

PERFORMING CHANGE :  
A STUDY OF THEATRE  
IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION  
IN THREE ASIAN CULTURES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

THESIS

SUBMITTED TO

GOA UNIVERSITY

FOR THE AWARD OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

ENGLISH

BY

MARIA ISABEL SANTA RITA VAS

UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF

DR. A.K. JOSHI

( PROF. AND HEAD, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, GOA UNIVERSITY, RTD.)

AND

DR. KIRAN J. BUDKULEY

( READER, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, GOA UNIVERSITY )

*Certified copy*

*goshite* 2008  
*August*

*No suggestions/modifications  
were recommended by the  
external examiners  
- goshite  
1/8/08*

*Chems M  
Prof. R. Chems  
1/8/2008*

*822*  
*VAS/Per*  
*T-399*



## DECLARATION

As required under the Goa University Ordinance OB 9.9. (ii), I, Maria Isabel Santa Rita Vás, hereby declare that the Thesis titled '**Performing Change: Theatre in the Context of Social Transformation in Three Asian Cultures in the Twentieth Century**' is the outcome of my own research, undertaken under the supervision of Dr. Ashok K. Joshi, Professor and Head, Department of English (Rtd.), Goa University, as the Guide and Dr. Kiran J. Budkuley, Reader in English, Goa University, as the Co-guide, in an attempt to find new insights into the chosen area of study. All the bibliographic, critical and biographical sources used in the course of this work have been duly acknowledged in the Thesis. This work has not previously formed the basis of any award of Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship or other similar titles to me.

*Maria Isabel Santa Rita Vás*

Maria Isabel Santa Rita Vás

Department of English, Goa University

Taleigao Plateau, Goa



1/8/08  
Date: 29<sup>th</sup> July 2008

*Joshi*

## CERTIFICATE

As required under the provision of the Goa University Ordinance OB 9.9. (vi), I hereby certify that the Thesis titled '**Performing Change: Theatre in the Context of Social Transformation in Three Asian Cultures in the Twentieth Century**' submitted by Ms. Maria Isabel Santa Rita Vás for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is the record of her own work done under my guidance and further that it has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship, or other similar titles to her.

*Ashok K. Joshi*  
1/4/08

Prof. Ashok K. Joshi, Research Guide

*Kiran Budkuley*  
-01/08/2008-

Dr. Kiran Budkuley, Co-guide



Dr. K.S. Bhat, Head, Department of English, Goa University

Prof. B.K. Sharma, Dean, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Goa University

Date: 29<sup>th</sup> July 2008.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Words of thanks are inadequate for all that has come my way in terms of scholarly guidance, assistance, and encouragement in the course of writing this dissertation. However inadequately, I wish to express my gratitude:

- to my research guide, Prof. Ashok K. Joshi, for his scholarship, meticulous guidance and great patience, and for allowing me to trespass into his time even after his retirement from active academic service;
- to the co-guide, Dr. Kiran J. Budkuley; her perceptive insights, optimism, and kindness well beyond the call of duty buttressed my confidence in my work;
- to the Registrar, Dr. Mohan Sangodkar, for his interest and help;
- to Dr. K.S. Bhat, Head of the Department, English, who invariably cleared hurdles and extended every assistance;
- to Prof. B.K. Sharma, Dean of Languages and Literature, for his help and encouragement;
- to Dr. Rafael Fernandes, and Dr. Nina Caldeira, Department of English, for their cheerful support;
- to the administrative and library staff, Goa University, for warm cooperation, always;

- to my friends, who have generously walked yet another mile with me;
- to my dramatic friends of the Mustard Seed Art Company who have shared with me much more than theatre;
- to my family. ( on earth and in heaven!) for unfailingly believing in my antics and standing by me;

It has been a joyful journey of exploration: ideas, books, journals, scholars, theatre persons and theatre events, the painstaking effort of researching and writing, the very opportunity to study – for these I am inexpressibly grateful

- for all these and for theatre, thank God!

Maria Isabel de Santa Rita Vás

## PREFACE

Theatre has been a companion to me for two decades now – an exciting and generous companion. The wealth of experience it offers theatre artistes – playwrights, actors, directors, technicians – is all too familiar. What I needed to explore was the significance of theatre beyond this small circle, its wider and more objective relevance, if any, to the community. This study comes in response to the insistent question: is theatre today a form of self-indulgence, yesterday's art, sadly but fittingly crowded out by mega-technologies in a hurried world? Other people's answers did not seem to provide the insights I was looking for.

As a student of English literature, my training had been grounded in Western drama alone. Now, it was Asian theatre that beckoned. The delimitation of the area of exploration was dictated by constraints of time and space; by the accessibility of published material in English translation; and by a half-acknowledged desire to personally experience, at first hand, at least a glancing contact with theatre in the cultures selected for study.

In one sense the area selected was wide: theatre in China, India (West Bengal) and Sri Lanka from 1950 to 2000. In another sense, it was restricted: I concentrated on certain regions within these cultures and excluded others. One sad exclusion was the enormous output of theatre in India today beyond West Bengal. Bengal received priority thanks to its

vibrant theatre for over two centuries and equally because the Bengali people experienced unspeakable social trauma in the twentieth century – and because the theme of the dissertation was theatre in times of social transformation. But theatre in Hindi, Konkani, Marathi, Kannada, Gujarati and English, for instance, was not included within the ambit of this study. The apprehension was that it might turn out to be too colossal a task.

Another dimension not explored was the impact of the economic changes taking place in the culture under transformation on matters of theatre. It is certainly an aspect that deserves study, but this was not attempted for want of competence in the field and difficulty of access to relevant data.

Given the wide chronological and geographical frames, it was, regrettably, not possible to attend performances of the plays selected for study.

The M.L.A. Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Fifth Edition, has been followed as the style-sheet.

## CONTENTS

## Chapter

1	Theatre and Social Transformation	1
2	The Text in the Context of Society and Theatre	30
3	The Playwright in Political Costume	94
4	Gendering the theatre	174
5	The Changing Frames of Performance in Asian Theatre	220
6	Performing Change	269
	Works Cited	287
	Works Consulted	306



---

PERFORMING CHANGE :

A STUDY OF THEATRE

IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

IN THREE ASIAN CULTURES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

## CHAPTER 1

---

### THEATRE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

## Chapter 1

### Theatre and Social Transformation

Theatre creates heaven and earth, ghosts and deities. Theatre can exhaust ten thousand possibilities of human characters and present a thousand changes in human history.[...] When a performance reaches the most exquisite point, one can hear the soundless and see the Tao as big as life.

- Tang Xianzu (1550 – 1616) *Epitaph for the Theatre God Master Qingyuan*

You sit and watch the stage

Your back is turned –

To what?

The firing squad

Shoots in the back of the neck

Whole nations have been caught

Looking the wrong way

I want to remind you

Of what you forgot to see

On the way here.

- Edward Bond, *Lear* (1971)

### 1.1. Theatre as a Cultural Text

Theatre has been a living and significant presence in the pre-modern world. The Chinese scholar Li Liweng writes in the seventeenth century, "A dynasty's position in history rests on the plays it produced. Therefore, while different from other genres, the art of playwriting is not a minor skill but ranks high, along with history, biography, poetry and prose" (78–79). Such a position for the theatre in contemporary society has been contested and problematized. Performance theorists today, such as Philip Auslander, question the "traditional, unreflective assumptions" (2) that are made about live performance. Auslander attacks what he refers to as, "attempts to explicate the value of 'liveness' [by] invoking clichés and mystifications like 'the magic of live theatre', the 'energy' that supposedly exists between performers and events in a live event, and the 'community' that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators" (2). Technological developments in virtual reality and communications have sometimes prompted the conclusion that theatre has no genuine place any more: technology has turned the world, and humans themselves, into a 'standing reserve' in which everything and everyone is instrumental, a means to be used up or laid waste, rather than a fully present end in themselves (Heidegger 3–35). Postmodern theory tends to see theatre as a "quaint and marginalized activity in a wired world" and contests whether live theatre really exists any more (Fortier 220).

However, equally vocal have been theorists and theatre practitioners who claim for theatre today a more than merely marginal location. In *The Future of Theatre* Benedict Nightingale claims: "It has been observed that people watching film or TV tend to lean back, people in theatre to lean forward. That body language tells a truth. However hard it may strive to be trivial, the theatre cannot shed the civic and religious importance it possessed at its dawning" (6). Anthropologist and comparative symbologist Victor Turner believes that "Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances.

[...] A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures" (Introduction 1). Theatre researcher and artist Jane Plastow examines the dynamics in a variety of cultures under stress and remarks that "The theatre not only examines the resultant sense of loss of self-worth but also attempts to take part in the healing process of asserting culture and identity [...]" (2). The debate has not abated; it continues to beckon investigators.

This study investigates the viability and vitality of theatre to participate in the creation and re-creation of meaning and social critique. It claims for theatre, in the context of three cultures in Asia, a significant location as a cultural text, in providing space for political discourse; in problematising contemporary social issues; in provoking critical thought on the nature of art and performance; in interrogating culture itself, and matters of cultural identity; and in playing a quasi-ritual role in creating community.

By virtue of being, fundamentally, one of the most collaborative of the arts, the theatre engages with culture at more than one level. Various, it functions as an exchange between literary text and performance; playwright, reader, actor, director and audience; art and politics; leisure as well as economics; a space for resistance or a less than liberating instrument of political power. Particularly in times of social crisis and transition, theatre finds distinctive creative possibilities poised in the transitional moment. It can act as a multi-layered agent in the creation and recreation of maps of meaning for the cultural group where it operates. The theatre experience is deeply communitarian in nature. In times of social conflict and crisis, elements of discontinuity and heterogeneity and contradictory impulses may find their way onto the stage. This makes available a space for analysis, novelty, resistance and change.

The problem analysed in the dissertation is the complex relationship between theatre and culture in some Asian societies in the second half of the twentieth century. Twentieth century Asia has been a major theatre of political, social and cultural struggle and redefinition. This fact offers vast scope to investigate the response of theatre, as a form of the literary and performing arts, to reinvent itself. The transformation of theatre in the context of a society in

deep and often violent crisis, challenges the investigator to venture into fact finding, analysis and interpretation.

The focus of the study is to throw light on the experience of theatre at the literary and performance levels in three Asian countries as they negotiated social transformation: China, India, and Sri Lanka. To narrow the point of focus, the study investigates the theatre of urban China, the Bengali theatre in India, and the Sinhalese theatre in Sri Lanka. Selected plays from the work of an array of playwrights are critiqued. They are viewed within the larger historical, political and cultural context within which they arose and to which they responded, so as to identify patterns and trends. The underlying assumption is that such an enquiry yields significant insights into the nature of theatre as a cultural text. This assumption is supported by Johan Fornas' observation: "Symbolic or cultural forms mirror, represent and thematise other parts and aspects of human life, society and the external world. [...] Culture represents or refigures these other 'realities' while simultaneously opening an intersubjectively shared symbolic dimension of its own. Cultural texts mirror society but simultaneously take part in its formation" (134).

## **1.2. Researching Theatre**

The study examines selected plays from China, India and Sri Lanka so as to investigate the complex relationships between theatre and culture in these locations from around 1950 to 2000. Rather than conducting an exhaustive survey of all the plays written and performed in these five decades – a rather daunting task considering the large geographical and chronological area under consideration – eleven plays have been earmarked to serve as case-studies. These plays chosen for analysis are believed to be representative of the segment of theatre under investigation.

### 1.2.1. The Plays

#### China:

1. *The White-haired Girl* by He Jingzhi and Ding Yi, (representative of the *geju*, a new theatre form developed to popularize emerging political ideals).
2. *Cai Wenji* by Guo Moruo (representing the historical genre popular in China).
3. *Teahouse* by Lao She (as an instance of the *huaju*, the modern 'spoken play').
4. *Nocturnal Wanderer* by Gao Xingjian (representative of the work of a Chinese writer in exile).

#### India:

1. *Evam Indrajit* by Badal Sircar (a path-breaking experimental play influenced by Western theatre).
2. *Hunting the Sun* by Utpal Dutt (representing the work of an Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) playwright that highlights social issues).
3. *Mareech, the Legend* by Arun Mukherjee (as an instance of an amalgamation of the *Jatra* folk form with the modern theatre).
4. *Water* by Mahasweta Devi (significant as a play by a woman writer and social activist).

#### Sri Lanka:

1. *The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain* by Ediriwira Sarachchandra (a play harking back to myth and legend to throw light on contemporary problems).
2. *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* by Ernest MacIntyre (an instance of a play with an experimental form and an intractable contemporary theme).
3. *The Bearer of Woes* by Prasannajit Abeysuriya (to illustrate the use of theatre for socio-political critique).

In the six chapters of the dissertation the attempt is to contextualize the study of theatre as it evolved in the three specific locations; to investigate ways in which theatre re-invented itself in Asia in the context of major social transformation; and also to analyse the significance of theatre as a cultural text within such a turbulent context. In this introductory Chapter 1 the thesis is stated, the contours of theatre theory and practice are drawn, and recent relevant literature is reviewed; the focus is on Asian theatre, but the larger canvas of world theatre is always kept in mind. The next six chapters deal with the following themes:

Chapter 2. The Text in the Context of Society and Theatre. In this chapter the plays are introduced and placed within the context of society and theatre in three cultures.

Chapter 3. The Playwright in Political Costume. Here the focus is on the political nature of theatre, with reference to ideology, and power relations. Note is also taken of the role of the artist as understood within the worldview of each culture, and of the ways in which each of the playwrights negotiates these issues in turbulent times.

Chapter 4. Gendering the Theatre. Gender-based constructions in theatre are posited as an intrinsic part of a larger discourse within societies grappling with thorny issues of modernization and identity.

Chapter 5. The Changing Frames of Performance in Asian Theatre. In this chapter some of the problematics of form and style come in for discussion, situated within the dialectic of modernity and tradition.

Chapter 6. Conclusion. The main threads of the argument are woven together to indicate patterns in the weave of theatre and society.

The scope of the study is defined by the parameters selected: to examine theatre as a literary as well as a performance text as it functioned and evolved over a period of about fifty years (1950 - 2000) in specific geographical locations.

Methodology: As the title indicates ( Performing Change: a Study of Theatre in the Context of Social Transformation in Three Asian Cultures in the Twentieth Century) the dissertation is essentially a cultural analysis of texts. It is in the nature of a case-study of specific



texts within their context, with the aim of indicating trends or directions. The changes in the writing and performing of plays are seen to go in tandem with the social, political and economic changes in society. The study analyses the nature of this relationship between transformation in society and theatre. It includes a comparative dimension where the responses of the three cultures under observation are juxtaposed and critically viewed in the process of theorising theatre. Mikko Lehtonen indicates the nature of such a process: "Analysis is returning to the roots of text's symbolic construction, to what it is composed of, and simultaneously withdrawing from text, detaching from 'the text itself' and going to contextual elements" (89).

The analysis borrows from the approaches of various theorists: it finds useful insights in semiotics to understand theatre as a language of signs; it acknowledges that psychoanalysis can be a rich map for analysis; it probes, with the theatre anthropologists, the ritual character of stage performance; it takes a leaf out of the book of the feminists to come to grips with issues of gender; and it draws on postcolonial viewpoints to critique the theatre of three Asian cultures grappling with their immediate past. It takes as a point of departure that texts are, in the words of Edward W. Said, worldly events:

(T)exts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.[...] The realities of power and authority – as well as the resistances offered by men, women and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies – are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics (*The World* 5).

Together with the analysis of the selected plays, the dissertation draws upon other primary sources like biographical and other first-person accounts and discussions, as well as secondary sources such as theatre scholarship, historical and socio-political analyses.

The Asia-centred focus in the latter decades of the twentieth century calls into attention a region that has been the stage of social upheaval of enormous magnitude. Asian theatre re-

inventing itself with unsurpassed vitality within such a cultural context offers interesting insights into the nature of theatre and the diverse players who shape its discourse.

The concept of 'Asian theatre' is taken as a meaningful category, despite the extensive differences in the circumstances and works that one encounters in each of the cultures being studied. This is based on the perception that theatre in Asia does seem to prioritize specific motifs in the area of form, and that, differences notwithstanding, Asian societies faced common challenges in the twentieth century: overwhelming political turmoil, problematic engagement with Western powers, modernization, questions of cultural identity and nationhood, and social reconstruction.

### **1.3. Theatre and Social Change**

Theatre and social change have manifested interconnections, possibly at all times in one subtle way or another, but graphically and diversely in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theatre discourse has been abundant and fertile in sowing the winds of change within every facet of theatre, from the very concept of its nature, to the various aspects of its craft. Simultaneously, the practice of theatre has certainly not remained unaffected by the enormous transformation in the socio-politico-cultural context. The dialectic between social change and change within theatre has flowed with vigour through the century. This is however, not a new or sudden development. Theatre has manifested a nexus with society through the ages.

#### **1.3.1. Theatre and Society in Ancient Greece**

The debate about the 'proper' nature and function of theatre can be traced back through the centuries to the ancient Greeks: Plato's mistrust of the poet as a man possessed, unable to grasp the true nature of reality and given to whipping up unhealthy emotions, and Aristotle's advocacy of poetry as more philosophical than history, and his defence of theatre as cathartic, all

seem to point to the vitality of the theatre of the day. It is to the tradition of comedy of the times, as a genre, that we turn to explore topical issues and earthy themes and to take on the events and personalities of the moment. Aristophanes sounds perfectly contemporary to a twenty-first century audience, with his irreverent tone and political engagement. As early as the fifth century B.C., Aristophanes uses, in *The Frogs*, the *parabasis* or direct address to the audience, to interrupt the action and mount a direct political exposé. Not surprisingly, one discovers that Aristophanes wrote during the years of the long Peloponnesian War<sup>1</sup> which ended in 404 B.C.: social turbulence had its impact on the playwrights of the day. In Asia too, theatre of social engagement has not been uncommon in days gone by.

### **1.3.2. Ancient Asian Theatre**

In some Asian cultures we encounter a similar engagement not primarily in the classical mode but powerfully in the robust folk traditions. However, the classical playwright Bhasa (circa 400 AD) (Richmond et al 54) is known to have have reinterpreted mythological or historical characters to comment on contemporary matters. The folk performances widespread in India, have usually related in diverse ways to the contemporary socio-political reality. The *Jatra* of Bengal, *Terukkuttu* of Tamilnadu, *Veethinatakam* of Andhra Pradesh, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, and *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, are some examples of this process. Originally with strong religious affiliations, as the political life became stable they took to presenting also historical, social and political themes and mythological episodes without emphasis on the religious (Jain 41). As Girish Karnad points out, "the energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head" (14). Karnad's comment that folk theatre has been a very socially committed space is vindicated by the socio-political themes in mythological dress which are popular to this day.

### 1.3.3. European Theatre from the Seventeenth Century

Early European drama also reveals its deep-seated involvement with social realities. In Elizabethan England, Ben Jonson insists on the moral purpose of comedy to act as a social monitor and condemn vice by ridicule. Shakespeare's plays cannot escape questions of power and politics. In seventeenth century France, Molière insists that the only rule in comedy is to please the audience, that the end of comedy is social instruction and that comedy should depict universal types, not individuals. In 1751 playwright and philosopher Denis Diderot in his *Encyclopaedia*, advocates civil rights and helps pave the way for the French Revolution. Turmoil in the arts often reflects social confusion. Like conceptions of society, conceptions of theatre were being redefined in France: the values came from what were earlier the social margins – not the aristocracy, but the rising middle class which wanted a theatre and a society based on their values. In his conception of production and in urging a prose play that reflected these values, Diderot tried to change and extend the scope of theatre.

The twentieth century, fraught with war and violence, brought forth an enormous body of theatre work. Martin Esslin writes about the new-found seriousness that viewed drama and theatre as a space for reflection as the century dawned:

For the nineteenth century middle-classes, the theatre had been a source of entertainment, a provider of laughs, glitter and maudlin sentimentality; it had lost some of the more lofty functions it had served in some earlier epochs: poetic, religious, political. But voices began to make themselves heard that the time had come to put the theatre – and drama – back to its formerly hallowed position in the culture as a place of serious reflection on the state of society, and, indeed, a source of sublime emotion and almost religious uplift (341).

When one considers the theatre of Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, to name just a few playwrights, Esslin's comments are entirely apt. The century that produced the mass media is also responsible for an unprecedented interest not only in live

performance but equally in theorizing experiment and a passionate search into the fundamentals of theatre.

In the following sections note is taken of the significant voices of theatre practitioners and critics who have made seminal contributions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; these have influenced world theatre, including, to a large extent, Asian theatre.

#### **1.3.4. Twentieth Century World Theatre and Asian Theatre**

A few of the influential voices that have emerged, and will be briefly highlighted, are those of Henrik Ibsen, George B. Shaw, Constantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Jerzy Grotowsky and Peter Brook. Without exception, these were theatre persons themselves, to whom performance was a central issue of life. In this century that experienced profound political, economic and social upheaval, theatre aficionados responded with a discourse where change, however understood, is never peripheral, but uncompromisingly central.

Theatre at the turn of the nineteenth century witnessed major literary and theatrical reform following in the wake of political and social upheaval which swept Europe. **Henrik Ibsen** (1828 – 1906) from Norway heard the insistent call for naturalism and realism that infused the novel (Zola, Balzac, Flaubert and Stendhal) and painting (Turner and Courbet). During a period of self-imposed exile from Norway to Italy he lived through years of creative turmoil, liberating himself and his art from prevailing superficial and bourgeois mores of contemporary Scandinavian society. In path-breaking plays of realistic prose, Ibsen explored themes like the inequality of the sexes; the endangerment of political systems; the conflict of reality and illusion; the destructive price of material success; the tyranny of ideals. Plays like *Ghosts* (1881), naturalistic in thematic treatment and deeply symbolic imagery catapulted an international audience into prolonged controversy and debate on the nature of theatre. Ibsen saw the stage as an experimental space where he criticized prevailing moral dogmas and advocated radical solutions. Ibsen remained a

beacon and a point of departure for the new drama of the new century. In China, for instance, the impact of Western drama made a *début* with the acquaintance of Chinese writers with Ibsen and realism in the 1920s and 1930s (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 119). In India and Sri Lanka, too, Ibsen's plays were widely performed in the English theatre as well as in translation to the local languages ( Raha 170 and Obeyesekere 123).

Realism found a devoted advocate in England. **Bernard Shaw** (1856–1950) brought to English theatre a passion and energy not seen since Elizabethan times, and a combativeness all his own. Incisive and irreverent, his major plays like *John Bull's Other Island*, *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara* and *Pygmalion* displayed his genius for dramatizing debate on contemporary social and political issues. Though his unabashed use of the stage as pulpit does not gain him a large following today, Shaw remains an influential pioneer. In 1992 the veteran dramatist, actor and director Utpal Dutt, whose play *Hunting the Sun* is selected for study here, staged his *Janathat Aphein* (Opium of the People), a Shavian play debate about Hindu and Muslim claims to the same temple site, a hugely controversial issue at the time in India (Brown 525).

Newer impulses were now being felt and they derived from the borders of Europe. In Russia **Constantin Stanislavsky**, a great patriarchal figure of theatre, (1863-1938) helped usher front-stage the figure of the actor and explore his/her inner creativeness. Roose-Evans asserts: "Of all the pioneers he casts the longest shadow. [...] Through all the vicissitudes of fashion, however, he retained his belief in the essential creative power of the actor as the only source of vitality for the theatre" (6). Stanislavsky's insights into the nature of acting are set out in his two books *My Life in Art* (1926) and *An Actor Prepares* (1937). With Constantin Stanislavsky, then, was firmly established the actor's theatre. Stanislavsky's influence on modern acting has been enormous for the better part of the twentieth century, though it came to be challenged by later theatre practitioners like Meyerhold and Artaud. Stanislavsky's influence was received by Asian playwrights like Lao She, in his play *Teahouse* and others in the 1950s; but it was summarily dismissed by writers like MacIntyre, from Sri Lanka, in his *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* and Badal Sircar in India, in his *Evam Indrajit* in the later decades under the

influence of Absurdist Theatre; also by playwrights like the Chinese Gao Xingjian who rejected realism in favour of the Theatre of Cruelty later propounded by Antonin Artaud.

To his compatriot, **Vsevolod Meyerhold** (1874-1940), the most fascinating aspect of theatre was the primacy of movement. In 1912 Meyerhold wrote in his essay "The Fairground Booth" that pantomime and *cabotinage* or bodily theatre, were the only antidote to an excessive misuse of words in theatre. By reviving the primordial elements of the theatre -- such as the mask, gesture, movement and plot -- theatre was at last able to free itself from the shackles of literature. The grotesque, on the other hand, sharpened the senses. During the Stalinist regime in Russia, (1928-53) experiment in art was banned and Meyerhold was denounced as an enemy of the State. After a courageous speech defending the right of the creative artist to experiment, Meyerhold was deported to a concentration camp where he died, some believe, having committed suicide. His wife was found assassinated (Roose-Evans 23). It is to Meyerhold's credit that he dared challenge the appropriation of the stage for realistic literature, and point to older and more primordial elements of theatre. Though it would be difficult to trace a direct thread of influence from Meyerhold to Asian drama, one discovers in Meyerhold an emphasis on bodily theatre, which was never alien to theatre in Asia.

