamic invasion of India. As mentioned by Bhagavat Nayak, "The origin, growth and evolution of Indian English Drama is based on the tradition of Sanskrit drama in the pre-Vedic era, with its dexterous struggle in the Mughal era." (v) Theatre was discouraged and forbidden entirely during this period as the Islamic religious law was against theatre. Along with Sanskrit theatre, Indian drama went on growing in folk dramatic tradition in regional languages, popular till today, in different parts of the country. Some examples of folk dramatic forms are *Ramlila, Raslila* and *Nautanki* in the North, *Ojhapali* in Assam, *Pala* in Orissa, *Jatra* in Bengal, *Bhavai* in Gujarat, *Khayal* in Rajasthan, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Padayani* and *Theyyam* in Kerela, *Terukuttu* in Tamil Nadu, *Yakshagana* and *Bayalata* in Karnataka. Later on, to re-assert indigenous values and ideas, theatrical traditions were encouraged by theatre lovers in India, across the sub continent, leading to the development of a large number of regional language theatres and folk theatres from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

A new awakening came over the Indian arts, including drama, after the invasion of the British in India. English education brought, over the course of years, the study of western drama. Foreign troupes visited and performed in India. The exposure to new forms of literature and drama strengthened the dormant impulse of lndian drama. Translations and adaptations from Sanskrit to English and English to other vernacular languages followed. By the end of the nineteenth century some of the Indian drama, written originally in vernacular languages, started to be translated into English. This new form of drama, on the one hand, dealt with the western tradition and on the other, experimented with the Indian tradition. Thus, the western impact influenced "the dormant, critical impulse in the country to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and literature, and to open the way for a fruitful cross fertilization of ideas and forms of expression." (lyengar 4) It is observed by L.S. Gill that the Indian English drama made its humble beginning with the British support in the second half of the 19th century. The three major Indian cities Bombay, Madras and Calcutta important trade centres under the influence of British trading companies, became the centres of the theatre-activity. The English education adopted for sheer commercial and political purposes gave rise to a very ambitious middle class of Indians. These Indians were carried away by the artificiality of the British culture and forgot their own rich heritage. In the big cities, theatres staged plays by the visiting troops from England. (13)

The influence of Western models brought the proscenium theatre, which was a perfect example of the conditions of colonial dominance, where it borrowed "… organizational structures, textual features and performance convention from Europe especially England." (Dharwadker 3)

"After Independence, the impetus imparted to theatrical activity in India took various forms like the establishment of National School of Drama and Sangeet Natak Akademi. This has helped the growth of theatre in regional languages." (Gill 13) The dramatists who wrote after Independence have continued with Indian tradition of drama. As observed by M.K.Naik:

It is true that post- Independence drama did benefit by the growing interest abroad in Indian English literature, and a number of plays by dramatists like Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma and Gurcharan Das were successfully staged in Europe and the United States of America. But these stray performances abroad, in spite of all their advantages, did not lead to the establishment of a regular school of Indian English drama at home. This was mainly because the encouragement which drama received from several quarters immediately after Independence was monopolized by the theatre in the Indian regional languages. (267)

At the same time the traditional theatres "… such as *Yakshaganas Tamasha, Ras Lila, Nautanki, Bhavai, Jatra, and Khayal* have gone through a remarkable revival since Independence… Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition, on the basis of common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (sutradhara) and clown (vidushaka), and abundant song and dance." (Hansen 77) As a result an "... interest in folk theatre started in the late fifties and early sixties in India ... The rediscovery of folk theatre had infact heightened the sense of a rural-urban cultural dichotomy among the educated elite.... By the early seventies, playwrights and directors had begun to incorporate folk conventions and ideas into their productions." (Hansen 77-78)

The term postcolonial refers to the complex phase that politically engages the erstwhile colonies after the cessation of European colonisation. Postcolonialism designates the terrain of discourse that consists of reactions to, an analysis of, the cultural legacy of colonialism. It foregrounds the cultural transformation effected by European colonisation and the struggles endured by the once colonised subjects to reclaim their cultural conflict between the two worlds: the colonising and the colonised. It also points to the socio-cultural formation of the new nation states.