By this time the call for a non-naturalistic aesthetic became more and more insistent. The British theorist, director and stage designer **Gordon Craig** (1872-1966) argued for an abstract and ritualistic theatre that would have an equivalent spiritual significance to the tragedy of classical Greece or the *Noh* play, a traditional and highly stylized Japanese form. Other theatre practitioners giving serious thought to the visual and symbolic elements of performance were **Adolphe Appia** (1862-1928) in Switzerland, a theorist and designer who renovated theatrical and operatic scenography and in France, actor, director, critic, essayist and playwright **Jacques Copeau** (1879-1949) who rejected naturalism as well as spectacular decorativism and advocated a concentration on the actor and a bare stage.

The name of **Bertolt Brecht** (1898-1956) is deeply linked with the concept of Alienation. In the first three decades of the century, three names were connected with revolutionary

developments in the theatre in Germany. Max Reinhardt directed productions on an epic scale (theatrical invention in squares, streets, by lakes, cathedrals and in private houses). Erwin Piscator invented the phrase 'Epic Theatre' (and pioneered what came to be known as documentary theatre) and Bertolt Brecht used the concept in the writing of his scripts. The influence of Brecht particularly, has deeply marked the world of theatre. Brecht saw drama as a means to transform society by subjecting ideologies to close scrutiny. Roose-Evans accurately indicates the core of Brecht's aesthetic: "Brecht wanted to stimulate a reaction rather than encourage the kind of passive acquiescence found in the old bourgeois theatre. [...] The play thus became an 'encounter' and an 'experiment', with the audience functioning both as interpreter and critic" (68).

Brecht was passionate about creating a form of theatre where the audience is 'alienated', or distanced so that they are not emotionally involved, but ever aware that they are in an auditorium watching a play. They are thus able to ponder the dramatic action, and draw independent conclusions about social problems. The figure of Brecht continues to loom large over the world of theatre. Brecht was deeply influenced by Asian theatre, and the performance of Chinese actor Mei Lan-Fang in which he found confirmation of his insight that theatrical form can use symbolism to great advantage.

In France, **Antonin Artaud** (1896-1949) launched a rebellion against the rhetorical acting of the *Comedie Francaise*. He questioned the traditional dominance of the stage by words and by the author. He advocated a poetry of space that utilized music, dance, mime, chanting and lighting. Artaud was rebelling against the kind of culture that is subservient to the printed word and takes no cognizance of primitive sources of inspiration. In his volume of essays *The Theatre and its Double* (1938) he demanded that theatre should no longer be mere entertainment but genuine action, with real effects on the real world. Artaud suggested a model for theatre: a police raid on a red-light district, rounding up prostitutes on the streets and flushing them out of the brothels. The features of what he later called the Theatre of Cruelty are at work here: violence and sexuality, and the catapulting of dramatic action out of the safe



confines of the stage. Artaud's theories continue to provoke and his influence can be read into the experiments of more recent playwrights in Africa and Argentina who stage violence in criminal States. Among the playwrights studied here, Gao Xingjian's work reveals Artaud's influence, in the depiction of nightmarish violence.

The traumatic impact of the World Wars resonated within theatre in many ways. In his essay on "Theatre After Two World Wars" Christopher Innes discovers an unusually close integration of theatre with its social context after 1919: it can be seen in the different kinds of drama on the stages of defeated countries, and on those of the victors.

There seems to be an equation between the degree of war damage a country had suffered, and theatrical experiment. In Germany, where the theatre had long held the reputation of a 'moral tribunal', Expressionism had already burst on the scene in 1916. [...] Russia had been even more soundly defeated, although initially on the victorious Allied side, and already by 1920 Meyerhold was raising the banner: 'Put the October Revolution into the Theatre!' (Innes 383)

England and France, however, victors in war, lost out on theatre: experiments lacked the ideological content of the Russian and German innovations. Though one seems to encounter here one kind of theatre-society connection, the reality is entirely different when a couple of decades later, World War II ravages the world. Innes opines:

In a sense drama became a continuation of war by other means during the inter-war years, with the slogan 'Theatre is a Weapon' being coined in 1920. And this essential continuity, right up to the declaration of peace in 1945, perhaps helps to explain why there was no artistic ferment and radical innovation in the theatre – such as characterizes the 1920s – in response to the Second World War (382).

Theatre in Europe had been co-opted by the political and educational Establishment and lost its space for subversion and experimentation.

The impulse for experimentation, when it arrived, came from the philosophy of existentialism. In the atmosphere of despair and despondency after World War II, existentialism

became the support of many intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). Among the many plays he wrote, Sartre's *The Flies* (1943), *Dirty Hands* (1948) and *The Devil and the Good Lord* (1951) won great acclaim. Camus was very active in theatre work, and plays like *Caligula* (1938) and *Cross Purpose* (1944), were in the nature of extended debates. Each of these two Frenchmen wrote plays, but it is their essays that were seminal in establishing Existentialism.

But where Sartre felt a sense of commitment to his existentialism, the Theatre of the Absurd discovered no values worthy of commitment. Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and other Absurdist playwrights expressed the disorder they experienced through the very form of their writing. **Samuel Beckett's** *Waiting for Godot* (1952) the 'story' or the 'un-story' of two tramps, is the masterpiece of the Theatre of the Absurd. It has been said that "through whittling away the traditional elements of plot, setting and character, he has created a dynamic image for the static experience of waiting, remembering, struggling with the characteristically modern sense of futility. [...] Beckett creates compressed images of the whole human situation" (Bradby 81). Samuel Beckett (1906- 1989) writing from France, can be seen as the towering figure of challenge to twentieth century theatre. It is to his credit that the *angst* of the age, the sense of alienation, the breakdown of communication, are given form through grotesque symbols of the emptiness and terror of being human. Beckett's long arm has penetrated Asian theatre and playwright Ernest MacIntyre depicts genocide in Absurdist terms, and Badal Sircar dramatises the rootless consciousness of urban Bengali society.

Other significant voices came to be heard in theatre: in America, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller strove to articulate a genuine American consciousness and idiom. Clifford Odets created a theatre of political consciousness. In England, the fight against censorship of the theatre which Shaw had espoused at the beginning of the twentieth century, came to a head when the Royal Court was prosecuted for staging Edward Bond's play *Saved* (1966). A furore was unleashed and the result was the repeal of the Theatres Act of 1843 and

the censorship of the English stage was abolished in 1968; the greater freedom would be conducive to greater experimentation (Innes 430).

But the most energetic questioning of the nature of theatre originated from Poland. **Jerzy Grotowsky** (1933 - 1999) had one question to grapple with: what is theatre? Working in small rooms, with audiences kept deliberately small, Grotowsky discovered that theatre can exist without make-up, costumes, a stage or sound and light. But what theatre cannot do without is the relationship of actor and spectator. This one act is essential, this encounter between two groups of people: this, Grotowsky called Poor Theatre. Grotowsky seeks to disturb the spectator on a deep level: he takes a myth or situation sanctified by tradition and the actors confront it to relate it to their own experience of life which is determined by the collective experience of one's time. The spectator responds with empathy, and at certain moments of heightened awareness, can be changed for life. Grotowsky is considered one of the most powerful influences on world theatre in the twentieth century.

The sophisticated technological control of stage images and sound available to the theatre director prompted questions about the essential nature of performance. Theatre research drove **Peter Brook** (1925 - ) to attempt to uncover the roots of theatre: he undertook a long series of experiments and what he has termed 'cultural experience'. How to make theatre absolutely necessary to people, as necessary as eating and sex? Moving from England and Paris to Africa and Afghanistan, Peter Brook searches for an answer, for a quality in theatre lost to Western industrial societies. With a group of actors of different nationalities, Brook turns to a twelfth century masterpiece, *The Conference of Birds* by the Sufi poet Attar to create a work of theatre that would be meaningful wherever it was played. With his international company he stages the *Mahabharata*. Brook is not aiming at an exchange of theatrical skills, but to create the conditions for an exchange of cultural experience. Brook's *The Empty Space* (1968) and *The Shifting Point* (1987) have influenced directors and actors as perceptive analyses of the problems facing contemporary theatre. Brook is among those who see that deep change is necessary, but he no longer believes that conventional theatre can provide such change. His quest for theatre as

cultural experience has been challenged by **Rustom Barucha** from India. In *Theatre and the World*, both Grotowsky and Brook come in for severe indictment. Barucha problematises the so called 'intercultural theatre' as disrespectful to theatre and an attempt that decontextualises and falsifies the native cultural tradition in response to international market demands. He decries "this lack of concern for the contextual realities permeating the Indian theatre, and its dynamic relationships with numerous communities" (6). Barucha's views give voice to the concerns of some theatre persons world-wide who are deeply suspicious of what they construe as a form of spurious 'interculturalism'.

The attempts by political powers to oppress, exploit and tyrannize have met with resistance in theatre in various forms. Playwrights have seen the stage as the forum for surreptitious insurrection. At extreme personal cost, some have staged the violence tearing the social fabric in countries like Argentina, Nigeria and Brazil. The concept of theatre in Brazil and indeed in the world has been deeply transformed by the work and writings of **Augusto Boal** (1931 - ). Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed sees itself not as a mere theatrical method but as atonement. His concept of the 'spect-actor' derives from the fundamental importance assigned to the 'user' of theatre, and the users include those who watch as well as those that act. Boal's vision of theatre as a means of empowerment caught the imagination of theatre people. It has found practitioners in more than 70 countries. Not only in the poverty-ridden *favelas* (shanty-towns) of Brazil but all over the world, Boal's Forum theatre continues to be popular with individuals and communities who see in it the possibility of giving voice, body and gesture to the marginalized and oppressed. Boal's philosophy of theatre has shaped the work of a popular theatre movement in Bengal today that goes by the name of Jana Sanskriti. As the Brazilian's vision is transposed to India, it takes on a more local colouring, but the philosophy remains unchanged: empowering the oppressed.

In the last fifty years theatre appears rejuvenated. Subverting oppression, forging identities, at times supporting the establishment, it has persisted, if not always center-stage, then in interstices and margins. This age of revolutions has prompted practitioners of theatre in

innumerable guises to enter, participate, confront, articulate or subvert the multiple, often conflicting, narratives around them. Contemporary theatre practice has generated plentiful theatre scholarship. Vigorous critical discourse has surfaced in the last few decades attempting to contribute conceptually to theatre scholarship in the contemporary scenario. These include discussions on aspects of performance and culture and on cultural representations of suffering.

#### 1.4. Theorizing Theatre

Ironically, the century that has made the loudest din about theatre as an upstaged cultural practice, is also the century that has voiced the greatest interest in theatre theory. This theory has gained from a broad range of disciplines: philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, political economics, history, anthropology and so forth. Much of the theory stresses the importance of language as the basis of human activity: this is often resented by theatre practitioners as a distorted co-opting by 'literary theory', to the exclusion of the physical and sensual elements of theatre. The term 'drama' is generally used to refer to the dramatic text in its written form; whereas 'theatre' is preferred as a term to refer to the play in performance. Even as the distinction between 'theatre' and 'drama' is made, one needs to accept that "recovering the literary does not marginalize the theatrical – and vice-versa – and both together account for the resonance of the plays in performance" (Dharwadkar 17). Theatre and theory are also complementary, since "both are contemplative pursuits, although theatre has a practical and sensuous side which contemplation should not be allowed to overwhelm" (Fortier 5). Reflection on theatre practice has proceeded from diverse disciplines, some of which we now note.

**Semiotics:** The rise of semiotics brought to a study of theatre Saussure's definition of the sign and the signifier and the signified. Theatre semiotics was undertaken by various theorists. In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980) Keir Elam attempts to provide a coherent system capable of accounting for all significant activity of theatre and drama: smiles, gestures, tones of voice, blocking, music, lights, character development (4). Similarly theatre

theorist Erika Fischter-Lichte writes: "Everything which humans produce is 'significant' for themselves and each other, because humans in principle live 'in a signifying world' " (*Semiotics of Theatre* 1). This standpoint privileges form, but fails to take adequate note of extrinsic contextual factors that vitally affect theatre.

**Anthropology:** The value and significance of 'cultural performance' was highlighted by the anthropologist Milton Singer when he drew attention to the fact that culture is produced and manifested not only in artifacts but also in performance. Singer established the performative as a constitutive function of culture (xii). The cultural performance was later recognized in literary theory by Roland Barthes and in philosophy by John L. Austin who defined 'the speech act'. The critical discourse in the twentieth century has been imbued with the awareness that language not only serves a referential function but also a performative one. In "Performance Art and Ritual: Bodies in Performance", Erika Fischer-Lichte observes that since the 1980s performers increasingly use the body in violent ways and the audience is forced to endure the artist's plight empathetically. "The performer, in this sense, suffers in place of the spectators. [...] Their imagination 'saves' them from the anxieties of violence and pain directed towards their own body by imagining the performer's pain and by attempting to sympathise with it and to sense it themselves" (35).

In an article entitled "Where Does it Hurt?: Genocide, the Theatre and the Human Body", Robert Skloot remarks that the twentieth century which has produced genocide of a horrendous magnitude, has equally produced theories of dramatic representation that reject the efficacy of empathy, or warn against its inherent dangers (51). The author examines Elaine Scarry's question "What do we know of pain?" in her important book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Scarry firmly believes that pain is unshareable because its existence destroys the language necessary for it to be conveyed. Moreover, the staging of the violated body evokes hostility. However, it is Robert Skloot's contention that we need to accept shared emotions and our own complicity, as an aspect of the 'Theatre of Atrocity'. These critics offer important insights into the nature of violence in theatre in a violent world.

Theatre anthropologists Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba delve into the ritual origins of theatre and make a case for its continued affiliation with the sacred and the sensuous. They have focussed on a number of Indian theatre traditions and performance genres, viewing them as liberating contrasts with text-based theatre. Their emphasis is on the exacting physical discipline, ritual repetition and 'defamiliarizing' aesthetics of dance forms like Kathakali and Odissi. A hazard of anthropological standpoints is that they tend to indulge in a transculturalism that denies the particularity of cultures.

**Feminism:** Feminist theories have been vigorously applied to the study of theatre and drama. These are deeply concerned with the cultural representations of women, sometimes as appropriation of women to masculine perspectives, at times as masculine fantasy far removed from real women. Sue-Ellen Case presents a critical reading of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*<sup>2</sup> as "a text central to the formalisation of misogyny" (12). These are interesting readings, but the inward-looking focus tends to be 'universalist' and may downplay specificities of context.

**Materialist Theories:** Another approach to theatre is to recognize that theatre happens in a larger context and is intimately linked with the world. Changes in the world cannot but produce changes in theatre. Marxist and materialist theorists have analysed how theatre relates to the forces at work in the context where it is produced. Raymond Williams emphasizes the relations between socio-economics and literature and introduces the idea of the 'dominant', the 'residual' and the 'emergent' (*Marxism and Literature* 121–7). Most Marxist theory stresses the determinant forces of economics. In *Radical Tragedy* Jonathan Dollimore discusses the political force of theatre. Materialist theories have put back into scholarship the demand for a holistic understanding of theatre, interdependent on the material conditions of life and culture.

**Postcolonialism:** Postcolonialism seeks to describe the contemporary situation and its culture by focussing on the effects of Western imperialism and its centuries of domination until its crumbling in the latter half of the twentieth century. Though political independence has been won by the countries earlier subjugated by the West, new forms of domination have emerged, mainly military and economic. Postcolonial theory has taken various routes to map the complex

postcolonial situation world-wide. Palestinian-American Edward W. Said launches a critique of 'orientalism' and the asymmetrical divisions between 'orient' and 'occident' to the advantage of the West. Said discovers that patterns of oppressive orientalism are to be found not only in jingoistic and racist literature, but often in the 'masterpieces' of the West. "Most professional humanists [...] are unable to make the connection between the prolonged and sordid cruelty of practices such as slavery, colonialist and racial oppression, and imperial subjection on the one hand, and the poetry, fiction, and philosophy that engages in these practices on the other" (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii-xiv). Said challenges the canon of Western art; his later work moves in the direction of acknowledging and accepting the fact that hybridity exists and grows as cultural identities interconnect in a migratory and diasporic world.

Other powerful critiques in the postcolonial mode have come from Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. The postcolonial writers' project is to give voice to oppressed groups by understanding and critiquing the structures of oppression; equally, by articulating and strengthening liberation and revolution. These critiques remove theatre from the periphery of critical notice and raise the curtain on questions that are more and more insistent on being framed and possibly answered.

### **1.5. Decolonizing Theatre in Asia**

Art – including the written play and performance – has been a sensitive area in the confrontation of Western societies with Asian cultures in the twentieth century, particularly since the 1950s. This is also a cultural policy issue, since the consciousness of artistic identity extends not only to artists but also to political authorities (Dufrenne 535). In Asia, the practice of art, and of the performance arts in particular, has been deeply influenced by contact with Western imperialism. The theatre of countries in Asia colonized by the West has been imploded by Western theatre, with complex results and reactions. Asian theatre has been rich and distinguished in its performance traditions in countries like India, China, Japan, Burma,



Philippines and Korea, to mention a few. In Sri Lanka (or Ceylon), though there are no records of a classical dramatic tradition, the folk tradition has been rich. In the wake of colonization, a new 'modern', urban and somewhat elitist theatre came into its own as a result of Western education, the growth of cities and the presence of the white 'ruling classes' who made provisions for their own entertainment. A small privileged class of 'natives' was exposed to the Western classics and many young Asians travelled to the West to acquire a Western education. In Calcutta (or Kolkata), Bombay (or Mumbai), Peking (or Beijing) or Shanghai, in Tokyo or Colombo, it was European theatre that established itself in the esteem of the new westernized 'native' elite.

The first plays to be staged in newly constructed theatre buildings in the cities were performed by travelling European companies or by amateur local resident Europeans. By the early twentieth century, local language translations and adaptations of Western plays grew in popularity. In Calcutta the Hindu Theatre, founded in 1831, staged Bengali translations of *Julius Caesar* and soon after, of the Sanskrit classic *Uttar Ramcharita* (The Latter History of Rama). In Tokyo, an adaptation of *Camille* by Alexandre Dumas  *fils* made an appearance in 1907. In Shanghai, The Spring Sun Society staged an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the following decades experimentation by local playwrights in the local language but in the European models gained great currency among the urban educated public. The 'spoken play' had come to stay and it threatened to effectively upstage the older performance traditions now viewed as outmoded. But the political confrontation of the local powers with the imperialist forces inevitably led to a confrontation of cultures. The confrontation was often bitter and included passionately contested questions of national identity.

A greater awareness of the specificity of art was experienced; local artists and intellectuals become more deeply conscious of the reality and distinctiveness of cultures, and the value of their own. Mikel Dufrenne points out how the confrontation creates new realizations for the Asian people:

The national culture, first of all, is no longer experienced, as it might have been, in a kind of happy innocence. Because it has been threatened, disqualified, often half destroyed, it

is henceforth *thought out* and *desired* as the instrument of an intransigent and impassioned self-assertion. If we consider this culture as a value, the West may, all unwittingly, have contributed to it, not simply because it has illustrated the value of its own culture, but because – after the devaluing of the indigenous culture by its conquerors, missionaries and teachers – it has, through its artists and scholars, succeeded in revaluing it (536).

As Dufrenne points out the awareness of art is linked, in twentieth century Asia, to a search for national identity. This assertion of a distinctive spiritual identity has found resonance with theatre persons, playwrights like Girish Karnad in India, directors like Ediriwira Sarachchandra in Sri Lanka and actors like Mei Lan-Fang in China.

### **1.5.1. Trends in Asian theatre**

A glance at the theatre in Asia, including theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka, reveals certain commonalities:

- a. The powerful influence of Western theatre during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- b. An initial neglect of folk forms in favour of written, text-based plays.
- c. A cultural gap and sometimes an atmosphere of distrust between practitioners of the older and newer forms.
- d. Politico-cultural questions of identity which fuel questioning and research into older traditions.
- e. The creation of new forms, experimental in character, which celebrate their hybridity.
- f. Diverse forms, traditional and modern, co-existent and subtly influencing one another.

These trends indicate the directions that theatre in Asia has taken, including within the Chinese, the Indian, and the Sri Lankan cultures.

### 1.6. Critical Writing about Indian, Chinese and Sinhala Theatre

Few scholars seem to have undertaken to comprehensively study Asian theatre – perhaps the sheer scope and diversity of the field are deterrents. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* edited by Martin Banham, (1992) and *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* edited by James R. Brandon (1993) provide a basic overview of theatre in twenty countries in Asia, but the approach is to survey various forms and processes at work, with only a cursory mention of playwrights and no discussion of plays. The emphasis on traditional theatre in Asia fails to do justice to the efflorescence of modern theatre in this area of the world. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, (1997) edited by John Russell Brown undertakes a deeper analysis of trends in theatre, including modern theatre in Asia and some of the perceptions that have emerged, as for instance of 'cultural colonization' and a 'return to the roots' or more 'syncretic' theatre forms.

Sinhala theatre is examined by Ranjini Obeyesekere in *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space* (1999). A timely work that fills a void in the field, the book emphasizes the tolerance of social satire in theatre within a literate Buddhist culture, where the stage escapes the wrath of censors because it is accepted as a kind of therapeutic 'permitted' space. Though it provides valuable insights into Sinhala attitudes to debate, and the author appends her translation of a recent play by a young writer (*The Bearer of Woes*, by Prasannajit Abeyesuriya), the major lacuna is the total omission of any discussion of theatre by the Tamil population in Sri Lanka. It can be noted as a revealing omission. In theatre journal articles we find discussions of aspects of Sri Lankan theatre: in "Sri Lanka's "Ethnic" Conflict in Its Literature in English", D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke reveals that the "ethnic" conflict in Sri Lanka is rather a trans-ethnic language conflict, reflected in its literature (451-456). Goonetilleke also writes about "Sri Lankan Drama in English: Metamorphosis Through Migration", indicating the myriad influences that have shaped modern Sri Lankan theatre (493-500). Both articles carry unmistakable Sinhala viewpoints, and the upshot is that non-Sinhala theatre is all but invisible. In "Is it the End of History for Asia's Modern Theatres?" (1997) A.J. Gunarwardana focuses on a debate current

among cultural analysts: tradition versus modernity, and claims that the only theatre that has a future in Asia, is the modern theatre, as against the traditional forms that do not resonate with modern audiences and their concerns (77). In generalizing about Asia, Gunawardana seems to miss the simultaneous presence, in various Asian cultures today, of 'traditional', 'modern' and hybrid forms that often interconnect.

Theatre in India has been investigated in *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, edited by Richmond P. Farley et al. (1990), an exhaustive survey of classical, ritual, devotional, folk and dance-drama traditions, as well as modern theatre, with an attempt to relate them to their context. The section on contemporary theatre does not provide a systematic coverage of authors or institutions and does not touch upon important aspects of theatre in India today like translation and circulation. It also does not take note of the complexity of postcolonial theatre which is infused with often simultaneous influences from the classical, the religious and the folk. A recent work, *Contemporary Indian Drama astride Two Traditions* (2005), edited by Urmil Talwar and Bandana Chakraborty features an eclectic and interesting collection of essays on various issues related to dramaturgy, interpretative processes and directorial interventions, offering brief analyses of the work of the major contemporary Indian playwrights in various languages. Bengali Theatre in particular has been fairly comprehensively discussed in a handful of volumes: *Bengali Theatre: 200 Years*, (1999) edited by Utpal K. Banerjee, an anthology of essays by playwrights, actors and scholars which sketches the rich scene of theatre in Bengal for two centuries. Kironmoy Raha's *Bengali Theatre*, a more concise volume, is able to introduce an array of Bengali playwrights and their major plays. The visibility of theatre in Bengal in the 1940s is to be found in *Turbulent Times: India 1940 -44*, edited by Biswamoy Pati (1998), a book about the momentous years of the history of the Indian Freedom Struggle. A chapter entitled "Visions of Cultural Transformation" by Aishwarj Kumar highlights the remarkable contributions of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in Bengal to political theatre through a discussion of major plays. The first serious analysis of theatre, politics and culture impinging on modern India comes from Rustom Barucha, in *Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of*

*Culture* (1990): this is a scathing indictment of the interculturalism practiced by directors like Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook. *The Seagull Theatre Quarterly* (Kolkata) is also an invaluable archive of news and views on theatre theory and practice in India today.

In the very recent past the number and quality of research works on modern Indian theatre testify to the growing interest in this form of cultural communication. *Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage* (2004) by Minoti Chatterjee painstakingly studies the dislocations and relocations of theatre in Bengal as India defined its identity as a Nation. *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics and Postcolonial India* (2004) by Nandi Bhatia cogently argues that theatre was a significant force against colonial and postcolonial structures and addresses important theoretical questions about recovering contentious voices from the margins of colonial societies. In *Poetics, Plays and Performance: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (2006) Vasudha Dalmia undertakes a detailed discussion of Hindi theatre, tracing its genealogies and its appropriation of folk theatre in its project of evolving a national theatre. And *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2006) by Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar is a carefully researched scrutiny of contemporary theatre with brilliant insights on historical and theoretical themes. Interestingly, all four volumes are by women researchers.

Chinese literature is briefly discussed in *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective* (1996), edited by Barbara Stoler Miller; the perspective is 'orientalist', with an eye on the exotic, privileging the 'ancient' over the contemporary. *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present*, edited and translated by Faye Chunfang Fei (1999) is a veritable treasure-house of theoretical insights about Chinese theatre from ancient texts, modern debates and contemporary practices. A well-researched account of the development of modern Chinese theatre is offered by Colin Mackerras, a reputed scholar, in *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day* (1975). More contemporary discussions are to be found in theatre journals: "PRC Politics and Literature in the Nineties" (1991) by John Marney examines the oscillation between hard-line Marxist ideology and more moderate stands that

favour literary discussion, criticism and experimentation in China in the 1990s. In "Audience, Applause and Countertheatre: Border Crossing in 'Social Problem' Plays in Post-Mao China" (1998), Xiaomei Chen argues that unlike other literary genres, which are usually confined to the private sphere, theatre operates in a public sphere and so offers space, however limited, for Chinese intellectuals to pit a marginalized discourse against the dominant ideology. This is an insightful account from an 'insider's perspective' on the dynamics of theatre in a highly regulated society.