The origins of postcolonialism can be traced back to the natives historical resistance to colonial oppression and imperial control. The success of the natives to resist and overthrow the colonial rule empowers them to offer a radical challenge to the political and conceptual structures of the systems on which such domination has been based. It serves to challenge the hegemonic structures of the colonisers that inscribed themselves as the ideal and civilized and denigrated the natives as wild, barbarous, and uncivilized. The postcolonial subjects have recognised the strategy of "cultural Othering" (Said 54) used by the colonizers to domesticate subordinate and control the colonies. In Edward Said's phrase, "cultural Othering" (54) is an orientalist discourse or practice in which the Orient is constructed as the cultural Other of Europe. The colonised began to re-inscribe hegemonic structures of the Empire that silenced them for ages. Hence, postcolonialism involves an engagement with, and a contestation of the coloniser's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies. It works through the process of writing back to the Empire, re-writing and re-reading its canonical texts to explore the disparate treatment meted out to the pre-colonial people. The writing back or the de-scribing can be done in many ways. One of the means is to decolonise the landscape: to imaginatively reconstruct a landscape where the residue of colonisation are conspicuously absent. Dramatists like Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad construct locales emptied of colonial markers with a view to reconstructing their cultural identity. They landscape their resistance to dominate power structures in life and also dominate literary forms in writings. This is a way to expunge both consciousness and imagination of the ensnaring images of colonisation.

Postcolonial drama intersects with postcolonial theories as a powerful form where dramatists have been creating drama for a range of vital cultural functions. The dramatists are using this literary form to "define and affirm their people's cultural 'personality' in the face of continuing cultural, economic and political subjugation by recovering the past, freed from the biases of metropolitan or mainstream history." (Crow and Banfield 17) Karnad exemplifies himself as a postcolonial writer through the form and structure of his plays. Kamad's postcoloniality is a result of his innovative application of traditional dramatic forms. He effectively domesticates the dominant theatre tradition and moulds it to give a distinct Indian experience. The identity of his theatre is defined in terms of its cultural difference from both modern European theatre and ancient Indian theatre. In this regard, Krishna Singh states that "The potent underlying features, techniques, character delineation and choice of language directly targeted against colonial neurosis and centrality of the West, definitely pave the way for literary and cultural independence." (3) The observation of P.Obula Reddy is also significant in this context:

The Indian dramatists like Karnad, Tanvir, Panikkar and Karanth in their works return to the tradition.... It is something to be lived and grappled with, adapted and even transformed, in order to create new forms of drama which relate to Indian people... their return to the past is an immediate response to the immediate historical reality of 'westernization' in India. There is also an attempt to 'decolonize the mind' in the sense that Ngugi wa Thiong'o might advocate; by decolonizing definitions of cultúre, aesthetics and representational forms and techniques, by combining rather than separating the various languages, idioms, forms and techniques, narratives and histories that make up popular and regional cultures of India. This process of decolonization involves the practice of interculturalism at the most essential level ... They produce plays in the spirit of decolonization. They draw from the Ramayana and Mahabharata and from the dramas of Kalidasa and Bhasa. (34-35)

Folk- Modern hybridity in Indian theatre after 1947 constitutes decentring the European drama by exploring the indigenous thematic concepts. It is also accomplished through the narrative techniques that the post-independent dramatists employ in their dramatic performances. The inculcation of pre-colonial past in the forms of indigenous performances like rituals, myths, folktales, history, music songs, dance, local settings, and oral style of storytelling, turn out to be effective devices in dismantling the dominating forms of western drama. These incorporations make the postcolonial Indian theatre a site for articulating resistance by the once colonised subjects.

This recontextualisation of folk traditions in contemporary Indian theatre acknowledges the fact that the once colonized world is full of conflicts, and contradictions: the conflict between the nation's colonial past and the postcolonial present, between the pre-colonial identity and the colonial legacy, and so on. It acknowledges "hybridity" (Bhaba 13) as the predominant trait which is the result of the contact and conflict between the colonisers and the natives. The indigenous traditions of the nation's past confronted with the modernising impulse of the colonisers turn the postcolonial individual into a cultural blending. This has resulted in the grooming of a new generation of populace who find themselves caught between the two conflicting cultures. This blending, as Homi K. Bhaba mentions "hybridity" (13), leads the postcolonial people to an equally ambiguous condition of "unhomeliness" (13), a state where the individual is not at home even in himself. The hybridity and unhomeliness in the post Independent Indian communities induce them to search for their cultural identity prior to colonisation. Thus, they attempt to reconstruct, rediscover or retrieve a cultural identity eased by the hegemonic power structures of colonisation.

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