### **1.7. Conclusions**

Even a cursory glance at theatre during the course of the century reveals its amazing vitality and flexibility across cultures. Shifting political paradigms and the commercialization of the mass media have often relegated theatre to the margins of social discourse. Paradoxically, it has been off-centre-stage that the theatre has performed most eloquently. In subaltern locations, from city slums to village squares to the streets of small towns, practitioners of theatre in innumerable guises have stretched themselves and theatre resources to enter, participate, confront, articulate or subvert the multiple, often conflicting, narratives around them. In the next chapter the focus is to investigate how the context and the text interpenetrated in the Chinese, Indian and Sri Lankan settings – each with its unique history and postcolonial experience, its own cultural make-up, and its own contemporary political realities. The text-in-context model is posited as essential to a discussion of theatre in times of turbulence. The social and literary-cum-performance contexts are presented as intriguing 'co-texts' with diverse interconnections with the selected plays.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Peloponnesian War refers to the continued hostilities between the States of Athens and Sparta between 431 B.C. and 404 B.C. The playwright Aristophanes lived c. 445-385 B.C. See Cambridge Illustrated History: Ancient Greece. Ed. Paul Cartledge. 360-367.

<sup>2</sup> The *Oresteia* (458 B.C.) is a trilogy by the ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus. It is set against the background of the Trojan War and the campaign by King Menelaus to capture Troy. The expedition against Troy was a reaction to the seduction of Helen by Paris, a son of Priam, King of Troy, and the running off to Troy of Helen and Paris with a great quantity of Spartan treasure. Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, was married to Menelaus, king of Sparta.

## CHAPTER 2

---

### THE TEXT IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETY AND THEATRE



## Chapter 2

### The Text in the Context of Society and Theatre

#### 2.1. The text-in-context framework

"Once everything changed, except China; now there is nothing in China that does not change" (230). This wry comment by Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai about the birth of modern China can be seen to apply to most of Asia. As the twentieth century arrived, it found Asian societies struggling to pull themselves out of the mire of economic stagnation, social decadence and political turmoil. The anxious search was for transformation. Through five decades these Asian societies transformed themselves into important centres of self-reflectivity and social experiment. Culture came in for self-questioning. Predictably, theatre as a cultural text performed change.

The analysis of plays in the context of their creation and reception forms a multi-layered investigation. It involves opening and releasing many voices and relationships and currents. It places great emphasis on the cultural nature of texts, on "the constitutive role of culture for human existence and the notion of the worldly nature of symbolic meanings that it opens up" (Lehtonen 3). Meanings are created as products of social reality; but meanings also participate in the production of this reality. 'Con-texts' are not looked at as 'backgrounds' of texts but 'fellow texts' which exist together with the texts; contexts are also inside the text, and they additionally are present both in writing and reading, or in production and reception. The analysis of texts in context is not an attempt to reduce a text to its context, rather, an attempt to study text and context as inter-dependent, interwoven and inter-creative.

This chapter proceeds to:

1. Provide a sketch of the social context in each culture.
2. Delineate the literary and performance contexts in each culture.
3. Briefly introduce the selected plays from the three cultures – China, India and Sri Lanka.
4. Examine some ways of interpenetration of these texts and cultures.

## **2.2. China**

The first culture to be studied here is that of China in the second half of the twentieth century. China has an extraordinarily complex society which can be understood only with reference to its long history. Its dramatic present is rooted in a rich past, full of interesting possibilities and specific choices made, which reveal the spirit of its people.

### **2.2.1. The Changing Society of China**

**Ancient China:** The Chinese civilization dates back to 1650 B.C., one of the earliest great civilizations. Its culture developed through the centuries and spread across the mainland homogenizing the customs and traditions of the advancing armies that periodically descended upon it. Chinese culture grew in complexity, sophistication and remarkable continuity, thanks largely to the geographical isolation in which it thrived. The physical environment provided the basis for its agrarian economy as well as the comparative political isolation it enjoyed.

The entire domain of Chinese land was made up of several feudal states and civil wars were frequent. However, the majority of the Chinese people were of one racial stock, shared a common civilization and were connected by a common language. The feudal states were units of an empire, and when dynasties rose and fell, the changes that occurred were more in political structure than in culture. Even during the 631 years (1280–1911) when China was under alien

rulers – the Mongols and the Manchus – the Chinese were dominated politically, but were culturally dominant.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the imperial government falling into decadence, corruption and inefficiency and the humiliation of unequal treaties at the hands of the Western powers demoralized the scholars and impoverished the masses. Foreign powers demanded commercial concessions. The Chinese slid into war after war and dethroned the emperor. In 1911, a Republic was established but after less than four decades it was strangled by the Japanese occupation (1937-45) and World War II (1939-45). The Communist Party came to power and established the People's Republic of China in 1949. By the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century China was deep in the throes of social transformation.

Three great traditions of diverse origin and character have co-existed in China: Confucianism (sixth century BC), Taoism (circa fourth century BC) and Buddhism (circa second century AD). They have thrived independently and yet have coloured one another. Often, they have been simultaneously accepted by the same community and the same individual (Smart 62-63). Confucianism is a philosophy and system of ethics embodied in the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*. It propounds high intellectual ideals and its rules of moral conduct came to be accepted as binding on the people. Taoism began as a philosophy developed by Lao Tzu, but later developed into a religion with a large pantheon that included folk deities and spirits. Buddhism, a metaphysical religion, went on to become a major influence on Chinese philosophy, art and literature.

Through the centuries, the Chinese developed and strengthened various institutions that would promote social harmony. The most basic of these has been the family, where the centre of importance is not the individual but the kinship network (Ebrey 148). Chinese political thought evolved on the same model; it developed into the system of a paternal government and its ideal was the maintenance of social order.

The long isolation of the Chinese was breached with the arrival of Westerners in the seventeenth century. The Manchu government, looking down on the Western 'barbarians', often

refused proposals for a commercial treaty. The British then launched the Opium War, a turning point in the history of China. A number of unequal and oppressive treaties were imposed on the Chinese, and by these agreements, British, French and American powers secured concessions: in effect several foreign states were established within the territory of China. The Chinese economy took a downward plunge from which it could not recover. A historian remarks:

Now, in the mid-nineteenth century, came a series of events unprecedented in the varied history of China. A quite different civilization, the West, encroached upon the Empire, and the result was abrupt transition and a revolution which swept aside much of the traditional culture. Observers who watched the change were fascinated and at times bewildered, for the spectacle was what might have been expected had denizens of another planet invaded the earth, bringing with them an utterly alien way of life, dynamic and over-whelming. The change was rendered the more traumatic by the fact that Western civilization was itself undergoing a profound revolution, a revolution which in part was produced by the very forces that later shaped the new China of the mid-nineteenth century ( Latourette, *The Chinese* 99-100).

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Manchu dynasty had become corrupt, debilitated and very unpopular. Dissensions at court, economic depression, and popular resentment were preparing the ground for a century of extreme political turmoil, economic upheaval, war and revolution. Some of the historical landmarks are the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894 – 1895, the encroachments by the Western powers, the Opium Wars (1839)<sup>1</sup>, the fall of the Manchu dynasty and the end of imperial rule; the establishment of the Republic in 1911; the coming to power of a Nationalist government in 1928, the Sino-Japanese hostilities from 1937<sup>2</sup>, the civil conflict between the Kuomintang and the Communist parties in the 1940s;<sup>3</sup> and the establishment of the new Communist government in 1949 (Chai and Chai 187-225).

**China from 1950 to 2000.** The victory of the Communists in the civil war brought China together under a powerful central government. On 1 October 1949 Mao Zedong (or Mao Tse-Tung) as party leader proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. By the

end of the 1950s the Communist Party organized around one million branch party committees in villages, factories, schools and army units. The government took over the banks, contained inflation and took control of key industries. People were mobilized to accuse merchants and manufacturers of bribery, cheating and similar crimes. Their assets were taken over by the government. Hundreds of thousands of 'counter-revolutionaries' were executed and similar numbers were sent to labour reform camps.

Coming from a peasant background, Chairman Mao was convinced that the basis of the revolution should be agricultural reform and rural re-organization. Landlordism, high rents and cultivation of small plots by intensive application of labour had been the norm. The Communists now launched a national policy of land reform, whereby landlords and moneylenders were eliminated, and the land was divided among the peasant cultivators. Former owners and creditors were subjected to public trials and countless people were executed (Hsu 653).

A major objective of the Communist programme was to revolutionise the social patterns. Confucianism deeply influenced Chinese culture, through its educational system, the state and the family. The new government sought to cleanse society of these influences: to modernize education, revolutionize the state and destroy the traditional family system (Chai and Chai 187-195). The status of women was raised through the law, the education and employment. The structure of the People's Republic of China was deeply influenced by the USSR. The Communist Party was in total control. In 1954 the First National People's Congress adopted a constitution declaring that the Republic was a people's democratic state led by the workers and based on an alliance of workers and peasants.

### **2.2.2. Theatre in China**

**Traditional Theatre in China: Performance.** The history of Chinese drama is very long indeed. Records from as early as 200 B.C. refer to emperors who sponsored drama for a number of reasons: to celebrate important occasions, to accompany sacrifices to the gods and to

ancestors, and for sheer entertainment. Ancient texts stand evidence to a flourishing theatre scene in the court of Ming-huang (712–56 AD), of the T'ang dynasty (618 – 907) (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 13). The titles of more than 600 plays in the Jin dynasty (1125–1234) have been discovered and from Yuan times (c.1215 – 1368) the scripts of around 160 plays have survived (Ebrey 187). Theatrical performances in the thirteenth century were so popular that representations of musicians and actors formed part of the decorations on the walls of tombs; books on theatre were written by numerous scholars like Zhu Quan (1378–1448) whose book *Taihe Records of Music/Drama* included theory as well as documents about classical theatre and comments on playwrights and plays (Fei 42).

Over the centuries an enormous variety of dramatic styles evolved, an estimated three hundred, which are differentiated, even to date, by region. They are referred to as 'regional theatre' and vary primarily in the music that they use. The most popular theatre genre came to be known as Peking Opera.

**Peking Opera.** A twentieth century scholar Sun Kaidi argues that drama in China basically derives from puppets (Mackerras, *China* 27). Chinese theatre has always combined acrobatics, dancing, music, singing and chanting and story-telling. The visual aspects are highly stylized. Until the twentieth century there was no 'spoken play' in China, in the sense of a dramatic performance devoid of music, singing and chanting.

Chinese drama paid even greater attention to the person of the actor than to the playwright. The stage was very simple, with a backdrop curtain, but no curtain in front. The emphasis was not on elaborate stage properties; the significance of the action was projected by a complex set of formal symbolic gestures and portable objects. The categorization of the actors, their costumes and make-up, the gestures and facial expressions were extremely intricate.

There is symbolism in every detail of the play: in signs and make-believes, in the movements and costumes of the actors. Everything has its implications and suggestions, for the Chinese audience does not go to the theatre to see the play; it goes there to see how well the actor renders it. [...] Symbolism consists of two fundamental elements,

namely, simplicity and suggestiveness. Because of its simplicity, Chinese art is intelligible; because of its suggestiveness, it is full of imagination and feeling (Chai and Chai 181).

Theatre in China was performed in a large variety of settings and so could not but touch the lives of people throughout the country. Popular plays could be staged in a village street, a market-place or temple fair. The folk and classical theatre were an intimate part of the life of the Chinese, interwoven with events of family life such as marriage celebrations, of public life, such as festivals and ritual celebrations of the cycles of nature. Wealthy families in the cities hired actors' troupes to perform at occasions of sacrifice to ancestors and banquets to guests. Scholars in China were highly conscious of language structure and style and poetry, song and drama were carefully crafted. Fully benefitting from the technology of printing, Chinese plays from the eleventh century onwards have been preserved for posterity, have been performed for generations, and have grown enormously popular. The playwrights were generally well-educated men who collaborated with actors and story-tellers, writing librettos, or ballads for them. Editor Wang Jisi notes, "The townsfolk called such scholars "talented men". They had their own guilds or "book societies", in which they worked, exchanged experience and sometimes held dramatic contests. Indeed the appearance of these professional guilds gave fresh impetus to the development of the theatre" (2). The Yuan dynasty produced a number of remarkable dramatists, Guan Hanqing being one of the best known. Titles of more than sixty of his works are known and eighteen of these are extant today.

The playwright was however, not privileged in China over the performer, nor the text over performance. Theatrical offerings were a composite of music and song, dance and acrobatics, poetry and spoken dialogue, an early instance of 'total theatre'. Though the craft of the writer was highly prized, it was the actor who was the cynosure of all eyes. The actor and the 'sing-song girls' were enthusiastically admired by all classes of people. But their status was very low in the social hierarchy. Colin Mackerras notes: "They were looked on as wanderers and vagabonds, shiftless and dishonest, and worst of all, utterly immoral. [...] The attitudes of a community are reflected in its laws. In China actors were bracketed with slaves and prostitutes

as the lowest of the low, and edicts of 1313, 1369, 1652 and 1770 forbade them or their families to sit for the civil service examinations" (*Chinese Theatre* 78-79). These conditions made it impossible for the actor, however rich and famous, to opt out of the stage to enter the scholar-officialdom. The situation improved by the end of the nineteenth century, when popular actors began to perform for the aristocracy; earlier this had been the prerogative of special palace companies that seldom ventured outside the palaces. With the establishment of the Republic in 1911, the ministers of state and the rich citizens invited good actors to perform. Amateurs from good families and with a good education began to enter the profession. The status of the actor improved (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 80). In the twentieth century outstanding actors like Mei Lan-Fang brought great prestige to the theatre.

The more formal performance sites for dramas included commercial theatres as early as the twelfth century, as well as temple and guild halls which had a stage; the permanent stage in the mansion of a rich family; or tea-house theatres. In the lives of the hard-working illiterate peasant as well as those of the gentry and nobility, theatre had a cherished role to play. Theatre and theatre artists, then, have been part of a living tradition, a vital cultural component that reflected, and reflected upon, the concerns of the people in China.

**The Literary Aspects of Traditional Theatre.** Though the aspect of performance held high priority in Chinese dramatic taste, the literary merits of drama were not ignored by critics and playwrights. In the Ming Dynasty, Wang Jide (? – 1623) wrote his *QU LU* ( Principles of Lyric Drama ), a comprehensive theoretical book of dramatic aesthetics. Wang's book is the fruit of ten years work, of travelling and talking to other artists and scholars. His aim was to elevate the status of dramatic writing, and in a total of forty chapters he deals with subjects like theatre history, dramatic structure and technique and critical theory ( Fei 64).

Another influential book, *Casual Notes in a Leisurely Mood* by Li Liweng (or Li Yu) (1611–1680), analyzes in detail playwriting, the performance, the performer's voice and appearance. The author concludes: "A dynasty's position in history rests on the plays that it produced. Therefore, while different from other genres, the art of playwriting is not a minor skill



but ranks high, along with history, biography, poetry and prose" (Fei 78–79). At the turn of the nineteenth century, Wang Guo-wei (1877–1927), a brilliant modern scholar lived and wrote during the Sino-Japanese War, the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the proclamation of the Republic in 1911. Well read in German philosophy and Western ideas, Wang wrote extensively on drama, the evolution of Chinese theatre, the form and content of plays (Fei 104).

**Theatre in the Twentieth Century.** The first decade of the twentieth century was one of social and political turmoil for China: the Taiping Rebellion<sup>4</sup>, the Boxer uprising<sup>5</sup>, the fall of the tottering Manchu dynasty and the establishment of the Republic. These events paved the way for a gradual transformation of theatre. In the first decade the Peking Opera was not greatly affected by the political upheavals. In fact, one striking feature of its history at this time was the rise of the great *lao-sheng* actors (male character type for heroic drama). "This was caused by the growing interest in China's heroic past, and consequently in heroic drama, which was possibly aroused in China by the country's humiliation at the hands of foreign powers during this period" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 38). Here we find theatre trying to revitalize itself.

Around this time new 'spoken drama' with social and revolutionary content made its appearance. A number of well-known actors actively promoted the new progressive drama: they became aware that theatre could serve not only as a means to uphold the status quo but could also be used as an effective weapon against those in power. Thus, the arrival of the twentieth century saw both the traditional theatre and the modern theatre flourishing simultaneously.

**Traditional Theatre in the Twentieth Century.** The prestige of the traditional Peking Opera style theatre was undimmed as the century began. The figure of the actor continued to fascinate audiences and to draw large crowds to the theatre houses in the cities. The best known actor was Mei Lan-Fang. Brandon rightly remarks:

His artistry and breadth of perception helped the old theatre attain a new pinnacle of public esteem. Not the least of Mei's achievements was his success in international cultural relations resulting from his tours to America and Russia in the 1930s. He stirred Western thinking to new aesthetic insights on theatre. Bertolt Brecht and V.E. Meyerhold

were among those who admired, and were deeply influenced by seeing Mei's performances (36).

Despite the difficult social conditions the 1920s and 30s saw two major reforms in the world of theatre: a number of institutes of training and education for theatre apprentices were established; and professional actresses came to be accepted on stage alongside male actors, and some of these brought added power to the traditional theatre.

**The rise of 'spoken drama'.** 'Spoken drama' is a recent arrival in China, an outcome of the encounter of China with Western literature. The contact of China with the West in the nineteenth century led to questioning of many aspects of Chinese life and culture. One response to the encounter was a growing desire to understand and assimilate 'progressive modernization'. Thousands of young people went to Japan to explore the challenges of modernizing society; many other young intellectuals were sent to the West to study. When these people went back to China acquainted with other cultural practices and technologies, they came to be major influences in the process of modernization. The Chinese theatre saw the beginning of an entirely new genre: the spoken play, *huaju*. This is remarkable, considering that "in China, political revolutions have been more frequent than theatrical" ( Wells 5).

The city of Shanghai immediately became the center for experiment. The Spring Sun Society, under Wang Zhong-sheng (d. 1911) who had studied in Japan, staged *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* in 1907, an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By 1916 Hu Shi, a scholar who had studied in America was leading a movement to standardize language – replace the classical language intelligible only to the educated elite by a vernacular accessible to one and all. The work of Henrik Ibsen was widely discussed in literary journals like *New Youth* and a New Culture Movement flourished.

The Chinese had hoped that the Treaty of Versailles would redress their long-standing grievances of Western occupation of Chinese territory. In 1919 they were outraged to learn about the details of the Treaty that gave large concessions to Western powers and threatened Chinese sovereignty. In May 1919 a massive student protest arose in Peking and culminated in a

popular wave of dissent known as the May Fourth Movement. The character of the New Culture Movement changed.

Remarkably, the intellectual and political revolutions of the New Culture and May Fourth periods were led by people who were basically literary figures. The impetus for change in the theatre received a new boost. The Shanghai Dramatic Association and The Creation Society were founded in 1921. The first issue of the journal *Creation Quarterly* in 1922, included a play by Tian Han (1898-1968), *A Night at a Coffeehouse*, which was hugely acclaimed. It was staged all over the country until 1923, when it was dissolved by government order (Brandon 37). Large audiences had by then been exposed to modern theatre.

The Chinese Communist Party soon realized the potential for organizing theatre for political action. Vigorous measures were taken to recruit performers locally and train troupes. This effort developed into an extensive network led by the Workers and Peasants Dramatic Society. The Nationalist side, in turn formed the Farmers Resistance Dramatic Corps and performed to mass audiences. Through the 30s and 40s hundreds of itinerant troupes performed in tea-houses, in schools and factories and in the front-line. "Academics and literary men frequently joined forces with professionals. Urban intellectuals and the rural population shared a new direct relationship as a result of dramatic activities" (Brandon 39).

An important playwright made his mark on the theatre scene. Cao Yu (1910-1996) was a graduate in Western literature from a Peking university. He was an admirer of Greek drama, Eugene O'Neill and Anton Chekhov. Two of his plays *Thunderstorm* (1935) and *Sunrise* (1935) won him great renown and literary prizes. *Thunderstorm* was a dark condemnation of the Chinese family system and the social degeneration it led to. *Sunrise* dealt with the corruptive power of materialism. Cao's realistic characterization and dialogue and his exposé of the decadence of Chinese pre-war society established him as a playwright with a 'social conscience' and an important dramatic influence.

**Theatre after 1950.** The People's Republic of China was established on 1 October 1949 under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. This was the beginning of a whole new era for

the Chinese people. The decades of war with foreign powers and civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists came to a decisive end. The nation was now launching itself into a new age of revolutionary change under an all-powerful Communist regime. The next fifty years were to see marked and distinct political phases and each had an undoubted impact on the theatre of the day. The official line was Mao's conception of art: the role of the writer was not merely to reflect social and economic changes brought about by objective and impersonal historic laws. The writer was required to "awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment" (Mao, *Yan'an* 19).

In July 1950 the Ministry of Culture set up a Drama Reform Committee: its mandate was to determine how practice in theatre should conform exactly to theory. The traditional plays were scrutinized and those which contained reactionary feudal elements were banned, or certain portions were abolished. No people's hero should be shown in a humiliating position before a feudal figure, for instance, a monk. Plays which depicted patriotism, peasant rebellion or equality between the sexes were retained and commended.

By 1958 and the Great Leap Forward<sup>6</sup>, plays of all forms on contemporary themes were strongly favoured, though traditional plays were not banned. New playwrights were now acquainted with the theatre techniques of Stanislavsky, but the major influence was that of Bertolt Brecht.

It was in 1963 that the government began to aggressively push its programme to revolutionize the theatre. For the first time the trend was to abolish the traditional theatre. The new repressive policy was led by Jiang Qing (or Chiang Ch'ing), the wife of Mao Zedong, and supported by Mao himself and several powerful figures in Shanghai.

The Cultural Revolution was launched in late 1965. The ten years of this sweeping and violent movement affected every aspect of the life of the Chinese, and principally the arts; among these the theatre was the greatest casualty. Fittingly, the flood was let loose on account of a play performed in Peking, entitled *Hairui Dismissed from Office*. The play by the vice-mayor of Peking, professor and historian Wu Han, dramatizes the character of Judge Hairui from the

Ming dynasty who heroically fights the emperor. The play was probably meant as veiled satire against the prevailing political situation. Jiang Qing is believed to have convinced Mao that it was part of a conspiracy against him. They had an article published in the Shanghai Wen-hui condemning the performance. Apparently no one took the article seriously. Incensed, Mao launched the revolution through the media: "Let the Cultural Revolution be a soul-purifying process," the papers quoted Mao, "the old order has to be abandoned" (Min 223 – 31). In a few months chaos was let loose. Mao's youthful Red Guards went on a rampage to eradicate physical and spiritual vestiges of pre-1949 society. Jiang Qing and the 'Gang of Four' held a forum on 'Literature and Art in the Armed Forces' which laid down the line on theatre demanded during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Over the next decade a small number of 'model operas' was devised and professional drama companies were allowed to perform nothing else (Brandon 41). With the death of Mao in 1976 and the fall of the Gang of Four, the Cultural Revolution was quickly set aside. Social and economic reform was accompanied by vast change in theatre. The 1980s came to be known as the 'New Period' and it was marked by a post-Cultural Revolution liberalization. A renewed interest in Western theatre was revealed in the Shanghai Shakespeare Festivals, colloquiums on Western playwrights, numerous translations of contemporary Western plays and publications on theatre. Chinese playwrights looked with enthusiasm not only at realism, but also at neo-Romantic, symbolist, expressionist and surrealist drama. The influence of Artaud, Brecht, Grotowsky and Peter Brook grew immensely (Ding 69-72). Chinese playwrights had rejected the role of indoctrinator and propagandist and were now seriously bent on exploring the human condition.

Playwrights in China at the turn of the twentieth century are extremely aware that the evolution of spoken drama in China was, for a long time, divorced from traditional aesthetics. Also, in their quest for the 'essence' of theatre, many are discovering points of commonality between contemporary western theatre and Chinese theatre – theatre as the experience of creation both by performers and audience, and also the theatricality of theatre. These important

insights have enriched contemporary theatre practice as it stands at the cross-roads of modernization and nationalization.

The plays selected for study cover the entire span of the latter half of the twentieth century and reflect a wide range of interconnections between the text and changing contexts.

### **2.2.3. The Chinese Plays**

The Chinese plays offer an insight into the paths traversed by Chinese theatre during times of major socio-political change which includes the establishment of the People's Republic of China and Maoist Marxist ideology, reassessing relationships with Western powers and the world community at large, regenerating a bankrupt economy and redefining Chinese identity in modern times. The plays are to be read for what they say and, equally, in the interstices, for what they do not say.

#### ***The White-haired Girl*: theatre captures the mood of the day**

*The White-haired Girl* was written in 1951 by He Jing and Ding Yi and staged in the years immediately following the take-over by the Communist Party (1949), after prolonged strife and civil war and the launching of a process of transformation of a feudal society into a socialist Republic. It combines dialogue and song to weave a story of exploitation by a rich landlord, the predicament of a young peasant girl, and the eventual retribution and justice meted out by the Red Army.

**Plot, characters and theme:** The play trains its attention on the plight of the peasants in feudal China. Young Xier and her father struggle against great odds to make ends meet. Were it not for the unreasonable demands of Huang, the landlord, and the usurious rates of interest he imposes on small loans of money they have taken from him, Xier and her father would have been able to satisfy their needs and live a contented life in their friendly village neighbourhood. Young

Xier is in the prime of life, and is the apple of her father's eye. She is also in love with her cousin, Dachun, who is anxious to marry her. Act I opens on the eve of the Chinese New Year; the families pool their meager resources to rustle up a celebration. However, bad news strikes. The landlord summons Xier's father, grills him about his supposed debts and demands that the daughter be brought to him in settlement of the dues. The father, disoriented and terrified, eventually signs an agreement. But on arrival home in the evening, he is eaten with remorse and commits suicide. His body is discovered in the snow outside the doorstep the next morning. As Xier is plunged into shock and grief, the landlord's messenger comes to drag her to her master's house to be his mistress and his mother's servant. Acts II and III trace the girl's exploitation at the landlords' mansion. Her one ally is an older servant, Zhang, who shields her as best she can. Xier is found to be pregnant, and since the landlord is about to celebrate his marriage to a rich heiress, the servant girl has to be locked away – to be eventually disposed of. Zhang helps the young woman to run away: she crosses a stream and escapes into the mountains, evading her pursuers.

The title of the play derives from the ghostly figure that villagers espy on moonlit nights haunting a mountain shrine. Fearful and superstitious, they wish to placate the 'white-haired goddess' with food offerings. A young soldier from the Communist 'Red Army' who is visiting the village, is impatient to sweep away superstition; he maintains guard on the shrine and soon enough captures a young woman who has sneaked in for the food offerings. It is Xier, who lives with her young child in the depths of a cave. Lack of sunlight and a deficient diet have turned her hair white.

The culmination of the story is the trial of the landlord by officers of the advancing Red Army, including Xier's childhood sweetheart, now part of a regiment in the Eighth Route Army. The landlord is accused, publicly tried and convicted in the presence of the gathered villagers. It is a moment of vindication for them all, joy for Xier and her family and hope for the future under the new political system.

*The White-haired Girl* is clearly theatre as contemporary critique. The characters are stereotypes of the exploitative class of landlords and the oppressed peasant class. Its enormous contemporary popular appeal seems to have been based, primarily, on the cultural representations it offers: the class struggle, the portrayal of the Red Army as saviour of the masses, the mood of effervescent idealism that pervaded Chinese society in the wake of the establishment of the Communist government, and the hope for social justice for millions of Chinese peasants.

### ***Teahouse* : saga of a decadent society**

*Teahouse* is a play well-known and well-loved in China; the work of a reputed Chinese playwright, Lao She. Written and performed in 1957, it is set in the old-world charm of a traditional Peking teahouse. A teahouse, in ancient China, was far more than a commercial eating place. It was a space for leisure, for socializing, for planning and plotting, for sharing stories and finding social support.

**Structure and theme:** In the three acts of the play, Lao She traces the changing fortunes of Chinese society through decades of political upheaval. A massive cast of characters embraces a cross-section of the Chinese people, both high-born and low-born, and offers a glimpse of the convolutions of many lives and destinies. Central to the play is the teahouse itself, and the successive generations of the family that owns it. In Act I we encounter the pre-modern Chinese society, highly hierarchical in character, leisurely in pace; we are introduced to the growing inequalities of income as we watch a palace eunuch buying himself the young daughter of a starving peasant for a wife. The political rumbles in the world outside can be felt within the teahouse: a collapsing economy, a decadent imperial administration, the encounter with aggressive foreign powers, the confusion of civil war. As Acts II and III unfold, the destiny of the teahouse itself is problematic: it is finally requisitioned by the local officers to be used as their headquarters as well as a 'pleasure house'. The proprietor, Wang, loses all hope and patience



and shoots himself – even as the advancing Red Army brings hope of a more equitable and stable society.

*Teahouse* is significant as one of the earliest instances of the 'spoken drama' in China. Also, it showcases theatre in the role of social commentator rather than mere entertainer. It opens a space for reflection about times of extreme turbulence. Its attempts at realism in characterization and performance establish its status as a modern Chinese play.

### ***Cai Wenji*: historicity in the service of ideology**

*Cai Wenji* is a historical play, reflecting Chinese concerns with historicity. Chinese history is re-interpreted in the light of contemporary social realities and perceived social needs. It was the kind of play Chairman Mao approved of. Guo Moruo (or Kuo Mo-jo), the playwright received accolades from Mao for his writing in the service of the State and the new society. The play was written in 1959, a decade after the founding of the Republic, with Communist rule well established. The tasks facing the administration were daunting. In a country that was still poor, enormous sacrifices were called for from the people in the service of the larger good. *Cai Wenji* gives voice to such a subordination of private loyalties to national service.

**Genre, plot and theme:** This play is one of five historical plays by Guo Moruo, and part of the long tradition of historical drama in China. It is set at a turbulent period of ancient Chinese history, between 208 and 216 AD, when warring tribes had been intent on seizing power and founding their dynasties. *Cai Wenji*, the female protagonist, is the daughter of a Han scholar. In the fray of battle among warring tribes, she is separated from her own people and eventually marries a tribal chief on China's northern borders. Many years later, when peace is declared with the Han kingdom, *Cai Wenji* is requested by the Han Prime Minister to return to the Han Kingdom. He would like to entrust her with the task of continuing her father's scholarly work of writing the history of the Han empire.

The five acts unfold the court intrigue and snags that almost impede Cai Wenji from leaving the Xiongnu tribe. Eventually, in the interests of the peace between the two kingdoms, her husband, the Zuoxian Prince permits her to leave. She does so with mixed feelings: extreme pain at having to leave behind her two small children and a sense of responsibility and pride in the onerous task assigned to her. The plot traces the movement of Cai Wenji from the kingdom of Xiongnu to the Han kingdom, from a state of confusion and self-pity to one of acceptance and understanding. The resolution of the play comes years later when her children are reunited with the mother, their father having died. Cai Wenji, now a reputed historian and poet, eventually marries a Han official.

The story was a well-known one to the Chinese people. In the play they found many themes: the divided heart of Cai Wenji, the value of social responsibility, the need for unification of all the ethnic peoples of China. The playwright has delved into history and turned his material into an object lesson about the moral responsibility of a citizen, above all other responsibilities, to the State.

### ***Nocturnal Wanderer*: rejecting the dogma of collectivisation**

*Nocturnal Wanderer* (1993) by Gao Xingjian is an entirely different piece of writing from the other Chinese plays selected for study here. It is a creation by a Chinese playwright who gained renown in his own land, but subsequently found all his theatre work banned. The controls imposed on artists irked him beyond all tolerance. Convinced that he would never be able to produce and publish his plays in China, Gao Xingjian sought refuge in France. Here he found an admiring public for his novels, plays and paintings. He went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000.

**Structure, characters and genre:** The subject of *Nocturnal Wanderer* is a dream; through this nightmare the world of the protagonist, the Traveller, is exposed. Sordid and horrid, the images tumble one after the other, as the Traveller enters his own dream. He is now the

Sleepwalker. The setting is a train journey and the passengers the Traveller meets momentarily on the train turn into characters ambling down a street in the dream: the Tramp, the Prostitute, the Thug, the Master. The dreamer's psyche turns them into representations of his secret fears, his secret urges. The Traveller journeys through his own, hitherto unexplored, subconscious.

Wrought of absurdist images, the play depicts a great deal of struggle and violence. A first-class train cabin: several passengers are sitting by the window, an Old Man, a Young Woman, a Young Man. Train inspector enters, a little conversation follows. Young Woman turns off the light and closes her eyes. Traveller starts to read a book. Stage lighting changes. The scene turns into a street. The Streetwalker, dressed only in an undershirt that stretches up to his knees, saunters under the light of a lamp-post on a rainy and foggy night. He stumbles onto a pile of cardboard boxes from which emerges a Tramp. They argue, the Sleepwalker moves on and is followed by a Ruffian, they knock into each other, and as they are entangled in a brawl, a Prostitute hails them. The Ruffian makes passes at her and chases after her. As the Sleepwalker screams, the Tramp crawls out of the box. The Sleepwalker confesses he is afraid for the woman's safety. The Tramp crawls back into his box and as the Sleepwalker strolls along soliloquizing, a Thug pounces, grabs him by the throat and drags him into the shadow of a doorway. He subjects him to questioning and dumps him. The Prostitute reappears, they converse, she propositions him. The Sleepwalker puts his arm around her and they sit by the cardboard boxes. The Tramp re-emerges, disturbed from sleep. She finds a bag and proceeds to search it, despite the Tramp's protests. It is full of old lottery tickets that the Tramp has been collecting. The Prostitute departs towards a shadowy doorway. Suddenly she screams, there is a loud bang and she falls. Lights out.

Act II is situated on the same spot. Only a high-heeled shoe is found where the woman fell. The Thug accuses the Sleepwalker of killing her. They argue, the Thug pulls out his gun and forces the Sleepwalker to carry a suitcase across the road. As they walk, a gunshot sounds, the Thug falls with a loud thud. The Ruffian appears and threatens to kill the Sleepwalker unless he stuffs the Tramp's dead body into the cardboard box. The Sleepwalker manages to whack the

killer on the head and the Ruffian falls. The Sleepwalker clearly realizes there is pleasure in killing. Lights out.

Act III: The Sleepwalker is circling round the suitcase, soliloquizing about desire and death. The Prostitute appears from behind the door, accuses him of pushing her and calls him a killer. She agrees to having enjoyed her sexual encounter with the Thug. The Sleepwalker throws himself on her. The Ruffian emerges, crushes her fingers with his foot. As the Ruffian retreats into darkness, the Thug picks up the Prostitute and dances with her. She disappears into the dark, the Thug calls the Sleepwalker his dog and a worm. The Sleepwalker throws the suitcase at him. He picks up the suitcase and leaves. The Prostitute enters with the suitcase and starts to remove her make-up. From the suitcase she takes out a man's head which bears an extreme likeness to the Sleepwalker, rolls it on the floor, and she disappears. The Tramp enters with a wine bottle and stamps and squashes the head. They drink together and laugh and talk about the Prostitute. The Tramp cannot stop laughing at the Sleepwalker, who jumps up and throttles him and stuffs him into the suitcase. As he leaves he bumps into a masked man. As they grapple with each other, the sound of a train is heard. There is no one in the train coach, just a book on the floor. Conductor enters, picks up the book and exits. Curtain.

*Nocturnal Wanderer* shuns realism in favour of a more surrealistic technique. In the words of its author, "the play attempts to arrive at an explanation of some traditional themes such as the relationship between God and Satan, man and woman, good and evil, and salvation and suffering, and modern man's concerns for language and consciousness, as well as the relationship between the individual and the Other" (Gao, *The Other Shore* 189). It is a disturbing play by its very disjointed, episodic and violent nature and insistently begs questions about form, theme and aesthetic philosophy.

**An overview of the Chinese plays:** The playwrights writing and staging their work during these five decades have negotiated many issues of content and form. They have experimented with realism, have created new hybrids that integrate the old and the new and

more genuinely articulate modern Chinese identity. They have often captured the contemporary mood of the common people. The Chinese plays reveal the intense desire of theatre persons to represent and reflect upon the events and processes occurring around them during half a century. Taken together, they also seem to reveal the scant space, psychological and public, permitted to artists in China during these decades. During the 1970s, the decade of maximum repression, the playwright is altogether silenced. In succeeding years, a less restrictive atmosphere returns, but to free souls like Gao Xingjian and many others, the ambience is still too stifling. These writers opt for exile. Their work does not cease to be Chinese literature, even when the playwright may write in French, as Gao often does. Such theatre offers a valid counterpoint to the work of other playwrights who continue to write on the Chinese mainland.

The social and theatre contexts in India have been very different from their counterparts in China. The next section attempts to map these contexts in West Bengal and investigate ways in which they interconnect with the selected texts.

### **2.3. West Bengal**

The latter half of the twentieth century has taken India for a roller-coaster ride: extreme socio-economic depression in the wake of Independence, waves of internal reform as well as political upheavals, coupled with war with neighbouring States, and by the turn of the century, its emergence as a major player in the global economic and political scenarios. Indian literature has reflected these unprecedented challenges. Bengali theatre with its deep political hues has participated in reflecting and discussing vital issues.

#### **2.3.1. Social Suffering in West Bengal**

West Bengal is a state located on the eastern side of India, sharing an international border with Bangladesh in the East, Bhutan in the North and Nepal in the North-West.

Bengal has been the birth-place of outstanding Indian personalities and an influential centre of culture. Among the best known Bengalis we count Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the social reformer from Burdwan; Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian Nobel Laureate in Literature, a noted poet, playwright and educationist; Subhash Chandra Bose, the freedom fighter and army official in World War II; Swami Vivekanand, the religious ambassador; Aurobindo Ghosh, the philosopher and writer; Satyajit Ray, the noted film director; Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning economist.

But the significant contribution it made to the life and culture of India did not spare Bengal from suffering and turmoil. In the 1940s the great Bengal famine killed millions. In the struggle for independence from British rule, the Bengali people were at the heart of the internecine strife that tore the Hindu and Muslim communities asunder at indescribable cost. And at the moment of political independence in 1947, the land was gripped by communal hatred and hysteria and the social fabric was deeply wounded.

The catastrophic events of the partition of Bengal<sup>7</sup> into West Bengal (Indian) and East Bengal (Pakistani) did not mark the end of suffering for the Bengalis. A further crisis was the pouring of East Bengali refugees across the Indian border, as East and West Pakistan were unable to settle their differences. East Bengal seceded from Pakistan in 1971 and declared itself an independent State, Bangladesh. Economically, politically, emotionally and culturally, Bengal had been traumatized and from the 1950s faced the task of social reconstruction. West Bengal turned to Marxism in 1977 for stability, prosperity and social justice – dreams that its Communist Party government has not always been able to realize. Though Kolkata has regained some of its influence on the economic and cultural map of India, the masses are still struggling to find the basic necessities of life, over fifty years after Independence.



### 2.3.2. The Indian Theatre Tradition and the Bengali theatre

Indian theatre can be studied with reference to three forms, or as they have been considered, three stages of its growth: the classical Sanskrit theatre, the rural theatre forms and the modern theatre.

**Classical Drama.** The abundant archaeological evidence of the early Indian civilization does not provide physical evidence of early theatre history. Dance and music seem to have been enjoyed as part of religious celebrations, but all the evidence of early theatre is to be found in dramaturgical texts which survive in palm leaf manuscripts and in descriptions from other sources (Brandon 65). The most important source of information about the nature of the tradition of the ancient Sanskrit theatre is the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (A Treatise on Theatre), attributed to Bharata Muni, which is variously dated between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* relates the mythological origin of theatre and sheds light on many aspects of theatre in ancient India. Here we find the most complete book of ancient dramaturgy in the world. In thirty-six chapters the *Nāṭyaśāstra* covers acting, theatre architecture, costume, make-up, properties, dance, music, play construction, organization of theatre companies, audiences, dramatic competitions, the community of actors, ritual practices, et cetera. It can be claimed that among the unique contributions of Sanskrit drama to world literature is its aesthetic theory. This aspect of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is further discussed in Chapter 3, with reference to the artist's role in society. Several dozen plays have survived from the period of first to the tenth centuries, the high point of the Sanskrit dramatic literature. Of these, the works of Bhasa (circa 400 A.D.) are best known. Kalidasa (circa 400 A.D.) is considered to be India's greatest ancient playwright and his masterpiece *Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition* is still frequently produced in modern times.

After the tenth century, Sanskrit theatre began to wane. Nemichandra Jain lists some of the possible reasons for the decline: social and political instability created by foreign invasion and internal conflicts, loss of creative energy in the Sanskrit language confined to an elite and a lack

of talented playwrights (30). Referring to the culmination of the process, Kironmoy Raha perceptively remarks:

(T)he decline of Sanskrit drama and theatre had set in even before Mahmud Ghaznavi invaded India from across the Himalayan passes in the eleventh century A.D. and Mohammad Ghorī laid the foundations of Islamic conquest in the twelfth. Sanskrit drama had already become bloodless and bereft of vigour when the invasion took place and the conquest snuffed out the dying embers of Sanskrit theatre (4).

By the eleventh century Sanskrit theatre was all but extinct on stage, though its aesthetic theory and precepts have survived and today continue to influence modern Indian drama in diverse ways.

**Regional Folk Theatre.** By the fifteenth century theatre emerged in rural India through a large variety of forms. Each of these forms was unique, used the vernacular language and catered to the tastes and needs of the people of the particular region where it flourished. These were truly local forms. Sanskrit theatre, which had been patronized by court and temple had earlier developed a 'national' character as it was exhibited in urban centers across the land. By contrast, the rural forms, like the *Jatra* in Bangal, Bihar and Orissa, *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan or *Bhavai* in Gujarat, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, did not travel far beyond the regions where they had originated. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, these regional folk theatre forms flourished all over the subcontinent and attested to the vitality and variety of the culture of the people.

A powerful catalyst for the reappearance of theatre as a significant practice in India was Vaishnavism, a religious movement which centers on devotion (Bhakti) for God in the person of Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu. Shiva was revered as the patron god of the arts. Theatre came to be a means of communicating the faith, and of involving performer and audience in a religious act.

In the fifteenth century, when the Bhakti movement swept Bengal, devotees went singing and dancing in procession. They sang in temple court-yards, narrating the events of their



patron god's life, and expressed their devotion with frenzied acting. The collective singing amidst the clang of gongs and fumes of incense produced a mass hypnosis and sent these singers into an acting trance. This singing with dramatic elements gradually came to be known as *Jatra*, which means "to go in procession" (Gargi 14).

***Jatra* : Folk Theatre in Bengal.** *Jatra* became a thriving theatre form and part of the emotional life of the people in Bengal by the sixteenth century. Its themes were woven around episodes from the life of Krishna and Radha. Gradually historical romances came to be included in the repertoire of *Jatra* companies. By the eighteenth century, Bengal was firmly under the control of the East India Company. The British introduced a system of permanent land settlements which resulted in wide social transformation. The increasing prosperity and leisure of the gentry gave rise to a growing demand for entertainment. The gentry of Bengal invited *Jatra* troupes for festive occasions such as the Ratha Puja and Durga Puja celebrations.

In the nineteenth century, as tastes turned more secular, the *Jatra* repertoire swelled with love stories, mythological heroes, historical romances, tales of legendary robbers, saints and reformers. As political consciousness grew in the twentieth century, the *Jatra* writers gave political overtones to their plays. Mythological stories depicting the struggle between good and evil came to refer to the struggle between the Indian masses and the British government (Gargi 15). As *Jatra* entered the urban setting of Calcutta, a growing trading city and commercial center, it came under the influence of other forms of entertainment, and appropriated some of their coarse humour and bawdy songs. The English-educated '*bhadralog*' or upper middle class of Calcutta, who had become the leaders of Bengali thought and opinion, frowned upon the *Jatra* as a crude form of entertainment. *Jatra* revealed its inborn vitality by its ability to adapt to changing tastes. It entered a new phase when theatre persons like Brajamohan Roy and Krishna Kamal Goswami, Mukunda Das and Motilal Roy gave it contemporary relevance and greater refinement. *Jatra* troupes proliferated in Calcutta and adapted to the changing social scene. Women actors were for the first time allowed onstage, the number of songs was reduced, the duration of the performance was shortened. Political and social issues found their way into the *Jatra* stage. In

general, the twentieth century saw a remarkable revival of the popularity of the *Jatra* and of the interest of theatre researchers in this ever-adapting cultural form. Kironmoy Raha remarks on the tremendous changes taking place:

The change has been almost sweeping. One or two illustrative instances may be given to indicate its extent. In 1962, Tulsi Sahiri produced his successful play *Chnera Tar* as a *Jatra pala*. In 1967, a *Jatra* troupe, Tarun Opera, presented *Hitler* and in a seminar in 1972 Utpal Dutt argued in favour of *Jatra* as a powerful instrument for spreading political messages. Contemporary playwrights known for their modern views have written successful *Jatra* plays on subjects which have not the remotest connection with religious motifs or Hindu mythology. Actors and actresses move from one to the other and often cross over again. *Jatra* has become increasingly urbanized. Even when it is not performed inside a playhouse, a not altogether uncommon occurrence, such un-*Jatra* arrangements as raised platforms, theatrical lighting and sound effects, the use of microphones, are taken recourse to almost as a matter of course. But it has not been a one-way traffic. Theatre continues to borrow many conventions or features of *Jatra* and has in recent times been looking to it for clues for breaking theatrical barriers (10 – 11).

The traditional *Jatra* form has not only played as a grass-roots theatre of enormous appeal, but has provided inspiration to modern playwrights as storehouse of philosophy and techniques of theatre to be explored today.

Modern Bengali theatre has had a vigorous presence on the Indian cultural scene. But before focussing on this theatre in Bengal, one needs to briefly consider the constructs of modernity and postcolonialism in India, indeed, in Asia.

**Modernity and Postcolonialism.** The plays selected for study are all modern plays; however, some of them incorporate elements of 'pre-modern' and 'pre-national' theatres. Literary modernity emphasizes "a deliberate disengagement from past and present conventions in favour of verbal, formal, intellectual, and philosophical attributes that are new for their time, whatever the time" (Dharwadker 132). In the context of Asia, literary modernity cannot be understood

apart from a host of extrinsic factors such as issues of nationhood, political struggle and freedom, international power equations, economic development, social reform and postcolonial discourse, all interwoven into questions of cultural identity. An analysis of modern theatre in Asia brings to light complex negotiations between the 'traditional' and the 'modern', 'western' and 'indigenous', 'mytho-historical' and 'contemporary', 'rural' and 'urban', 'regional' and 'national'. Modernity in Asian theatre contains a salient vein of critique of Western modernity that impacted Indian culture through the paradigm of colonialism. Underlying the selected modern plays, one senses a passionate engagement with contemporary struggles and a constant exploration of new or hybrid forms of the old and the new. Modern theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka can be seen as a cultural text which has consistently sought, for over five decades, to be an expression of, and an inspiration for, the struggles of the people for freedom and for identity, however these may be interpreted.

In India, the practice of modern theatre has been accompanied with a fair amount of theorizing by playwrights, directors and critics since the 1940s. Some of the important new directions came from early members of the IPTA such as Anil Marcia de Silva, the daughter of a Ceylon politician, one of the founders of the association. In the 1946 IPTA annual report she restates the principles that are to guide theatre practitioners: "to seriously study our past classical Sanskrit drama and our folk forms of drama, so that our writers and producers could experiment in a synthesis of these two forms with modern stage techniques and lighting" (*Annual Report* 5). She writes of the need to evolve a new drama, "one that will be essentially Indian, bringing forth real creative talent that will base itself on both tradition and technique" (*Annual Report* 5). Writer-directors like Utpal Dutt and Arun Mukherjee were uncompromising in their rejection of the elitist nineteenth-century Bengali urban proscenium theatre. Their goal was to carry performance and protest to vast and diverse audiences all over the country. As Dutt never tired of reiterating, "If the theatre loses its mass-audience, it loses its life, its meaning, its *raison d'être*" (Dutt, *ENACT* 19). Though the IPTA as a movement lost its energy through a variety of

factors in the 1950s, its vision for theatre would have an indelible influence on the climate of thought in India.

In the last four decades of the century theatre has been performed in many modern Indian languages, including Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada and Gujarati. New playwrights have made waves and the new literary canon is multi-lingual; it includes Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* (Bengali), Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, *Tughlak*, *Nag Mandala* (Kannada), Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (Marathi), Utpal Dutt's *Surya Shikar* (Bengali) Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech Sambad* (Bengali), Habib Tanvir's *Agra bazaar* (Urdu), G.P. Deshpande's *Uddhwasta dharmashala* (Marathi), Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe adhure* (Hindi), Elkunchwar's *Wada chirebandi* (Marathi), to name just a few. Playwrights like Mahesh Dattani (*Final Solutions*, *Tara*, *Dance like a Man*) and Manjula Padmanabhan (*Harvest*) write in English about contemporary social issues which plague the Indian middle-class. Cross-language translation is an important fact of performance in India today, with, for instance, Usha Ganguli translating, adapting and directing Mahasweta Devi's Bengali story *Rudali* into a play in Hindi and Girish Karnad translating his work into English. The National School of Drama in New Delhi offers academic training and patronage to theatre practitioners. And names of directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, Anuradha Kapur, Usha Ganguli, Alyque Padamsee, Vijaya Mehta, Satydev Dubey and Jabbar Patel, have made it to the national map. Concurrently, grass-roots theatre happens, in a prolific but more muted way, under the initiative of groups like Badal Sircar's Satabdi, Sanjoy Ganguly's Jana Sanskriti, Ninasam, and Tanvir's Naya Theatre in Chhatisgarh.

The theatre in India in the last few decades tends to be a markedly urban phenomenon, eclectic in its choice of themes, which range from the mythological (*Hayavadana*), to the domestic (*Tara*) and the socio-political (*Rudali*). Much of what happens on this theatre scene is non-commercial; the complementarity of a powerful written text with experimental performance styles has prompted the rise of playwright-directors and playwright-actors like Karnad and Dattani; women have found space as directors and critics; and a spate of serious theatre scholarship is noticeable in recent years (R. Barucha, N. Bhatia, S. Bandyopadhyay, M.

Chatterjee, A.B. Dharwadker). Theatre does not seem to work in conflict with the more recent media of cinema and television, though it does cater largely to a far more limited urban audience.

The theatre in West Bengal is one of the prominent theatres in modern India. We now trace its emergence and development with special emphasis on the decades between 1950 and 2000.

**Modern Theatre in West Bengal.** As the British General Warren Hastings consolidated British rule in India, the capital was shifted from Murshidabad to Calcutta in 1773. The British community saw the growth of the city into a major trading center. As economic and social life turned secure and prosperous, the British in Calcutta felt the need for entertainment. Soon theatre houses were built (Calcutta Theatre or the New Playhouse – 1775, Chowringhee Theatre – 1813) and English theatre arrived in India. Calcutta English society was delighted to watch Shakespeare plays, and a medley of comedies, farces and serious plays that had been successful in England.

A memorable occurrence was the staging of a Bengali play in a theatre house built for this purpose. In 1787 a Russian, Herasim Lebedeff arrived in Calcutta. He struggled to learn Bengali, translated and adapted English plays into the vernacular and in 1795 produced *The Disguise* to a full house. His success was short-lived: the playhouse was burnt down, Lebedeff was hounded by creditors and thrown into jail. It is believed that here was the hand of some Englishmen connected with the rising English theatres in the city. It was not until 1835 that another Bengali play was performed in Calcutta: *Bidya Sundar* staged in the Shambazar Theatre built by Nabin Chandra Bose in his palatial house in Calcutta – an adaptation of a poem earlier dramatized by *Jatra* troupes.

The stage was set for the emergence of a modern Bengali theatre. There was at the time, no tradition of dramatic literature besides the folk forms like the rural *Jatra*. But before long, an educated and wealthy middle class threw up directors, playwrights and an audience that loved and actively patronized the theatre. A theatre historian looks at some of the factors that contributed to this artistic movement:

The spread of English education, the growing affluence of trading families, the absence of landlordism, the rise of the middleclass and the exploding growth of Calcutta; the strong pull of traditional *Jatra* among the common people on the one hand, and on the other, a reaction against it among the intelligentsia, an acquaintance with English dramatic literature and English theatrical forms in the playhouses of Calcutta - all these fertilized the soil for Bengali theatre to grow and take in many ways the shape it did (Raha 17).

The Jorasanko Theatre of the Tagores and the Belgachia Natyasala housed many adaptations of the Sanskrit theatre as well as original contemporary Bengali plays. The person regarded as the first Bengali dramatist was Ramnarain Tarkaratna, whose play *Kulinkulasarbasva*, in 1854, was the first Bengali play, written for the contemporary stage. Another early dramatist was Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), who wrote comedies as social satire and gained popularity among the growing westernized middle class. Dinabandhu Mitra (1831-1873) brought Bengali theatre greater vibrancy and more confident craftsmanship. His play of protest, *Nildarpan*, dramatized the exploitation of the common people at the hands of the British indigo planters. The play is bold in attacking British commercial interests and provoked a furore. Rev. James Long, an English missionary who published an English translation, landed in jail for his audacity. In 1870 the government passed the Dramatic Performances Act that began a practice of censorship.

The arrival of Rabindranath Tagore on the scene of Bengali theatre is considered by some as a great event, and his influence seminal. To others he remained an isolated figure: "Tagore has remained a lonely eminence and the Bengali theatre has maintained a respectable distance from him" (Raha 129). His plays *Valmiki-pratibha* (1881) *Phalguni* (1916), *Dakghar* (1917) can be seen as significant events on the Bengali stage. Tagore wrote more than sixty plays, but staged them mostly in his estate at Jorasanko. He may have wished to maintain a distance from the commercial theatre that demanded too many artistic compromises from a playwright. Tagore wrote operatic plays, dance dramas, verse plays, symbolist drama; he moved from Western

models to the more regional ones. However his influence as a dramatist never came to equal his stature as a poet.

By the 1880s commercial theatre had established itself, with keen rivalry between professional groups. Two play-houses rose to great prominence: the Star, formed by a group of actors led by Girish Ghosh in 1883; and the Minerva. The theatre was heavily actor oriented, and provided ample scope for 'star acting'. The influence of the *Jatra* tradition of acting as well as the accounts of actors in the English theatre added up to a rhetorical and grand style.

Theatre in Bengal in the years preceding Independence took on a strong political colouring. The 1940s were years of social turmoil for the Bengali people. On the political front, the Japanese invasion of Burma led to a growing fear that Japan might invade India. As Calcutta became a centre for the war effort, and huge amounts of resources were diverted into the defence effort, the economy took a downturn, even as profiteering and black-marketing mushroomed. The Bengal famine brought starvation to millions of peasants in 1943-44. In August 1946 communal riots tore the social fabric apart. The following year was the year of Independence, and it brought along yet further waves of violence in the wake of the Partition of Bengal. Theatre was temporarily a casualty in this chaotic scenario, but it quickly raised its head again as a socio-political commentator.

The most remarkable organization to make a contribution to political theatre in the 1940s was the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). This was part of the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. On its agenda was the determination to influence the intelligentsia as well as the masses. Its impact is further analysed in Chapter 3, in the context of debates in the 1940s about the role of theatre. Group Theatre, or theatre by amateur theatre groups, also took root and flourished. Commercial theatre in Bengali, Hindi and English also drew urban audiences. With Independence, theatre received State funding from the Communist government, thus broadening the scope of the art, but ironically robbing it of much of its bite as social protest. On the fringes, mass-based theatre activists like Jana Sanskriti, have sought to return theatre to its political role, and as an agent of social protest and change in West Bengal.

### 2.3.3. The Indian Plays

These have been years of far-reaching change for Indian society in general and Bengali society in particular. In the face of tremendous political and economic upheavals, the Bengali people have made remarkable contributions to the cultural scenario in India. Calcutta has been a powerful centre of a Bengali urban renaissance, with special emphasis on literature and cinema. Four plays have been selected, to represent various directions taken by Bengali theatre in the last few decades of the century.

#### ***Evam Indrajit: the angst of the urbanite middle-class***

*Evam Indrajit* (or *Ebong Indrajit*) (And Indrajit) (1962) has been recognized as a milestone in the history of modern Indian theatre. About its significance, Satyadev Dubey rightly comments in 1989 that, "it is only in relation to Indian theatre history that *Evam Indrajit* really makes its presence felt; otherwise it is just a very good, sensitively written play, like many others written in the last decade in India" (Dubey 89). It breaks away from the well-established realistic techniques of the day to create a more impressionistic theatre, new to the Indian stage. Its existentialist tone creates "the first anxious protagonists in modern Indian theatre overcome by the burden of history and the emasculating effects of middle-class urban life" (Dharwadkar 65).

**Characters, structure, style and theme:** The play has a cast of seven characters – most of them stereotypes of men and women in contemporary urban India: Auntie/Mother, Manasi, Amal, Vimal, and Kamal. The two exceptions to this stereotyping are Indrajit, who is looking for something, "a world beyond geography", and the Writer, who is struggling to write a play. By virtue of their higher sensitivity and awareness, these two are condemned to walk the road, though there is no holy shrine awaiting them at the end of it. Through three acts we follow the undramatic lives of this bunch of people. In Act I, the Writer cannot begin to write his play since he finds he has nothing to write about, he knows no one. Auntie insists that he stop



scribbling and come to eat; a girl, Manasi, suggests that he should write about the audience. The Writer is dubious about such characters for a play. Nonetheless, he calls out to some gentlemen who have just entered the auditorium, invites them to come up the stage. They do. They present themselves as Amal, Vimal, Kamal – and Nirmal. But on the Writer's angry insistence, the latter admits he is actually Indrajit. We catch glimpses of Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit growing up as young men in college, attending classes, discussing "cricket, cinema, physics, politics and literature"; graduating; planning marriage; attending job interviews. Indrajit tries to convince Manasi, his cousin, to marry him, but she cannot make up her mind, as she does not want to break any rules.

In Act II, Amal, Vimal and Kamal have office jobs and the Writer doubles up as peon and boss. They marry and their families go through many stages of life. Indrajit has gone out of the country, as an engineer, to London. Manasi considers marriage to Indrajit, but he is now uncertain. The Writer, still unable to write his play, is tired.

Act III shows us Amal, Vimal and Kamal playing cards and talking rapid-fire about the routine events of their lives. The Writer has received letters from Indrajit, but he cannot write a play about him:

WRITER. [...] The more lines I write for him, the more he stands outside them.

Says they are not real. Oh! He knows too much – altogether too much. (50)

Indrajit returns to Calcutta. He marries someone else, another Manasi. Amal is going to answer an examination to get himself a promotion. Vimal is building a house. Kamal is entering the import business. Indrajit has stopped dreaming of doing "something unusual, important, unprecedented" (58). He now accepts his ordinariness and declares, "I am Nirmal. [...] I'm just an ordinary man" (59).

WRITER. That does not make you Nirmal. I am ordinary too – common. Yet I am not Nirmal. You and I can't be Nirmals.

INDRAJIT. Then how shall we live?

WRITER. Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road. We shall walk. (59)

Aware as they are of their predicament as sensitive people, they are bound to be on the road, without respite, without God, with faith in the road, the endless road.

The play has only a shadow of a plot, eschews realism, and departs from accepted norms of 'conflict' and 'denouement'. Its collage of moments and fragments of situations is a complete departure from the well-established, realistic nineteenth-century conventions of the Westernized Indian urban stage. When it appeared on the Calcutta stage *Evam Indrajit* brought the Indian public a shock of recognition: here was a reflection of the *angst* and undefined frustrations of being a middle-class urbanite in early postcolonial India.

### ***Hunting the Sun* : hunting for a theatre of the masses**

*Hunting the Sun (Surya Shikar)* was written by Utpal Dutt originally in Bengali and produced by a professional *Jatra* or folk-theatre company in 1971. The play was performed repeatedly by *Jatra* actors and directed by the author himself. The story combines the historical background of the court of Emperor Samudragupta at Ayodhya, with all its trappings of intrigue and extravagance, with a situation borrowed from the story of Galileo. The play offers a mass audience the spectacle and melodrama it expects from a *Jatra* performance, but also challenges it to question irrational tradition and prejudice.

**Structure, characters and theme:** The curtain rises on a street scene. Shishumar the mayor of the city heralds the sale of two slaves in the public square. He extorts a bribe from Mahasveta, the Prostitute, and orders her to be ready to dance, with her troupe, for the entertainment of General Hayagreeva, the conquering hero who shall be present at the slave sale. On arrival the General harshly grabs the woman and demands that she be sent round to his house for a night. Basubandhu, the Lord Chamberlain buys himself the slave Gohil as well as Madhukarika and her small son Veerak. As they prepare to make a grand exit, they are stopped in their tracks by Indrani, the woman disciple of Acharya Kalhan, the Buddhist monk. She challenges the bravado of the General and pleads for the release of Gohil, the slave. Intrigued by

the audacity and courage of the woman, Hayagreeva accedes to the request. As he is about to seize her for himself, the Virupaksha or High Priest enters with an order for her arrest: her crime is propagating heresy and atheism by declaring that the earth is round and refuting the Puranas. Hayagreeva refuses to let go of Indrani. The final appeal rests with the Emperor.

Scene ii is set in the royal palace. Dardura, the Vidushaka or court fool makes wry comments on the Emperor's self-indulgence and the lasciviousness of Urmila, the Empress. We watch Urmila try to seduce Hayagreeva, but he rudely rejects her advances and leaves. Basubandhu and Vidushaka enter with the offering of the two slaves for the Empress and a request for her good offices in punishing Indrani, the heretic. The Buddhist monk, Kalhan comes to ask the Emperor for the release of Indrani. The Emperor challenges the monk to prove his claim that the earth is round. The monk's proofs fail to convince the court, though the Emperor can see in his heart of hearts that Kalhan is right.

In Scene iii we discover Hayagreeva quite enamoured of Indrani, whom he has seduced but not won over. As he cannot gain her love, he frees her, in despair, but is prevented from letting her go by the Emperor himself who orders Indrani to testify in court against her master, Kalhan. On her stout refusal, she is led away to be tortured into acquiescence.

Scene iv depicts Kalhan in his monastery, urging his disciples to protect their books and join the rebellion against the oppressive Empire. Hayagreeva enters, trying to persuade Kalhan to save Indrani by renouncing his heresy. On his refusal, Kalhan's books are destroyed in a bonfire.

In Scene v, Indrani is tortured but refuses to testify against her beloved master. Hayagreeva brings news of a rising slave rebellion and Kalhan is dragged in chains. He will not betray his disciple, either. The Prostitute Mahasveta, who has been kindly treated by the monk, agrees to testify against him to placate the Emperor.

Scene vi reveals the slave Madhukarika tending Indrani's injuries. Indrani assigns the boy Veerak the task of finding and guarding the master's books, the source of knowledge and truth. Hayagreeva enters to beg of Indrani not to die; he confesses to having allowed Gohil, the leader of the slave rebellion, to escape. To his astonishment and joy, Hayagreeva discovers that Indrani

now loves him dearly. They prepare to face death together, death by trampling by an elephant. As they leave, we have the Emperor and the Empress watching the gory spectacle. The lechery of the Empress is exposed by the Emperor. Mahasveta prepares to save her skin by testifying in court against Kalhan, but is prevented from doing so by the slave Madhukarika, who has poisoned her wine.

The concluding scene, vii, brings news of a growing rebellion. Thousands of people have arrived to watch Kalhan's trial. With the loss of the Prostitute, the Emperor stages his own show: Kalhan is brought in, chained, the Emperor reads out the monk's confession of guilt. Kalhan tries to speak but cannot – his tongue has been gouged out. The Emperor exits in triumph, having persuaded the people of Kalhan's submission. The play ends with words of consolation from Madhukarika to Kalhan that her son Veerak has got hold of Indrani's books and shall dedicate his life to letting the world know the truth.

The theme revolves around the unmasking of superstition and manipulation of the credulous. The play is the work of a politically committed writer, deeply convinced of the responsibility and capability of the stage to provoke critical thought. It is a vehicle for his ideology, and this consideration colours his choice of target audience, theme and style. Hence its relevance and significance.

### ***Mareech, the Legend: unmasking the oppressor***

*Mareech, the Legend ( Mareech Sambad )* (1973) by Arun Mukherjee has become a very popular piece in the repertoire of theatre in West Bengal. Its appeal seems to be so strong that theatre lovers repeatedly watch performance after performance of the play. It is perhaps stagecraft and the treatment of vital social issues that account for its wide significance.

**Genre, structure, characters and theme:** In traditional *Jatra* style, the play opens with a troupe leader or Ustad drumming up an audience and announcing the stories he will dramatize and the tricks he can perform. The language he uses is a mixture of Bengali, Hindi and

English. He is well prepared to cater to any kind of audience. A Chorus enters, followed by musicians and they sing a song in praise of the poet Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana. Attendants bring in a curtain that reads, 'Mareech, the Legend'. The story of Mareech, a demon from the Ramayana, is broached. Shot down by Rama and his brother Lakshmana, Mareech is saved by Ravana and takes shelter in the jungles of Lanka. When Ravana's sister Surpanakha is wounded by Lakshman, it is decided to commandeer Mareech's help to avenge Ravana's honour. Ordered to abduct Sita to penalize her husband Rama, Mareech is horrified: he refuses to act against the god in human form to whom he has offered his devotion.

The drum plays, a curtain is carried in with the caption 'Lathiwallah Ishwar and the Cunning Nayeb'. Old characters exit and new characters enter: Ishwar, the peasant is being ordered by the landlord Nayeb to set fire to the house of Ragunath, a peasant leader, and start a riot to cripple peasant resistance. The job is meant to help re-assert the authority of Pal babu, the extortionist zamindar. Ishwar refuses, but is reminded that he is indebted to Pal babu, who once had him admitted to hospital when he was sick.

The scene changes once again: the new curtain that is brought in reads 'The President's Call'. The new set of characters are Gregory and Macky, American citizens. Macky, a C.I.A. agent attempts to persuade Gregory, a journalist, to enlist in the war. Gregory, who believes in democracy and disapproves of American foreign policy is most reluctant to agree.

Three points of time, three distinct situations: they have a common denominator, a man who is manoeuvred to knuckle under pressure from the powers that be. The three stories interrupt and intercept one another, with 'mistakes' happening, much to the annoyance of the Ustad: characters speak lines from stories other than their own, and the similarity of their plight is made only too apparent: Gregory is being blackmailed with a threat to blacken his scholarly father's reputation – Gregory commits suicide; Mareech obeys Ravana and is killed by an arrow of Rama; Ishwar has rebelled and, rescued by Raghunath, vows to fight for the welfare of the peasants. Pal Babu now advances to shoot Ishwar, who is saved by Mareech and Gregory. The characters break out of the planned story-line and the Ustad loses control, just as the oppressors

in the stories begin to lose control. Eventually, Valmiki, the great author of the Ramayana is summoned to justify why Mareech had to die the way he did – abetting evil. The poet claims to have written for his own day and age. He is aware of the fact that rulers exploit and ordinary folks die. He is wise enough to know that the mistakes the character have made are not fatal: “The world has not come to an end due to your mistakes! There will always be people left to learn from your mistakes” (48). Valmiki is impressed that Ishwar refuses to die – or rather is unafraid to die. “When a person is not afraid to die, you can’t have him die at your own whim and fancy! [...] Don’t you see that he is no longer simply a hired goon or an isolated peasant? He is now a group, a great human collective. Unless this entire group is wiped out, his death will fulfill no purpose. Even if you kill him he won’t be dead” (49). The play ends when the Ustad admits he has lost control of his plot and characters – but he is indeed happy that no one wants to die like Mareech, or commit suicide like Gregory.

The structure of the play, shuffling between three stories and as many settings, is intriguing and engaging to an audience, as is the theme of changing forms of exploitation, from the times of the Ramayana, to the American intervention in Vietnam and straight into present times. Both form and content single out *Mareech, the Legend* as a noteworthy instance of Bengali theatre.

### ***Water* : theatre for social justice**

*Water (Jal )* (1977) was dramatized from her story of the same name by Mahasweta Devi, with the hope that the plays would go beyond the literate audience to a more diverse public. Like her other plays, *Water* too weaves history, myth and contemporary reality to give face and voice to the neglected tribal communities in India.

**Plot, characters and theme:** The setting is the village of Charsa, and the characters are members of the Dome community, a class of ‘untouchables’. The villagers are desperate for water. Maghai Dome, the water diviner detects water underground, wells are dug, but are

monopolized by Santosh Pujari, a landlord in the locality. The 'untouchables' are not allowed to drink from the wells; but the cattle of the landlord are watered and washed near it. Phumani, Maghai Dome's feisty wife relates how she and the other village women scratch the sands of the river Charsa to collect a cupful of water. But in summer, the river dries and the villagers are desperate to quench their thirst. Phulmani calls the river her co-wife, since Maghai Dome loves the river, talks to her, flirts with her. Dhura, their son, demands that the father stop divining water for Santosh Pujari who lets them suffer and starve. But Maghai Dome recounts that his ancestors have been commissioned by the goddess, the nether Ganga, to help find water. They take no money for it, it is their sacred mission. The anger and anguish of the villagers mount, but Santosh continues to appropriate the drought relief and the villagers continue to fall prey to disease and death. Jiten, the new school-teacher, a new-comer to the village, helps them in whatever way he can, and complains to the Sub-Divisional Officer (S.D.O.) about Santosh Pujari's excesses and appeals for justice, to no avail – the dice is loaded against him.

Driven to extremity, Jiten racks his brains and comes up with an idea: the river, which is now swollen with the rains, can be dammed, if its banks are walled with boulders. Maghai and his fellow villagers are enthused and give themselves to the work whole-heartedly. For the first time they celebrate Holi with abandon and hope. But Santosh Pujari has alerted the authorities, and the police are prevailed upon to disband the workers and demolish the dam. The men offer stiff resistance and Maghai is shot; the bursting waters of the blasted dam carry his body away.

The play emphasizes the bond between the tribal folk and the movements of nature, and is an ode to the fortitude of the masses, even as it is a scathing indictment of officialdom. Its naturalistic technique combines with elements of song and dance to give it an interesting flavour: a combination of Western and Indian elements of theatre.

**An overview of the Bengali plays.** Theatre in Bengal seems well represented in the plays selected for study here. Its temper is basically political and speaks of the deep politicization of discourse in West Bengal. This does not turn the plays into pale copies of one another, rather,

they offer numerous shades of political theatre. A serious social commitment informs most Bengali theatre of this period. And an equal commitment to theatre as a vital part of culture is only too apparent. Hence, the Bengali plays depict playwrights in constant quest for forms capable of articulating their ideologies. In the process, new audiences are addressed, fresh areas of life are focussed upon, new equations of power are addressed. The names of Bengali playwrights like Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Arun Mukherjee and Mahasweta Devi, and movements like the IPTA, are indeed prominent in the history of modern Indian theatre.

Having sketched the contexts of two of the three theatres selected for study the chapter turns to explore similar themes with reference to Sri Lanka: the social, political and cultural contexts as well as the theatre context. The Sri Lankan plays are then introduced.

## **2.4. Sri Lanka**

The last few decades have been years of violence and instability for this island nation. Its location at the southernmost part of the Indian subcontinent has made it receptive to various influence from its much larger neighbour. Its island status, though, prevented it from being overpowered by the cultural or political influences from India. Sri Lanka has a history of accepting, assimilating, and adapting its imports. Its location in the Indian Ocean also opened routes for trade and political invasion from distant powers, just as it also spelled out opportunities for trade tourism, and migration. Modern theatre in Sri Lanka has been shaped by all these winds from many sources and has avidly created an identity for itself in recent times.

### **2.4.1. The Social Context in Sri Lanka**

**The Socio-Cultural Background:** It is generally believed that the Sinhalese have descended from the people who migrated from North India and put down roots in the Island



around 500 B.C. These early migrants were Hindus and they conquered the natives, popularly referred to as *nagas* and *yakkas* or *yakkhas* (not to be confused with *Yakshas* or *Yakshayas*, which in Sinhalese mean 'demons') ( Fenando M.S., *Rituals* 14). These prehistoric Balangoda cultures, seem to have been snuffed out by the early colonizers from India. A form of popular Hinduism evolved, not Vedic or formally based on the Upanishads, but an inclusive faith that made room for local gods and goddesses and awesome spirits. Buddhism was established (circa 250-210 B.C.) through the agency of Mahinda, it was consolidated by Mahinda's sister Sangha Mitra who imported a sapling of the Bo tree from Bodh Gaya under which Lord Buddha had attained enlightenment. Buddhism soon turned into a widely accepted popular movement. It flourished on the bedrock of Hindu belief and assimilated local norms and practices. The Theravada form of Buddhism suited the reality of the Sinhalese and took deep root. A number of Buddhist temples include shrines to Lord Vishnu or Upulavan, who is called the protector of Sri Lanka.

From the sixteenth century Ceylon was invaded by waves of European powers: the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British ruled the country for various lengths of time. They were primarily focused on trade and many administrative and development measures were undertaken to enhance their trade capability. These colonial efforts had a marked effect on Sri Lankan society. By the time the British came to power in Ceylon, they found a well-established aristocracy, westernized and influential with the masses: these they utilized as a class of 'mudaliyars' or semi-independent administrators, to liaise with the population at large and the independent powers, e.g. the Sinhala King at Kandy and maintain a balance of power. The Dias Bandaranaike family is a pre-eminent instance of such an influential class.

The British tended to favour the minority English speaking Tamil elite in the North, Hindu or Christian by religion, to the disadvantage of the majority non-English speaking Sinhala population. In his personal reflections on Sri Lankan society today, Fr. Merwyn Fernando comments: "The Britishers had groomed the natives so well that colonialism continued after independence, the colonialism of the English-tutored elite over the un-westernized, vernacular-

speaking masses. [...] There was no socio-cultural transition corresponding to political independence. This is the root cause of all the woes and violence we have suffered up to now" (94).

The anti-colonial movement generated deep interest in the revival of vernacular languages and literatures. Whereas English has been the medium of instruction in schools that paved the way for University education, from the 1950s Sinhala and Tamil were given higher status, and a new class of bilingual intellectuals – Sinhala/English or Tamil/English – with English as the link language between the Sinhala and the Tamil communities. Later, school children were educated only in the mother tongue, the link language was lost and young people came to be separated on linguistic and ethnic lines. The ill-fated result was a fragmented sense of a 'separate' identity (Obeyesekere 40-43).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Sri Lanka has been plagued with ethnic strife between the Sinhala Buddhist population and the Tamil, mainly Hindu, population concentrated to the North, in the Jaffna province. A section of the Tamil population formed the extremist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ( L.T.T.E.) and over three decades of terror were unleashed upon the people. The ethnic war drained the economy, crippled exports and the tourism industry, caused severe law and order problems and profound social tensions, and disrupted normal life. At the fag end of the 1990s the peace negotiations between the Sinhalese government and the terrorist L.T.T. E. were strengthened through the mediation of the Norwegian government. The peace-talks continue into the twenty-first century.

#### **2.4.2. The Theatre Tradition in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lankan history does not witness to a long or vigorous tradition of secular drama. Theravada Buddhism may have had a large role to play in this: in its doctrinal form it discourages religious ritual in the community and stresses individual salvation. Thus Buddhist orthodoxy did not originally support communal rituals or a performance culture. Consequently, the long Sri

Lankan literature tradition does not include drama texts – religious or secular – from the classical and medieval periods: or if it ever did, the literate Buddhist clergy failed to preserve it. Buddhist monks were enjoined to avoid performances, musical and dramatic, though they were permitted to engage in painting, sculpture or writing. Buddhist temple worship – the *pirit* ceremony – did include chanting, magic practice and food offerings, and in time, under the influence of Hindu ritual at the Sinhala courts, elements of music and dancing in formal processions crept into Buddhist ceremonies. King Parakramabahu 11 (1236–1271), a patron of the arts himself, is recorded as having issued an order to monks not to indulge in “poetry, drama and such despicable arts” (Obeyesekere 87). Theatre critic Ranjini Obeyesekere notes the resulting tension: “Throughout the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, one is aware of the tension between the highly individualized form of religion as it was expected to be practiced by monks or individuals seeking salvation, and the continuous and ongoing pressure for it to be transformed into a practical religion of this-worldly support for the laity in their day-to-day activities” (87).

Unlike the classical tradition, the folk culture in Sri Lanka is rich in dramatic performative rituals. These were generally propitiatory rituals dedicated to gods and demons, probably predating the arrival of Buddhism on the Island. Curing rituals and demon exorcisms were part of the popular culture and so entrenched in the popular imagination that they continued to enliven the important moments in the community through the centuries. Performers in vivid masks and costumes engaged in song and mimetic dance with satiric interludes targeting persons in authority in the village.

A number of traditional secular folk forms are still performed in villages, primarily as entertainment. A few of these can be noted:

*Kolam* – satiric plays from the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, characterized by earthy humour and comic miming and caricatures of local authority figures, laced with stories adapted from the *Jataka Tales*.

*Sokari* – a form of folk drama seen in the central hill country. The texts are believed to date to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the South Indian presence in the court at

Kandy was powerful. Kandyan kings at the time married queens from South India, who brought with them large entourages. *Sokari* is associated with harvest festivals and fertility rituals in honour of the goddess Pattini.

*Nadagama* – an operatic folk drama that gained popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth in the South-Western Coast of Sri Lanka. It is believed the form derived from the South Indian street drama or *Terukuttu* and was subsequently used by Catholic missionaries in the Northern regions of Jaffna to dramatize Christian themes. It came to be adapted and absorbed into the folk culture. Tamil and Sinhala languages often mixed freely here. Flamboyant masks are used in these ritual-cum-folk forms of art. Scholar M.H. Goonetilleka has researched and documented the various categories of masks and believes that these masking traditions are an extraordinary cultural phenomenon and a significant contribution Sri Lanka has made to the Asian cultural spectrum (*Masks* 202-4).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the growing urban populations of the Western sea-board came into contact with a more recent form from India, the 'Parsi plays'. These plays were produced by the westernized Parsi community from India, and were a form of Hindustani musical drama. Highly commercialized, they were noted for their lavish costumes and elaborate backdrops and technical sophistication. Much shorter than traditional performances, they were staged in a makeshift theatre and stressed not social satire but lively music and dance.

Quickly, a Sinhala version, the *Nurti*, evolved, and urban middle-class audiences were regaled with performances combining Hindustani musical scores with a Sinhala text and strongly anti-colonial and nationalist themes. C. Don Bastian (1852–1921), John de Silva (1857–1922) and Charles Dias (1874–1944) gained enormous popularity. John de Silva satirized the Europeanized upper classes and sought "to rescue the nurti performances from the position it had descended to as a vehicle of a hybrid Anglo-Oriental culture, and to make drama a medium for the propagation of national and religious sentiments among the people" (Obeyesekere118). John de Silva's plays were held in high esteem not only by middle class audiences but by intellectuals, writers and critics.

English theatre gained acceptance in the city of Colombo under British rule. The educated upper classes patronized English plays and European plays in English translation. The audience was small, westernized and rather alienated from the Sinhala theatre forms, including the greatly popular *Nurti* performances.

**Theatre from the 1950s.** By the latter half of the century, the bilingual intellectuals were consciously engaged in creating a resurgence in Tamil and Sinhala literature. This new energy found powerful expression in literature. E.F.C. Ludowyc and Ediriwira R. Sarachchandra, professors of literature at the University of Sri Lanka at Peradenya worked with students at the University Dramatic Society to stage adaptations and translations of Western realistic drama. The breakthrough came in the 1950s when Sarachchandra's experiments in a new Sinhala form of poetic drama brought together in a creative synthesis Western theatre techniques and dance forms of the *Kolam* and *Nadagam* traditions as well as the opera style made popular by the *Nurti* plays. In the early stylized dance dramas, *Maname* (1956) and *Sinhabahu* (1958) Sarachchandra worked with themes from Buddhist legend which he explored with new psychological insights. The playwright also borrowed from the Japanese *Noh* and *Kabuki* traditions and went on to create powerful drama that appealed not only to the intellectual elite but gained enormous acceptance with Sri Lankan audiences at large.

Sarachchandra's work is considered to be the bedrock of modern Sri Lankan theatre. Coming as it did, quickly in the wake of political independence, this theatre devised a new voice and suggested a Sinhala identity. D. M. de Silva assesses Sarachchandra's work:

His plays quite definitely represented in their own sphere a decisive phase in the 'struggle against imperialism'. They express potently the national sense of identity, reassured it perhaps, and certainly transfigured it – a function of abiding significance in post-colonial society. That they performed this function without themselves subsiding in a national hysteria is a vital factor in explaining their continued effectiveness and validity. [...] Consequently his plays do not address themselves to the transient mood of a nation

but to its permanent experience, and with it to the experience of all mankind; they contrive to be national without losing their claim to be universal (30-31).

By the mid 1960s audiences were tiring of the many poor copies of Sarachchandra's operatic dance dramas and Sinhala playwrights turned to realistic theatre. The shift also reflected a changing political ideology, a more radical Marxist socialism which required that art engage with the socio-economic issues of the day. Sinhala theatre was deluged with adaptations and translations of modern European plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, Miller, Williams, Sartre, Anouilh and Beckett. Brecht became a major influence. Rapidly, original plays about contemporary local issues swept the stage, of diverse artistic merit. Though in retrospect many of these plays were seen as mere polemical pieces of short-term interest, the theatrical output of the day helped breach the gap between the high-brow literary language of the Universities and the colloquial speech on the street. A rich spoken language was fashioned as a theatrical idiom more adequate to serious discourse.

The Drama Festivals sponsored by the state played a major role from the 1950s to the 1980s in generating interest in the theatre among playwrights, directors, actors and the audience. Dozens of new plays were written and produced, these were discussed and debated with vigour in daily newspapers and literary journals and audience support for the theatre grew exponentially. Theatre did face tough competition for audiences from the Hindi cinema and more decisively from Sinhala 'tele-dramas' but the serious theatre had come to stay. Obeyesekere aptly assesses the situation: " At the beginning of the nineteenth century Sri Lanka had only the remnants of a folk drama confined mainly to the villages; by the latter part of the twentieth century it had not only developed a sophisticated theatre but become a nation of avid theatre goers" (131).

### 2.4.3. The Sri Lankan plays

The Sri Lankan plays studied here are entirely the creation of the Sinhala community in Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lankan society contains sizeable minorities, of which the Tamil is the largest, no Tamil plays were available in English translation, nor was there access to critical writing on Tamil theatre on the Island. Some of the plays selected were originally written in Sinhala, others in English. The plays selected cover some of the main genres and themes that have emerged on the theatre scene.

#### ***A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy : speaking the unspeakable***

*A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* is a one-act play written by Ernest MacIntyre (or McIntyre) and staged by the group Stage and Set in 1973. In the guise of a family crisis, wherein parents and grandmother discuss the murder of one son by another, the playwright approaches the problem of good and evil. The theme harks back to Cain and Abel and the story of fratricide in the Old Testament. The play begins with a quotation from a poem by Richard Eberhart, "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" (1904):

You would feel that after so many centuries  
 God would give man to repent; yet he can kill  
 As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,  
 No farther advanced than in his ancient furies. [...] ( *Somewhat Mad* 207)

**Structure, characters, tone and theme:** The question of the choice of evil, undimmed with the passage of centuries forms the core of the play. The story is set in a plain middle-class domestic setting. As the Father comes back home from work, tired and irritable, the Mother informs him that their Son Ranjit has killed his brother Upali. She is "just about fed up with these children" and demands that Father should "give them a sound telling off" (210). The manner of killing is discussed: Ranjit pushed Upali's head in the oven. The discussion is

punctuated with matter-of-fact remarks about the milk and tea that is being served. Ranjit is questioned and offers a pat reply, "I killed Upali, but it was his fault" (210). He goes on to relate that he was baking a pie when his brother barged in and yelled, "I must have my share of the pie, because everything in our father's house belongs to all of us" (213). The boy is ordered to clear the mess. The parents watch Ranjit drag the dead body for burial under the orange tree. The mood begins to change when the Mother continues to chatter about the furniture but the Father lets out an agonised howl:

FATHER. Oh my God, for heaven's sake, keep your bloody centre table, keep your damned side chairs, keep your damned corner settee, your Pyrex dinner set, your living children, your dead children, yourself and everything that goes with it, because I am tired of this somewhat mad and grotesque comedy. (218)

Ranjit comes in, repenting:

RANJIT. Please forgive me, Father, I did not know what I was doing. (221)

He begs for another brother and promises he will never kill again, but the parents are terrified that he will not keep his promise.

The entire play is punctuated with a chorus-like chant from the Grandmother who comments on the contrasting news of the discovery of mass graves in Bangladesh and the celebrations of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro side by side in the newspaper, and keeps singing broken-heartedly, "Oh come and mourn with me a while" (223). Curtain falls. The bizarre situation offers a telling comment on Sri Lankan society where Sinhala and Tamil factions were out on a rampage, one against the other, causing enormous social suffering. The one-act play also transcends the local situation to explore the nature of good and evil, angel and beast.

This particular play is extremely valuable to a student of text-in-context: it is one of the rare available play-scripts in English that touches upon the harsh realities of ethnic violence on Sri Lankan soil. Another one that has been mentioned in critical literature, but has not been of easy access is *The Intruder* by T. Arasanayagam (Goonatilleke, *Ethnic Conflict* 453). The



Aburdist form seems to lend itself rather effectively to a dramatization of this thorny and volatile theme.

***The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain : Buddhist legend in postcolonial costume***

*The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain* (1989) is one of the early plays by the most famous Sinhala playwright, Ediriwira Sarachchandra. It is based on one of the Jataka tales (*Swarnahansa Jataka*), a collection of stories about the Buddha in earlier incarnations before Enlightenment. The play was written originally in Sinhala (*Bhava Kadathurawa*) and later in English, by the playwright. Editor D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke comments, "it is not a 'transcreation' but seems to me an original effort, somewhat like Beckett's French and English versions of his plays" (8).

**Structure, characters and theme:** The play dramatizes the story of a Brahmin woman, her two daughters, Nandavati and Sundarinanda, and a *Sanyasi*, a wandering ascetic, a reincarnation of the father, Somadatta, a Brahmin who had died a few months previously. As the mother and daughters struggle to eke out a living in the village, the *Sanyasi* comes looking for shelter for the night. He claims to be the brother of their dead father. The mother houses him in a corner of the outhouse. The next morning he is gone, leaving behind a gorgeous golden feather. The mother insists on having it sold, and gets a thousand gold coins for it. The *Sanyasi* returns the next day and is sheltered once again in the shed. In the night the curious girls visit him only to discover him transformed into a magnificent golden swan. The feathers he leaves behind on successive evenings are sold for a huge price and the mother's greed is exacerbated and she confines the Swan. The Swan confesses that he is a reincarnation of the father, come to provide for his family, and begs to be allowed to fly away to freedom. But the mother has brought along a group of grasping merchants and they pounce on the Swan, pluck all his feathers and cause its death. The chorus sings at key moments in the play, providing background information, narration as well as commentary on the action.

*The Golden Swan* derives some of its significance from the fact that the playwright seeks to define and elaborate his understanding of Sinhala identity. The play's theme of acquisitiveness offers a critique of contemporary Sinhala society, in sharp contrast to traditional Buddhist values. In this post-Independence period, questions of culture and identity engross the attention of the men of letters in Sri Lanka and plays like *The Golden Swan* turn theatre into a forum for public reflection and debate.

***The Bearer of Woes* : unbearable woe for the artist and society**

*The Bearer of Woes* by Prasannajit Abeysuriya was written in 1989, in the decade that came to be known in Sri Lanka as a 'Time of Terror.' Though it was the first play by this young playwright, it is an experimental piece of theatre combining serious social critique and exuberant stage-craft.

**Structure, characters and theme:** The original title of the play, *Dukgannārāla* refers to the role of an official in the ancient courts of the kings of Sri Lanka who carried the people's problems to the king. This Bearer of Woes bears on his own shoulders the burdens of the common folk. Within the play the title seems to fit the character of the Man, who agonises about social ills, and ironically, to the Woman he wants to rescue as well.

The structure reveals a play within a play. As the performance is about to start and the dancers make their entrance on stage, a commotion is gathering momentum at the entrance. A Woman clutching a small child bursts in. The usher attempts to push her out but she begs to be allowed to stay a little while. The Director, the Sponsor and the Actors all get involved in the action as a Man enters to carry away the Woman. The Man, a writer, claims to be anxious to protect her, and she protests that she and her children are starving since he has 'rescued' her from prostitution. He offers the Woman a stable life with a husband and children, which she refuses, since the Man's writing does not earn them a decent living. As the actors get acquainted with their relationship and their struggles, they seek to find solutions to the problem in Buddhist

history. They enact a story from the Jataka tales: Queen Madri, the wife of King Vessantara, follows the king into exile and sacrifices her children and her own happiness on the altar of her duty to her husband. The idealistic tale fails to offer either the Woman or the Man with viable solutions. As they continue to squabble, the Sponsor, thoroughly exasperated, gets the guards to thrash the Man and exorcise him of his demons. Eventually, he tries to drag the Woman out:

MAN. [...] This may not be your legal husband talking, but it's the man who loves you and is the father of your child. I want to live with you because I don't wish to make that child also a fatherless orphan. Let us live like human beings or let us die. That's better than living like dogs. Today we must choose one or the other. Until my book is completed we will have to suffer just a while longer. You should put up with this and be a little patient. This is the last time I'll ask you. Answer me in one word. Can you or can't you?  
(195)

The Woman leaves without a word, the man follows slowly. The actors too leave the stage. The Director, Sponsor and ushers, gradually follow them out.

*The Bearer of Woes* offers a critique of the harsh social conditions that oppress the marginalized. It is the work of a young playwright who has been living all his life in the throes of civil strife and ponders over the location of the artist within such a society. It offers special food for thought to a student of text-in-context: here the playwright explores the question of the capability of theatre to contribute to social justice and harmony. Weaving legend with fact, the play is an arresting instance of modern Sri Lankan theatre.

**An overview of the Sri Lankan plays:** The Sinhala theatre we examine here is a new development in Sri Lankan culture, which, as we have seen, did not emphasize performance. The energy of this modern theatre is astonishing, given its fairly recent origins, and also, the climate of political unrest in a 'time of terror' when they were performed. Within the prevailing Buddhist ethic, theatre seems to have gained, in the present day, the status of space safely permitted for

social debate. Within a culture grappling with postcolonial issues like the politicization of language and ethnic strife, Sinhala playwrights have discovered for themselves and their audiences an opportunity to question and articulate matters of culture and identity. Sadly, the Tamil minorities do not seem to have found a corresponding space.

Having sketched the contexts – both of society and theatre – in each of the three cultures and introduced the plays, we now analyse ways in which the text and the context in the three locations have established connections to perform change.

### **2.5.1. The Plays Perform Change**

Despite the marked differences in each context, the magnitude of the 'social drama' or turbulence precipitated a process of change within the stage drama in China, India and Sri Lanka. The main differences among the three cultures appear in the themes they choose to perform, relevant to their specific circumstances. Some of these will come in for discussion in subsequent chapters. However, one discovers numerous commonalities. In all three locations the theatre seems to have delved deep into its fundamental nature to investigate its own power to transform itself and society: the playwright moved away from being primarily the entertainer, towards the role of social critic; the stage came to be, almost despite itself, a political space, where each playwright took a stance according to his/her own lights and gave voice to a dominant or emergent or even marginal meaning; the speedily changing social conditions demanded of the theatre that it should question its techniques and forms to address contemporary needs and expectations.

#### **a. From Entertainment to Social Critique**

In 'normal' times of social stability, theatre appears to find a comfortable role as entertainer, delighting the public with intriguing tales, light satire, naughty jokes, poetic turns of

phrase and accepted stage conventions. Such 'normal' theatre flourished all over Asia at the start of the twentieth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, theatre as entertainer in Asia had received a shot in the arm as a result of its encounter with Western literature, especially Shakespeare. In India, particularly, translations, adaptations as well as new scripts on old themes, such as the productions mounted by Girish Chandra Ghosh, grew in popularity. In Sri Lanka, theatre as a popular form was literally born with the garb of entertainer as the influence of the Parsi theatre gave birth to the new *Nurti* plays.

It was by the middle of the century that the tumultuous social transformation began to make its demands on theatre's vision of itself. The ancient stories with their welcome pathos and easy laughter had been entirely appropriate to a community that shared fundamental values and expectations; they now began to appear irrelevant and clichéd. Even as social and political instability made producing and attending performances more difficult, theatre stretched its resources and entered the lives of the people, with new themes, new styles, new performance spaces. Though never rescinding its role as entertainer, theatre now proclaimed itself a social commentator, a prophet, even a shaman or healer. An instance of such an avatar for theatre, can be observed in *The White-haired Girl*.

*The White-haired Girl* was constantly performed in the 1950s, and was enormously popular. In 1958 it was performed in a Peking Opera version, was adapted as in Shanghai in 1965 as a ballet which came to be accepted as a 'model' drama, and was filmed in 1971. It moved away from the stories of traditional drama. The hugely appealing theme of class struggle, and the bold experiment in form endeared it to vast audience. Critics have noted that "the fusion of song, music, chorus work and ordinary speech allied to a contemporary setting set *The White-haired Girl* apart from either traditional Chinese or modern Western stage practices, though both had clearly offered some inspiration. (It) was the first full-length representative of a new national genre named *geju*, song drama. [...] It was one solution to finding a middle way between past and present, a long-standing problem of Chinese theatre" (Brandon 40). *The White-haired Girl*

speaks of the capacity of theatre to metamorphose itself in response to felt needs, and give voice to people's concerns.

In the context of West Bengal, an analysis of Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun* also reveals theatre as reformer and redresser of social ills. The play is stylistically an amalgamation of *Jatra* and modern realistic techniques to pose a vigorous and acerbic attack on superstition and blind faith. Utpal Dutt, a committed playwright of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1960s, launched a public campaign through theatre to win the common folk away from retrograde beliefs and practices and indicate a new rational mentality essential to progress in Independent India.

Here is a theatre of social commitment. Not for Utpal Dutt the elite performances running for a few shows in city auditoriums. His reach is towards the populace at large, his planning on a time scale of months and years. Plays that probe the depths of the mind, or fathom individual quests, do not interest him. The political and social issues of the community do. Emerging lines of discourse, as for instance matters of gender, find space in his work. In *Hunting the Sun* understatement, suggestion and subtlety are summarily dismissed in favour of an exuberant story and bold social critique.

In a similar, though never identical vein, other playwrights in each of the three cultures under study have sought to address important issues of the day, and offer redressal or direction to a society in crisis. In the play *Water* Mahasweta Devi passionately indicts the Establishment which, even in Independent India, has failed to deliver the basic necessities of life to vast numbers of tribal people all over the country. In *Cai Wenji* Guo Moruo turns to history, problematizes the responsibility of the individual to the private versus to the public sphere of life, and legitimizes the newly determined loyalties – not primarily to the family, but to the State. The Confucian ethic that prioritizes the family is replaced with the new Communist ethic that calls for the subordination of individual and private needs to the collective good. In *The Golden Swan*, as in other later plays, Ediriwira Sarchchandra delves into traditional Jataka tales to reaffirm Buddhist ideals and values in a rapidly modernizing society. The woman is seen as the repository

and transmitter of values. The acquisitiveness of the Brahmin woman who causes the death of the Golden Swan comes in for condemnation as unacceptable by Buddhist standards. Here the playwright undertakes the project of examining and re-defining the Sinhala identity vis-à-vis the rather unnerving demands of a new age.

With the playwright in the role of prophet or shaman, the theatre seems to return to its ritual roots. As performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte correctly notes, rituals work in a community to secure a safe passage from a particular status to a new one. This holds true in the significant moments in the life of an individual, such as birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, illness, change of professional position and death. It holds equally true in moments of social crisis. Fischer-Lichte points to the performances created by artists in various locations: "This passage is also to be understood as a passage from the given sign-concept, as well as semiotic processes, towards a new, yet undefined order of knowledge. The performances, thus, operate as the signature of a time of transition" ("Performance Art" 36). At a moment when individuals and collectives are experiencing unbearable stress in the form of discrimination, oppression or even physical torture, the performance in a way turns into a scapegoat ritual.

#### **b. Political Awareness**

In the turbulent times under study here, theatre seems to have assumed a markedly political tone. During periods of political uncertainty and confusion, the stage opened its doors to diverse stances, as playwrights gave voice to particular political ideologies or philosophies of life.

Arun Mukherjee unequivocally admits to seeing theatre as a political space. *Mareech, the Legend* addresses an issue that was very close to the heart of Marxists in West Bengal: class-struggle. It was first produced in 1973, over twenty-five years after Independence, when Marxist ideals were seen as losing ground, consigned, in the phrase of Ronald Reagan, to "the trash heap of history." However, many intellectuals in Bengal continued to believe that class considerations remained central to political and social life. Critic Himani Banerji remarks:

(Y)et the violence of class manifests itself everywhere in Bengal or India and the world. Dispossession grows, 'commoditization' grows, the world grows into a market place where very few can either buy or sell. Gender, caste, religion and 'race' are complexly woven into this organization of power of capital and class, and the talk of nation or community amounts to no more than a way for women or the poor to be manipulated to offer their backs for the ruling class to climb on. Never more than now did we need the stories of class and class struggle – but told in a way that is worthy of the social and formative complexity, the elusiveness, the many-facedness of the concept of class (viii).

It is within this context that we can situate *Mareech, the Legend*. Arun Mukherjee employs considerable creativity in devising the structure of his play; he infuses the theme with intelligence and wit that lends it complexity. The Communist ideology that Arun Mukherjee subscribed to, underpins the play. Himani Banerji goes on to note:

This play dramatizes Marx's statement in *The Communist Manifesto* about history being the history of class struggles over a succession of stages of property ownership. The time span within this play ranges from the epic days of the Ramayana to the present, from mythologies to the streets of contemporary Calcutta. In between, Mukherjee provides a detour and a parallel through the imperialist USA. At each level, he presents a dominant individual's response to pressures exerted by the state, its ideological apparatus and the economic hegemony of the ruling classes. In so doing, he teases out the possibilities and dimensions of class struggle through this individual's growing awareness of his political agency (ix).

Though fully committed, politically, the playwright avoids stridency in tone; the ending is, ironically, inconclusive – no playwright, no Ustad, no authority can really deny a person his or her agency as a free being.

If *Mareech, the Legend* is a political statement in theatre, Chinese playwright Gao Xingjian's *Nocturnal Wanderer* is no less political. Taken in isolation from the socio-political context, *Nocturnal Wanderer* appears to have no political colouring. It stands on its own as a



dramatic probe into the dark recesses of an individual's consciousness. Through the nightmarish images and events in his dreams, the Traveller-turned-Sleepwalker comes into touch with his own suppressed desires and fears. This is the kind of play that politically committed playwrights like Utpal Dutt or Arun Mukherjee or He Jingzhi and Ding Yi would abhor as self-indulgent and socially irrelevant.

In the context of the life and times of Gao Xingjian, however, one cannot but discern the significance of the playwright's chosen paradigm. The Nobel Lecture by Gao Xingjian in 2001 reiterated his distinct political stance – a rejection of the emphasis on the collective, or the nation, in favour of a literature of the individual. He declared:

Literature can only be the voice of the individual, and this has always been so. Once literature is contrived as the hymn of the nation, the flag of the race, the mouthpiece of a political party, or the voice of a class or group, it can be employed as a mighty and all-engulfing tool of propaganda. However, such a literature loses what is inherent in literature, ceases to be literature, and becomes a substitute for power and profit. [...] Literature is man's affirmation of the value of his own self, and is born primarily of the writer's need for self-fulfillment. Any impact it has on society comes after the completion of a work, and the impact is certainly not determined by the wishes of the writer (5-6).

The playwright goes on to register his revulsion against Chinese government policies that dictated literary practice: "(B)oth the revolution in literature and the revolutionary literature alike passed death sentences on literature and the individual" (Gao 5). He laments the fact that in pursuance of such revolutionary ideals, numerous writers were shot, imprisoned, exiled or punished with hard labour. To Gao, intellectual freedom was of the essence, as was the need to transcend national boundaries to make profound revelations about the universality of human nature.

In the study of *Nocturnal Wanderer* and other plays like *The Other Shore*, it is apparent that in his theatre, Gao does not mount a frontal attack on a particular political ideology. He dramatizes the fact that the individual cannot live alone, he needs the Other; yet one can be

destroyed if one gets too close to the Other. Gao investigates the human search for a balanced distance between the Self and the Other.

When one turns to the Sri Lankan scenario, once again one comes face to face with theatre speaking politically. Prasannajit Abeyesurya's *The Bearer of Woes* takes recourse to a blend of drama and dialectics to explore the relationship of the arts with society. Unlike the IPTA playwrights committed to a dominant political ideology, and equally unlike Gao Xingjian, who unequivocally rejects the concept literature as a tool of power and propaganda, the Sri Lankan playwright treads a different path. He dramatizes the writer's inner urge to reveal society to itself, and ultimately impact it; the impulse is met with resistance from members of this society who have little faith in the power of literature to affect reality; and the entire dilemma is reflected in the efforts of the actors – in the play-within-the-play – to provide answers to the agonized debate of the Man and the Woman.

The tone of the play veers from the serious – when the Man expresses his anguish at the fact that his writing has been banned; to the farcical – when the guards grab the Man and try to 'exorcise' him with a merciless beating; to the satirical – as when an actor comments:

1<sup>st</sup> ACTOR. You know, some Buddhist texts say it doesn't really matter what one does to survive or how one lives. The important thing according to them is to keep one's mind serene at the moment of death. Then pst... no problem...it's straight to heaven with no further talk! (188)

The ending is deliberately inconclusive: the writer challenges the Woman to follow him and be patient until he can make a mark with his writing; but the Woman silently walks away with her child, and the writer follows them. One is left with the impression that dogmatic and final answers are beyond the pale. All that one can do is clear a space for open debate.

One of the corollaries of socio-political turmoil in Asia seems to have been, as an analysis of these plays reveals, a growing need to examine and discuss the changing social and literary paradigms. Playwrights, performers and the public have often turned to the theatre to make some sense of their changing political realities. At points the theatre has been appropriated by

the oppressor to establish legitimacy. At other points attempts by artists have been summarily suppressed. At yet other points, the theatre, though it spoke with a subversive voice, has actually thrived as a permitted space in times of terror.

### **c. Experiments in Form**

As individuals and communities have found their identities threatened, they have generally turned to the manifestations of their culture to make a positive statement. For a time, native theatre traditions were neglected and dismissed as inferior or irrelevant, and the aggressive Western forms appeared to have won the stage. However, this was to be a passing phase. Soon, artists turned to questioning the new and the old and in each of the three Asian cultures, richer vernacular forms were born. This has always been the fruit of experimentation and self-conscious questioning, in response to the demand for a relevant and legitimate voice. The spurt of experiment in artistic form and technique does not appear as a quest for mere novelty; it seems, rather, that theatre felt challenged and enthused to revitalize itself – or face decay – as a cultural artifact.

The plays selected for study witness to the multiple new directions explored by Asian playwrights in the latter half of the twentieth century. Lao She's *Teahouse* is a breakthrough in Chinese theatre in the 1950s, a new form called *huaju* or 'spoken drama'. Here we find Chinese playwrights adopting Western styles and models. As has been noted earlier, traditional Chinese drama worked from a basic script that made room for extensive improvisation and extemporizing. Music, song and dance, and acrobatics were prominent elements in theatre, and the written text held a very subordinate position in the equation. Now we notice a major shift in the balance of dramatic elements. The play script is carefully crafted and published in a definitive form. The characters speak realistic prose. Realism as a new style of writing and performance enters Chinese theatre and transforms the very concept of what happens on and off stage. The 'spoken drama' engages with political and social issues, largely because this form is dominated by

intellectuals. The structure is also influenced by Western drama, as scenes move chronologically from one era to another, from the end of Manchu Empire to the encounter with foreign powers, to civil war, and the advent of the Communist government. There is an attempt at realistic characterization, though the cast is very large: it includes two generations of owners, customers and officials who frequent the establishment. The play is written to be performed in an auditorium, by itself a new development for the majority of Chinese spectators used to finding theatre in the market-square, in the teahouse and in the homes of the wealthy. As the use of space changes, the relationships between performers and spectators are also transformed. *Teahouse* deals, thematically, with the changing face of Peking society from pre-modern to modern; stylistically, it embodies the movement of modernity in its acceptance of realism over traditional symbolic modes, and of the literary text over the earlier, more 'total', multi-faceted spectacle.

In the Indian context, Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* stands as a landmark of experimentation in modern Indian theatre. Writing in the 1960s for a Bengali society intent on modernizing itself, Sircar attempts to capture the temper of the new urbanite, to dramatise and problematise emerging dilemmas and relationships. The commercial theatre of Calcutta, popular in the preceding decades – historical and mythical re-interpretation or romantic melodrama – did not seem to lend itself to speak for the contemporary situation. Sircar experimented with new concepts of structure, characterization and use of language to capture the mood of disillusionment of a sensitive Indrajit who ends up joining the monotonous routine of getting on with the business of living, which has sucked in Amal, Kamal and Vimal. Intrigued with voices he had heard on his visits to England, such as those of Ibsen, Brecht and Absurdist Theatre, Badal Sircar creates his own breed of characters: the Mother/Aunty, Manasi, Amal, Vimal, Kamal; the Writer; and Indrajit. Here we encounter, in the main, no profound psychological characterization. Instead it is new stereotypical figures that take shape on stage.

Structurally, the play dispenses with crisis, climax and resolution. The device of having the Writer write a play about four persons who have come to watch the play serves to break the

dramatic illusion and induce a Brechtian kind of distancing. The play appears to have no plot, yet one does find a progression, a sense of movement – for most of the characters, movement within a rut; for Indrajit, a movement towards acceptance of the fact that there is no escape.

Sri Lankan society too, experienced social trauma that must, of necessity, be dealt with through novel artistic forms. Trauma often robs individuals of their voice. Compelling themselves to break the silence, playwrights like Ernest MacIntyre resorted to experimental theatre to speak of unspeakable matters like ethnic violence and massacre. *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* turns to Absurdist theatre models to convey a sense of the absurdity and terror felt by the common people unnerved by fratricide. Having noted that the 'ethnic' conflict in Sri Lanka since the 1980s contained incendiary elements other than race – language, religion, economics and history – one approaches in this play the feeling of how close to the family, how close to the bone, the catastrophe feels to the person on the street. A realistic performance may have fallen woefully short of the effect intended by the playwright. Traditional folk forms like the ancient *Nadagama* might have seemed pitifully inadequate to accommodate new questions and new answers.

Ernest MacIntyre resorts to a one-act play in Absurdist format: as brother murders brother and parents discuss domestic trivialities in the same breath as fratricide, the old grandmother mourns the triumph of evil over good in a seemingly incongruous religious hymn. The very brevity of the play, and its bizarre plot and setting, manage to cast a glance, a very brief glance, at a horrific situation.

If theatre appears, at times, to hide from tasks as revolting as re-living trauma, it does, at other times, turn its hand to just such a project. In *Nocturnal Wanderer*, Gao Xingjian plumbs unfathomed depths and cumbrous issues of good and evil, individual freedom and pleasure in violence.

Quite removed from realism, Gao's theatre takes on a surrealist quality, with subterranean fears and desires catapulting to consciousness. Conceivably as a result of his exposure to violence, oppression and evil in the days of his youth – he was at one time a

member of the Chinese Red Guards – the awareness of dark impulses is nagging. It is through recourse to Artaudian images of cruelty and through innovative use of language that he creates his powerful effects.

### **2.5.2. Conclusions**

In the fifty years of the latter half of the twentieth century, the cultures in China, West Bengal and Sri Lanka came under tremendous pressure: negotiating their identities vis-à-vis western powers, and all that this process entailed. In these three locations was once again re-played the myth of the encounter between two super-human personalities which provides the plot of some of the greatest stories created by the human imagination --- as in India, the story of Indra slaying the demon Vritra, who holds captive the sun and the rain ( Rosenberg 357) ; or the story, in China, of the battle between Bao Chu and the King of Evil who has imprisoned the sun (Rosenberg 393) : allegories of the conquest of chaos and of the release of the life forces. Philosopher Theillard de Chardin remarks, "To jolt the individual [...] and also [...] to break up the collective frameworks in which he is imprisoned, it is indispensable that he should be shaken and prodded from outside. What would we do without our enemies?" (164) In China, West Bengal and Sri Lanka the context with all its extreme social tensions and the performance text with its creative response, have together created meanings in the theatre.

Underlying the selected modern plays, one senses a passionate engagement with contemporary struggles and a constant exploration of new or hybrid forms. Modern theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka can be seen as a cultural text which has consistently sought, over five decades, to be an expression of, and an inspiration for the struggles of the people for freedom and identity, however these may be interpreted.

The themes indicated here form the core of subsequent chapters: the political dimensions of theatre and the role of the playwright in political costume; one major area of

contemporary discourse – gender – as constructed and articulated within these cultures; and trends in experimentation in theatre form.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Opium Wars: hostilities between China and Britain (1839-1842) related to the trade of opium carried out by the English East India Company. The Chinese government was greatly apprehensive about the ill effects on the health and morals of the growing number of addicts, as also about the reversal in the balance of trade, and the right of the government to prohibit the import of the drug. The war was resumed in 1856. Treaties were signed during 1858-1860, whereby major concessions were made to Britain, France and Russia. See Latourette, *China* 104-113.

<sup>2</sup> The Sino-Japanese War (1894-95): this is a reference to attacks on China by Japan, repeated in the 1930s and 1940s to further Japanese imperialistic ambitions.

<sup>3</sup> The Kuomintang or the Nationalist Party was led by Sun Yat-sen, later by Chiang Kai-shek. It had leanings towards America. Though the Kuomintang and the Communist Party did attempt alliances, they eventually fell apart and were locked in a bloody civil war. After its defeat in 1949, the Kuomintang took refuge in Taiwan. See Latourette, *The Chinese* 398.

<sup>4</sup> The Taiping Rebellion (1848-1853) was led by rebel Chinese against the Ch'ing dynasty. The leaders of the rebellion followed a compound of Christian teachings and indigenous practices; the rebellion was in the main, an uprising against landlords, rich peasants and merchants.

<sup>5</sup> The Boxer Uprising (1900) had as its objective the expulsion of foreigners, chiefly Christian missionaries.

<sup>6</sup> The Great Leap Forward was a Five-Year Plan which stressed steel production and industrialization. 600 000 'backyard furnaces' are reported to have been started all over the country for this purpose. The Great Leap Forward was followed by a catastrophic famine that may have cost twenty million lives. See Louis 223.

<sup>7</sup> The first Partition of Bengal in 1905 into two provinces provoked the first mass nationalist agitation in India and was repealed in 1911. The second Partition led to the birth of East Pakistan in 1947.



## CHAPTER 3

---

### THE PLAYWRIGHT IN POLITICAL COSTUME

## Chapter 3

### The Playwright in Political Costume

A mass of twelve thousand, in a field in Amta,  
All sunk in impenetrable darkness.  
Comrade, the way you've set the lights  
They dazzle and blind our eyes.  
We can't read in the faces of the mass  
The map of rage, humour and rebellion.  
Cast the light on the people, Comrade,  
Let the tiger eyes burn all over the field.  
Otherwise, we'd lose our way in the darkness.  
Can the heroes of the street play sit away beyond the circle of light?

- Utpal Dutt, "The Street Play"

#### 3.1. Theatre and Relationships of Power

Theatre bears a deep political colouring by the fact that it is publicly performed, and that each performance by live actors necessitates some form of public funding. In the twentieth century, a century of great political movements and revolutions, thinkers have come to emphasize that art in general, and literary and performance texts in particular, are inescapably political in that they take specific stances with reference to social issues and historical processes. On close inspection of the texts, these stances are revealed, not only by what they say, but equally by what they evade saying (Jameson).

Theatre, like other arts, germinates in the soil of a particular culture. The nexus of the

worldview (*weltanschauung*) prevailing in that culture with the artist who articulates it, is a deep one. Not only does the artist en flesh the tradition, he/she formulates and re-formulates it, questions and discards, opposes and accepts, absorbs new influences and recreates combinations – all this is done within the native traditions of which he/she may be, to a lesser or greater degree, conscious. It is then vital to probe the location and role of the artist and the arts in the specific milieu.

In this chapter some patterns in this weave are brought to light, mainly between the world of theatre and the political scenario. The aim is primarily to investigate how the playwrights interrogated their image of themselves as artists in times of political upheaval and the ways in which the selected plays embody these negotiations.

### **3.2. The Twentieth Century as the Age of Revolutions**

The twentieth century can be retrospectively apprehended as the age of revolutions. Not only has it witnessed enormous and far-reaching change in science and technology; it has also been fundamentally characterized by political revolution worldwide. Arguably, the seeds of all these cataclysmic changes can be traced to earlier movements like the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. However, it was in the twentieth century that these subterranean seeds gained strength and burst into leaf. In the very first decades of the century the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia announced the arrival of the socialist movement that was to be one of the major impulses of the age. The Communist bloc established itself not only in Eastern Europe, but also made massive inroads into Asia, with its political and cultural centre in China.

The socialist movements in Asia allied themselves with the emerging anti-imperialist struggles and established themselves with a broad base which included the vast peasant classes and other groups fighting for freedom and equality. Political commentator Aijaz Ahmad reflects on this path of social change:

[...] one could say that this century was triangulated by imperialist dominion on the one hand, and the struggles against this dominance on the other, which were waged, centrally, by forces of socialism and national liberation. [...] (T)he theory and practice of socialism upheld the idea that revolutionary change was required not only by classes formed on the terrain of property and production – in other words, workers and peasants – but also by a whole host of social groups which faced a variety of oppressions: women as women, minorities as minorities, the crafts people ruined by the capitalist market, linguistic groups, cultural entities, and so on; that women across national or religious boundaries had certain common interests [...]. (A)ll this was translated into a powerful universalist culture. This culture was comprised both of institutions – political parties, trade unions, mass organizations of women and students, theatre groups, writers' associations, anti-fascist committees, and the like – and of values. In sharp contrast to capitalist globalisation which was intrinsically racist, the primary value upheld in socialist internationalism was that of radical universal equality (25).

The waves of anti-imperialism, nationalism, socialism and minority rights entered into varied and fluid combinations in China, India and Sri Lanka. By mid-twentieth century in Asia, they often rose to proportions of tidal waves that overturned all they touched. As the decades unrolled, political ideologies would undergo many revisions. Literature and theatre were deeply implicated in the political processes. Literary critical thought did not lag far behind.

### **3.3. The Political Nature of Literary Texts**

The crucial understanding of the political nature of literary texts offered by **Karl Marx** (1818 – 1883) fuelled a major trend in critical thinking in the latter half of the twentieth century. Issues of historical 'situatedness' or historical embedment rang true to the ears of critics living through decades of enormous social, economic and political upheaval. Marxist critical thought was greatly influential in Chinese literary circles, and among many thinkers worldwide. Drawing

from Marx's position that the way people experience the world around them is wholly or largely conditioned by the mode of production of material life, thinkers like the French Marxist philosopher **Louis Althusser** (1918–1990) developed the concept of 'ideology'. Althusser's thesis is that "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence" (18). Althusser further indicates the all-pervasive impact of 'ideological State apparatuses' – including organized religion, the law, the political system, the educational system – on the individual's beliefs and actions. Whereas Althusser's view of ideology is largely deterministic, the writings of the Italian Marxist **Antonio Gramsci** (1891–1937) published in the 1970s make room for the possibility of resisting hegemony with counter hegemonic actions, even if not entirely escape its all-pervasive influence (25).

**Raymond Williams** (1921–1988) further clarifies the nature of hegemony. He holds that hegemony is far from homogeneous, "its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended [...] they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified" ("Base and Superstructure" 22). Williams is convinced that hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces struggle in literature and within a culture ever in motion and in a state of flux. Marxist critics like Williams recognize the place of literature in reinforcing ideology, but equally pay heed to the views of dissent that literature often voices. From the 1960s to the 1980s, this critical direction is further investigated and deepened in the French critic Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) and in the American critic **Frederic Jameson's** *The Political Unconscious* (1981). These insightful critical works point out that the text may be said to have an 'unconscious' to which it relegates what it cannot say on account of ideological repression. Interpretation, then, must paradoxically reveal what the text represses rather than expresses. Reading texts against the grain can expose a text's ideology.

**New Historicism and Cultural Materialism** emphatically argue that authors and texts cannot transcend their own times; rather, the ideological constructions within which authors live have been internalized and inescapably shape their work. Texts then, are always political in that

they are always vehicles for power. Literature creates and consolidates power relations, so that it not only 'reflects' the culture in which it came to be produced, but actively contributes to the making of culture and history. Within this critical discourse there is, however debate and disagreement about the question of autonomy and the role of agency. Whereas Stephen Greenblatt assigns only a very limited role to agency (23-24), Cultural Materialists like Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield point out instances of dissidence, subversion and transgression that emerge during political struggles. Dollimore comments:

In making sense of a period in such rapid transition, and of the contradictory interpretations of that transition from within the period itself, we might have recourse to Raymond Williams' very important distinction between residual, dominant, and emergent aspects of culture (*Marxism and Literature*, p 121 – 7) [...] Nor is this threefold distinction exhaustive of cultural diversity: there will also be levels of culture appropriately described as subordinate, repressed and marginal. Non-dominant elements interact with the dominant forms, sometimes co-existing with, or being absorbed or even destroyed by them, but also challenging, modifying or even displacing them. Culture is not by any stretch of the imagination – not even the literary imagination – a unity (2).

These critical insights can be fruitfully applied to the study of theatre during the highly turbulent period of the second half of the twentieth century in China, India and Sri Lanka. In the following section the analysis will be initiated by probing the relation between the State and the theatre.

### **3.4. Theatre and the State**

The concept of politics cannot be restricted to the power relations of those who govern and the governed. In their essay: "Contesting the arts: politics and aesthetics" critics Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell refer to a "politicization of discourse." They remark: "Its sustaining premise is that every relationship is a power relationship. Therefore any relationship among humans that purports to be principally mediated by, or sustained by, a shared interest in the arts, for instance,

is *ipso facto*, a power relationship. In this case, aesthetic and political judgements may become indistinguishable" (2). However, in this chapter attention is focussed on the relationship of the State with theatre during the period under study and the location of specific playwrights as well as internal references, if any, in the selected plays, to issues of the power of the State. The chapter sets out to throw light on the far from monolithic nature of a 'nation' and the fact that dominant meanings can silence communities but can also at times be challenged by residual or emergent meanings of an alternative or contradictory character. The study of theatre in a society in transformation can make accessible alternative maps of meaning to perceive and weigh reality within a particular culture.

### **3.5.1. State Presence on the Chinese Stage**

Chinese theatre was deeply entrenched in the life of the people, and had long and strong connections with all sections of the community, including the ruling classes. As has been noted in Chapter 2, Chinese theatre began to flourish in the thirteenth century and grew in popular appeal over the next five centuries. The thirteenth century Yuan plays satirized the 'foreign' Mongol administration that oppressed the people and can be seen as making significant political statements. Traditionally, the *k'un-ch'u*, an elegant and refined form of theatre had enjoyed great popularity in the imperial court, and in the eighteenth century the emperor set up an organization to encourage its development. Other forms like the Clapper Opera held greater appeal to the gentry and the general public. These more earthy genres often included rather bawdy themes which aroused the suspicion and ire of the government. Though they were enthusiastically applauded by many, they also "drew attack both from those who feared the adverse effect which the new drama might exercise on the popularity of the aristocratic *K'un-ch'u* and from those who considered (their) acting immoral" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 29). However, it appears that through the ages theatre companies were generally very adaptable and prompt to placate the authorities. By the middle of the twentieth century the Peking Opera had emerged to cater

to the demands for entertainment throughout the country and had obtained an almost national status.

**Edicts:** Government edicts and restrictions provide interesting insights into the attitudes of the government to theatre in pre-Communist China. Chinese authorities regarded theatre as a vehicle of the propagation of ethical values. They regularly checked both the content of plays and theatrical practices. An edict of the Ch'ing government issued in 1834 requires that drama should uphold Confucian values such as filial piety and loyalty and safeguard customs. Another edict in 1852 declared that drama must encourage good and punish evil and that bad drama encourages sexual crimes and robbery. Yet another edict, the same year, remarks that men and women mixing freely in theatre gatherings corrupt public morals; moreover, thieves and robbers find these gatherings congenial places to meet, and must be apprehended (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 92).

**Actors:** Though actors were very popular, in law, actors were classified with slaves and prostitutes, as the lowest rung of society. Edicts passed in 1313, 1369, 1652 and 1770 forbade them or members of their families from taking the civil service examinations: this effectively prevented them from achieving any social advancement (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 79). By the end of the nineteenth century the prestige of the actor had risen thanks to the frequent invitations by the imperial court to good actors to perform before the emperor or empress. After the seventeenth century theatre houses were not allowed to be built in the Inner City where the Imperial Palaces were situated. It was in the late years of the Ch'ing period that this law came to be overlooked.

**Censorship:** Censorship was not unheard of in Chinese theatre. It prevailed in the Ch'ing and Republican periods and even more so in the Communist era. "Censors could at any time attend the theatres, where 'official seats' were normally available to them, and order the closing of the theatre or the suspension of any drama from the stage" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 92).



**The Establishment of the Republic:** The political events of the early twentieth century displaced the Manchu imperial court and ushered in the revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen and the proclamation of the Republic in 1911. At first it seemed that the theatre was not greatly affected by the changing political scenario. In fact there was a resurgence of theatre, with the increasing interest in the history of China and heroic drama. Soon, theatre artistes discovered the potential of theatre for revolutionary propaganda. Wang Chung-sheng, a well-known actor encouraged a new 'progressive' spoken drama and helped found the Spring Society in Shanghai. His political sympathies prompted him to stage several revolutionary plays. He was arrested and executed in 1911. Colin Mackerras remarks on this new avatar of theatre in China: "When the Manchus were in fact overthrown a few weeks later, it became obvious to the revolutionaries that if the theatre could be used to uphold the status quo, then it could also function as an effective weapon against those in power. [...] The adherents of successive revolutionary movements were to remember this lesson" (*Chinese Theatre* 49). Like everything else in China in mid-twentieth century, theatre became highly politicized.

As the revolution consolidated its gains, theatre too took stock of its strengths and weaknesses. The Peking Opera saw the rise of actors of great caliber, and continued to flourish. Conversely, influential voices were raised against the Peking Opera by some leaders of the New Culture Movement who saw the old theatre as a reactionary force. In urban settings, specially the city of Shanghai, where the Western influence was the most sweeping, the new 'spoken plays' gained acceptance. Realistic spoken dialogue, scenery and costumes were the preferred media to dramatize contemporary social issues. Famous playwrights and intellectuals as well as university students became practitioners of the new form and poured their energy into social comment. The high tide of the Chinese theatre in the early decades of the twentieth century ebbed during the chaotic years of the war with Japan and the struggle between the Nationalists and the Communist forces. The conditions of life were too dangerous and dark for theatre to flourish.

**The Party Line on Art:** The Communist Party consolidated its power in the 1950s and brought to Chinese society some stability and freedom from war such as it had not enjoyed for

almost a century. The new government encouraged the arts, and theatre particularly was viewed as an important element of propaganda and social change. As an offshoot of the Communist policy against private enterprise, theatres were gradually nationalised. The nature and function of art was defined by Mao Zedong, and his statements in the "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (1942) became the basis of the party line: "All culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics" (129-141). Mao forcefully maintains that the artist's responsibility is to ensure that his work benefits not the bourgeoisie but the broad mass of the people.

The Communist attitude towards theatre in China passed through a variety of phases. In the early years the peasant drama in northern Shensi was revitalized, with historical themes being given current political significance. A committee was set up in 1948 to revise old plays to reflect contemporary doctrine. In the next few years much effort was spent sifting the reactionary from the progressive in the old drama. Increasingly, the early policy of intellectual and artistic freedom gave way to one of restrictive control.

**The Cultural Revolution:** As the Great Leap Forward was propagated, enormous energy was channelized into the promotion of contemporary revolutionary theatre and a corresponding 'leap forward in drama.' The Great Leap Forward turned out to be a major economic disaster and as it collapsed, the preference in theatre turned again to classical plays. However, within the party raged a passionate debate as to the nature of theatre to be promoted. Mao's wife Jiang Qing, supported by Mao himself, won the day and her ascent to political power culminated in the Cultural Revolution. In the 1960s the press urged that art should propagate socialist principles. The Festival of Peking Operas on Contemporary Themes (1964) marked the beginning of a coercive phase of hostility to the classical drama and the restriction of all drama to highly controlled revolutionary plays. Leading actors of the traditional theatre were hounded and persecuted. Professional theatre ceased to exist, and a handful of 'model' operas were put in circulation. The amateur drama was actively fostered and it was reported by Li His-fan of the

People's Daily, that in 1973 the total number of amateur actors in China was 'several tens of millions.' (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 189) Actors received reasonable salaries and the status of the actor as a revolutionary rose considerably. However, the theatre life narrowed down drastically, and the range of plays performed was severely restricted.

**The New Literature:** After the collapse of the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four and then the death of Mao, theatre staged a gradual come-back in the 1980s. A new period of relative artistic freedom ensued. Spoken dramas were performed on contemporary social issues like corruption and the necessity of law. Some of these, which target the corruption within the Party, were banned. Dance dramas returned to the stage but it was increasingly the spoken drama that appealed to young theatre goers who found it more relevant to the circumstances of their lives.

The last decade of the twentieth century offered writers relatively few literary restrictions. Deng Xiao-ping's efforts to get China to convert to a market economy let loose new currents in theatre in the 1990s. As society itself became rapidly marketized the State-West-Market relationship was also transformed. In his essay "Chinese Theatre between the State, West and Market," Huang Jisu, a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences comments:

As the marketizing process came sweeping across the whole country, and secular rationality came to dominate the Chinese mind, 'the West' as a glaring, intruding ideology virtually disappeared, as if to affirm its quiet omnipresence. And the ideological opposition between the State and the West expired. It can be said that the State has changed the West and its relation with the West by changing itself, changing this country (2).

Voices like those of Huang Jisu deride the new 'universal debasement' including that of theatre, increasingly elitist, favouring promiscuity and gross commercialism.

**At the End of the Century:** These critical voices have entered the theatre too. As the year 2000 ended, some 1000 people in Beijing came into the auditorium of the Chinese

Central Academy of Drama every night to watch the play *Che Guevara* by Huang Jisu himself, Shen Lin and Zhang Guantian. Though named after Cuba's socialist hero, audiences recognized that the play was about modern China. Staged at a time when China as a country seemed to look to Mammon rather than Mao, *Che Guevara* dealt with social justice and rampant corruption as themes. The play unleashed a tempest of accolades and criticism (Wong 1). Many intellectuals worried about China's consuming passion for money. Others viewed the play as an unreasonable rejection of economic reform. How does the government view such a play? Ironically, the play might not have passed the censors, who are wary of overly pro-communist writing. However, as a senior professor at the Central Academy of Drama, Shen was able to have his play affiliated to the institution, which acts as its own censor. The State, then, has not lost interest in controlling theatre. However, at the start of the twenty-first century, what it controls is not anti-communist ideology, but, always, anything subversive of the current party line.

### **3.5.2. Literature, Performance and Public Life**

The word for 'writing' in classical Chinese, *wen*, embraces a sheaf of meanings, way beyond literature: the word indicates culture, civilization, learning, pattern, refinement and embellishment (Yu and Hutters 21). The earliest instances of writing can be traced to the Shang period (c.2000 BC) (Ebrey 26) and are believed to have been produced around 1200 BC. Chinese classical poetry was highly refined and as early as the thirteenth century, some seven hundred 'musical dramas' were written; however, literature was viewed not as primarily an aesthetic phenomenon. Critics Pauline Yu and Theodore Hutters indicate the Chinese conception of literature: "Much more compelling were the presumptions that literature was an integral element of the cosmos and of the socio-political world, and that in writing of the self one spoke ineluctably to and of society as well: the forms and patterns of one's writing corresponded naturally with those of the universe, itself" (21). In this as in other areas of their culture, the Chinese detected the integration and inter-connectedness of all things.

Chinese theories of the arts did not place heavy stress on the notion of creation, and the linked values of originality and uniqueness. Rather, they emphasized the idea of continuity and convention. Literature spoke of matters of the world; and the tendency of the reader is to contextualise the literary work, to assume it arises from the author's own empirical world. Like all else in the cosmos, the writer exists within a network of relations with the worlds of nature and society: these provide the motivation, the forms and the themes of the writer's work. Yu and Hutters suggest that this notion of reality and literature deeply pervades Chinese aesthetics: "A seamless connection between the individual and the world somehow enables the poem simultaneously to reveal feelings, provide an index of governmental stability and serve as a didactic tool" (24-25). Indeed, literature in China was never regarded as an end in itself, independent of context or tradition.

A concern with history and historicity marks Chinese culture and literary tradition. From Confucianism the Chinese derive the notion that history is the story of decline from some earlier golden age: this perfection can be recaptured by a 'return' to the ideals of one's lineage and political order. In literary terms, this concern reveals itself in a tendency for allusions and references to past texts. In a deeper vein, the historical sense reiterates the belief that the individual exists primarily as a part of a network rather than an isolated entity. This sense of context is extremely powerful and pervasive, and is intensely depicted in Lao She's play, *Teahouse*. Loyalty to family and state was more important than loyalty to oneself; but if family and state loyalties were to come into conflict, choosing between them became an impossible task – and a source of the tension in much Chinese literature, as *Cai Wenji* thematizes.

Literature in China, unlike its Western counterpart, did not develop as a literature of great heroes. Novels or plays are not really peopled with heroes, and where heroes do appear, as for instance the thirteenth century play *The Soul of Ch'ien-Nu Leaves her Body*, the main virtues of the central female character are the fact that she is a good daughter and wife. (Chai and Chai 154). The absence of wars of external aggression and a war hero mythology in Chinese history has been often remarked upon. The soldier holds a very low social rank, and warfare as a means

of resolving problems has been condemned as an inferior means. In fact, the plays studied here do not feature great tragic heroes at all. There are even no grand characters like Maghai in Mahasweta Devi's *Water*, no Kalhan or Indrani as in Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun*.

Realistic literature did not flourish. Chinese drama was not realistic, but symbolic in stage setting, body movement, costume and singing. Its symbolism relied for effect mainly on simplicity and suggestiveness. The theatre was close to the lives of the people and offered social satire through the guise of popular tales. It was in its encounter with Western literature that elements of realism entered Chinese drama, as plays like *Teahouse*, *Cai Wenji* and *The White-haired Girl* testify.

There is exciting and concrete evidence that theatre played a significant role in social critique in early Chinese drama. The famous Yuan drama was written and produced during the Yuan dynasty (1280-1369), a period when the Chinese were ruled by the foreign Mongols. The Mongols were militarily brilliant; when they consolidated their power in China, they grew rapidly civilized. But to the Chinese they were despotic conquerors to be feared. Liu Jun-en, translator of Yuan plays indicates the subversive nature of theatre during this oppressive rule: "As the new masters of China did not care much for ideas, so ideas flourished among the Chinese. [...] After years of war the master race settled down to enjoy the amenities of civilized Chinese life, oblivious to the well-concealed attacks upon their inhumanity and to the fun poked at their extravagant gestures of power and justice. The drama was to be the weapon of the conquered" (10). Here we have, at a moment of deep social turmoil, an energetic creative response, theatre as a space for reflection, subversion and satire. Old stories and popular legends or early simple plays were charged with new meanings to speak to the people about contemporary problems and the plight of living under foreign rule. The administrators were ridiculed and satirized, the wicked were punished, the virtuous rewarded. "New ideas born of desperation were freely presented and discussed. The dramatists sang of the sorrows of a conquered people, and what was more important, of justice, humanity and freedom, even if that freedom was only of the mind" (Liu 12-13). Many large cities had theatrical districts and each

district a score of theatres, some of which could accommodate thousands of spectators. Theatre became a social force to be reckoned with.

At the end of the nineteenth century the realization dawned among the educated Chinese that the traditional culture was not able to effectively meet the new political challenges. With the arrival of Western powers a sense of cultural crisis was deeply felt, and voiced in the intellectual discourse of the day. Literature came in for concentrated attention, as being able to provide conceptual insights. It was a time of radical challenge to the accepted world view. Contact with the wider world rendered the old context radically finite by making Chinese civilization merely one narrative among others. Bonnie McDougall notes that "In their aspirations and also in their achievements, the writers of the May Fourth movement brought China into world literature and underlined the necessity for the new literary movement to be studied in the world context, not as an isolated phenomenon unique to China" (61). This led to the vigorous literary debate and questioning that marked the 1920s and 1930s in China.

The questioning began with the publications of the famous New Culture Movement (1911–1919). A set of intellectuals, disgusted with the politics of the day, declared their conviction that a radical cultural revolution would have to be launched if a significant political revolution was to surface. These intellectuals were iconoclasts out to attack all aspects of the Chinese tradition. They were convinced that China could only be saved from total collapse by replacing the corrupt and outdated Confucian culture with a Westernised democratic and scientific culture. A drastic shift in perception occurred during what came to be known as the May Fourth Incident. A huge student demonstration on 4 May 1919 was followed by strikes and protests against the Western powers that had betrayed China with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Paul Pickowicz indicates the change of mood:

(T)here was profound disillusionment with Western political systems and methods of conducting international diplomacy. Rather suddenly, Chinese radicals became more interested in the significance of the Russian October Revolution and Marxism in general. Thus the ideology of the May Fourth Movement, which Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai and thousands of

others found so compelling, had two essential components: a militant nationalism directed at foreign aggression, and a radical cultural iconoclasm that rejected the Confucian past (18).

Pickowicz makes the significant observation that these cultural and political revolutions were led by people who were essentially literary figures. In the intellectual centres of Peking and Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s the intense literary debate had an essentially political orientation.

The main voices of the leftist literary movement were the Creation Society which included the playwright Guo Moruo, author of the play *Cai Wenji*, studied here, and the Sun Society. Great literary figures like Lu Hsun, Mao Tun, and Ch'u Ch'iu-pai debated aggressively the nature of revolutionary literature and the role of left-wing writers. Ch'u was highly critical of the nihilistic attitude to the national cultural heritage. Pickowicz remarks: "In a sense, then, Ch'u was doing precisely what Marx insisted was necessary. He was telling writers that they could not simply cut themselves off from the past: they must study the national past, identify its unique course, and critically inherit its cultural legacy" (175-7). Here we find, once again, the Chinese sense of history asserting itself in a time of cultural questioning.

Many of Ch'u Ch'iu-pai's ideas about art and literature appear to find an echo, later, in the thought of Mao Zedong:

The art of the various nations of the world each has its own peculiar national form and national style.[...] In rejecting Chinese things, the people who advocate complete Westernization say that Chinese things do not have their own laws, and so they are unwilling to study or develop them. This is adopting an attitude of national nihilism towards Chinese art ( Mao "Talks" 85).

The cult of Chairman Mao in China made his views widely known and accepted.

Mao laid heavy emphasis on the revolutionary role of writers and the utilitarian function of art. The writer was required to "awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment" (*Literature and Art* 58). Mao would



not tolerate for the arts any measure of autonomy from the State. He declared that literature and art are subordinate to revolutionary tasks and need therefore to be guided by the political party.

During the Cultural Revolution the intellectuals and writers became the target of paranoid persecution and torture. Literature turned into a blatant weapon of political propaganda and intellectual oppression. By the late 1970s, after unleashing a decade of horrendous social suffering, the Gang of Four collapsed and the Cultural Revolution turned into a spent force. The world of Chinese writers launched a counter-offensive against the Cultural Revolution policies. The 1980s came to be known as the New Period, a turning point marked by political and economic reform. This was the beginning of the post-Cultural Revolution liberalisation. The politicisation of literature waned even as China regrouped to modernise, revamp its economy and take on the world on its own terms.

At the end of the twentieth century, one cannot, however, claim that the earlier burning issues have been resolved. Paul Pickowicz notes:

The tensions between the professional and the amateur, between the city and the countryside, between raising cultural standards and popularizing art, and between nationalism and cosmopolitanism persist in China, just as they do in other parts of what has come to be known as the "Third World". These have been and continue to be the challenges for art, including the theatre, as Asia enters the twenty-first century (241).

The view holds relevance, as in one guise or another, these themes surface in the literature of China, India and Sri Lanka as the people grapple with their post-colonial questions.

### **3.5.3. Four Plays from Modern China**

By the mid-twentieth century, the Chinese people were deep in the throes of social transformation. In the context of this gigantic and confusing landscape what masks did theatre wear as Chinese society undertook to modernise? The four plays selected for analysis are representative of some of the avatars assumed by Chinese theatre from the 1950s to 2000.

There is no attempt here to hammer together one grand monolithic narrative. Many distinct voices were raised and it is intriguing to probe in what ways individual playwrights articulated the traditional worldview or questioned or departed from it, or re-defined it; and how they inevitably donned a political costume.

### ***The White-haired Girl* (1951)**

References to *The White-haired Girl* crop up in much writing about China: it came to the notice of peasant audiences, factory workers, city folk, university students as well as critics and foreign visitors. It received the Stalin Prize for Literature in 1951. In *The White-haired Girl* the eponymous heroine runs away from a cruel landlord who has raped her, and lives in a cave in the mountains. The play ends with the public trial of the landlord by the enraged farmers – an enactment of similar trials all over post-Liberation China.

**A new genre:** *The White-haired Girl* was staged at the 1945 Yan'an spring festival by the popular *yangge* troupes. The traditional *yangge* rice-planting songs had evolved into a very popular style and were turned into an instrument of grass-roots propaganda and entertainment. The play has a ballad-recitative origin and is believed to be based on some actual facts. The music set for it was also drawn from authentic folk sources. Its social-revolution theme won it the blessings of the political establishment. All in all, it turned out to be a happy combination and a genuinely new theatre genre. Mackerras and Scott record its achievement:

Being directed against abusive social practices long familiar to village tenant farmers, it became a theatrical symbol of the revolutionary cause and was constantly performed in the late 1940s and 1950s. The fusion of song, music, chorus work and ordinary speech allied to a contemporary setting set *The White-Haired Girl* apart from either traditional Chinese or modern Western stage practices, though both had clearly offered some inspiration. It appealed to an audience for whom theatre without song and music was inconceivable and dialogue drama in the Western vein meaningless in the context of their

lifestyle. *The White-Haired Girl* was the first full-length representative of a new national genre named *Geju*, song drama. Flexible in subject matter and musical form, it was contemporary but adaptable to regional traditions. It was one solution to finding a long-standing problem of Chinese theatre (40).

The popular reception of the play seems to suggest that *The White-haired Girl* was a very successful experiment and that it responded to a pressing contemporary need, both political and artistic.

**Popular appeal:** In retrospect, one could be tempted to dismiss the play as mere political propaganda against the corrupt and exploitative feudal system and the deification of the Red Army as the saviour of the people. To do this would be to miss the serious attempts being made to re-define social relations during this period of cultural crisis. Minoti Chatterjee writes of the political nature of theatre:

Theatre creates new social relations between the artists and the audience and in doing so, becomes political. In theatre, it is not just a question of foregrounding a revolutionary message through the existing media, it is a question of revolutionising the media itself. The revolutionary artist is not concerned with the art object alone, but also with the means of its production. Commitment is more than just a matter of presenting correct political opinions in one's art, it reveals itself in how far the artist reconstructs the artistic forms at his disposal turning authors, readers, spectators, into collaborators (2).

If during the 1950s and early 1960s the Chinese theatre had a rationale, it was to redefine social relations and give voice to the masses who had been denied fundamental rights for generations.

The authors of *The White-haired Girl* record the actual process of the evolution of the play:

[...] after careful study, we came to consider it not merely as a ghost story or an attack upon superstition but grasped its most positive aspect – the portrayal of the contrast between the two types of society and the significance of the people's liberation. Writing the libretto and rehearsing took more than three months, during which time we never

ceased experimenting and revising. [...] Most important is the fact that, apart from assistance received from experts, artists and cadres, this opera was composed mainly by means of the help and criticism of the masses. The people are our teachers, and it was they who taught us how to work (*The White-haired Girl* iv–vi).

The play touched a nerve in the audience, dramatizing how “the old life forced men to turn into ghosts/ but the new life changes ghosts back into men” (82).

Reception theory, popularised by Hans Robert Jauss finds application here. Jauss maintains that the “historical essence of an artwork cannot be elucidated by examining its production or by simply describing it. Rather, literature should be treated as a dialectic process of production and reception” (Holub 57). The reception of *The White-haired Girl* has been repeatedly recorded. Derk Bodde studying Chinese literature in Peking in 1949 writes about it in his *Peking Diary* (1950) and is worth quoting at some length:

Yesterday I attended a performance of the most famous of the new plays, *The White-Haired Girl*, beautifully produced and expertly acted by the Artist Workers Group of the (Communist) North China University. This semi-operatic drama is an elaborate production, written by four persons and requiring a cast of twenty and an orchestra of twelve. Seeing it was an exciting and memorable experience, despite its length of four hours and the fact that, as all tickets were unreserved, I had to come more than an hour early to insure getting a seat. [...] As I watched the sobbing heroine being dragged away from her father’s corpse to serve the landlord, I could not help wondering: Is this artistically true to life? [...] It is obvious, however, that no such considerations disturbed the minds of the audience (among whom I was probably the only foreigner). Emotionally, they were completely one with the play and, during tense moments, roared their disapproval of the landlord, shouted advice to the heroine, and cheered the arrival of the Eighth Route Army. [...] The behaviour of the spectators, in fact, was in some ways almost as interesting as the play itself. They filled every seat and overflowed into the aisles. During the hour or so of waiting before the play began, some groups passed the

time by singing the new revolutionary songs at the top of their voices. True, the audience was predominantly youthful and contained many students and soldiers: yet there were many older people. [...] The whole experience of seeing it, in fact, gave overwhelming proof of the strength of the new ideas in revolutionary China. Let any man beware who glibly assumes that these ideas are the monopoly of but a few visionary fanatics beneath whom lies a sea of "growing discontent" (304-6).

In *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times* (1975), Colin Mackerras makes some observations about the play:

Since the stage movements, décor and style of singing owe far more to European (especially Russian) models than to Chinese, there is a curious mixture of cultures in this work. As a stage piece, it seems to me too long to be fully effective. Yet the moral message is blended with a very human story, and I found parts of *The White-Haired Girl* extremely moving. I could certainly see that it was tremendously popular with the Chinese. [...] In 1958 it was performed in a Peking Opera version, with an excellent cast, including Tu Chin-fang, 'Mei Lan-fang's successor' as Hsi-erh [Xier] and Yuan Shih-hai as the landlord. It has also been filmed and, most important of all, has been adapted as a ballet which has come to be regarded as a 'model' drama (202-3).

Even as late as 1988 David Kellogg, teaching English at the Cancer Research Institute in Beijing, describes in his biography *In Search of China* a party thrown by his students at the Institute: "Dr. Li (male) and I then did an English version of the crucial scene in *The White-haired Girl*, to huge appreciation. I sang Xi-er, the white-haired girl, and Dr. Lisang Yang Bailao, my father. It is one of the few revolutionary operas that date from the actual revolution, and not from the Cultural one" (360).

The astounding popularity of the play for over four decades seems to indicate that here the Chinese people post-Liberation found a narrative that was their own, and an artistic medium that they vibrated to. *The White-haired Girl* indicates the grand narrative of the Chinese people in the 1960s, the *Zeitgeist* or the spirit of the age.

### ***Teahouse* (1957)**

*Teahouse* was written by Lao She at a time when Peking was fast changing. The play depicts old Peking society, with its peculiarities and frailties, crumbling in the face of the new forces that usher in the new society: it spans half a century, 1898 to 1949. Here is a *huaju* or 'spoken drama', the new genre born in the early decades of the twentieth century. It consists of a three-act, slice-of-life, naturalistic play set in a typical old Peking teahouse. The playwright, Lao She (1899 – 1966) creates a cast of over sixty characters drawn from various levels of society and follows their destinies as they take shape through the changes in Chinese society. Lao She displays intimate knowledge of the society he portrays and sensitivity in his depiction of characters and the language of the streets of the old city. *Teahouse* stands between the old China and the new, rooted in both, as Yutai Teahouse welcomes its customers over fifty long years.

**The playwright:** Lao She himself was rooted in both the old and the new. Born in Peking during the last years of Imperial China, as the Manchu dynasty and its structures disintegrated, this playwright of Manchu nationality himself, lived through the birth of the Republic and the May Fourth Movement and the convolutions of the political system. He was educated in Peking, left for England in 1924. He taught at the London School of Oriental Studies and lived in the United States from 1946 to 1949. He returned to China with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China and participated in literary committees and organizations under the new government. He earned the title of People's Artist. His novel *Camel Xiangzi* gained him renown. In 1966 the Red Guards under licence from the Cultural Revolution ill-treated and humiliated him. Lao She drowned himself ( Mackerras and Scott 48).

**Spoken Drama:** *Teahouse*, as 'spoken drama' is an instance of the influences of Western literature on Chinese writers. Lao She belonged to a generation of intellectuals who were keenly interested in world drama. Unlike traditional Chinese theatre, the *huaju* excludes elements of music and stylized song and dance, to the benefit of the written and spoken word.

The new genre had come into its own a couple of decades earlier with the publication and production of *Wang Zhaojun* (1923) and *Zhuo Wenjun* (1923) by dramatist, poet and historian Guo Moruo who had studied in Japan, and *Thunderstorm* (1933) and *Sunrise* (1935) by a leading playwright of the day Cao Yu. In the company of Lao She, Cao Yu had visited the United States to observe Western theatre. In Peking and more energetically in Shanghai, literary figures were calling for change in the theatre. The Creation Society and the Spring Sun Society together with the Shanghai Dramatic Association became enthusiastic sponsors of the new form. Cao Yu and his friends studied and admired not only Ibsen, but also Greek drama, Anton Chekhov and Eugene O'Neill. Realistic dialogue, credibility of characterisation, and the portrayal of the social tensions of the day marked the drama of the playwrights of this generation. Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* took the Chinese public by storm, was staged hundreds of times in theatres, schools, villages, factories and army camps and was later adapted to local opera (*Thunderstorm* ii).

**Social Change:** Lao She's *Teahouse* exhibits the Chinese writers' deep concern with historicity. The present was always seen as part of a long continuum, and the individual as part of a complex context. The setting of *Teahouse* lends itself to the long narrative since the teahouse was a ubiquitous and enduring establishment in the Chinese social landscape. It can be viewed as an important institution in the scenario of Chinese leisure. The larger teahouses often housed theatres, with the audience watching the performance from tables at which they sat, drank tea and conversed. Even the humbler teahouses were extremely popular in Imperial China and the Yutai Teahouse set in Peking is, in a sense, the central character of the play. The social change in China is reflected in the changes the teahouse undergoes before our eyes in the three acts. The collapse of the imperial system and the encounter with foreign influences created dislocation and identity crises for the Chinese. There ensues a struggle for place in the new order. The struggle is worked out in social interactions in public spaces.

**Leisure and Politics:** At the start of the play, in the autumn of 1898, the Yutai Teahouse is an inviting place with people streaming in and out to sample tea, snacks or meals.

The proprietor is a courteous and shrewd young man; the clientele is cosmopolitan indeed --- among others, a soothsayer, a 'flesh merchant', a landlord, a palace eunuch, a gang of toughs, a couple of police agents, an army deserter, a starving peasant woman selling her daughter.

SCENE: Everyday bird fanciers, after strolling about with their caged orioles and thrushes, would come in to rest awhile, enjoy a pot of tea, and compare the singing abilities of their birds. [...] One could come in contact with the strangest views; for example that foreign troops could be prevented from landing by building a Great Wall along the sea coast. Here one might also hear about the latest tune composed by some Beijing Opera star, or the best way to prepare opium ( 5-6).

Act Two takes place ten years later, and war is endemic.

SCENE: The big teahouses in Beijing have closed their doors one after another. Yutai Teahouse has been the one establishment strong enough to survive, but in order to avoid going under in the stiff competition, both the appearance of the place and the services offered have been changed. In the front part they still sell tea, but the back section has been turned into a public lodging house [...]. The large painting of the "Eight Drunken Immortals" and even the shrine to the God of Wealth are gone, having been replaced by pictures of fashionable women in foreign cigarette advertisements ( 23).

One thing is in common. A board stares down from every wall in large characters: "Don't discuss state affairs" (23). By Act Three it is the period following the defeat of the Japanese when Kuomintang special agents and American troops run rampant in Beijing. At the end of the Act the teahouse is about to be transformed into a den with a dance floor and bedrooms, and a place to track political enemies. It is the end of the teahouse; and of the proprietor – he hangs himself. The idea of work and leisure and with it, social relationships, are re-defined as modernity elbows out tradition.



The very performance space for the performance of this play is ironically eloquent. *Teahouse* is performed not in the old style teahouse theatre, but in more modern theatre auditoriums for an audience that sits still and serious. It is a far cry from the setting of the old Beijing theatre and its rather boisterous mood of celebration. Critic Yi-Fu Tuan comments, "A critical distinction between "traditional" and "modern" theatre is that whereas the former is a celebration of life, the latter is a criticism – a deconstruction? – of life and a cold look at death" (240). By the time Lao She's *Teahouse* is produced, the teahouse theatre culture has all but broken down. The audience sits in semi-darkness to watch the passing of an age.

**The Ending:** Traditional Chinese drama does not neatly fit into the genres of tragedy and comedy, in the ancient Greek or Western mould. The tragic character, heroic in stature, for instance, does not straddle the Chinese stage, pitting himself, like a Lear or a Faustus, against earth and heaven. By nature, old Chinese drama is more episodic, shining its more general light on a larger circumference rather than an intense spotlight on the center. Wells aptly remarks: "Leading figures in the most serious Chinese drama are less willful and neither they nor the audience experience the shock treatment which Aristotle so memorably described. Chinese playwrights are unsurpassed masters of pathos, not of tragedy" (53). Wang Lifa, the proprietor of Yutai Teahouse, and the protagonist of the play, is drawn to arouse strong sympathy, not the grand notes of 'pity and fear'. The death by hanging by which Wang Lifa ends his suffering does not presume to create a dark grand finale on the lines of classical Western tragedy.

Unlike the resolution in most ancient Chinese drama, the ending of *Teahouse* does not induce a mood of acceptance and harmony. The conventional Confucian devotion to morality which in the past always demanded poetic justice by the dramatist, appears almost perfunctorily in the 'clapper-ballad' epilogue: Oddball Yang, the ballad-monger, returns to find Ding Bao, the young 'come-on hostess' in tears, and he consoles her with the thought of a "bright new hope, a hope to wash away our grief" (81). The "bright new hope" that the New China would redeem their suffering sustains the people. The brevity of this note in the play begs a few questions. Is this the playwright's concession to the conventional expectations of his audience? Is the touch of

hope and poetic justice to come a residue of the Confucian world-view, which the dramatist assimilated all his life, and exposure to foreign drama cannot displace? More plausibly, here is perhaps a deliberately light touch, so that the note of hope does not counter-balance the mood of dark anger against social degeneration and the need to arouse awareness and public opinion. After all, Lao She was writing *Teahouse* in Communist China.

**Political Stance:** The playwright seems to disclaim the mantle of 'political' writer when he states:

In covering this period of change it was impossible to avoid political issues, but since I was never closely associated with the high officials of this period, I was unable to directly portray their careers. In addition to this, I am not an authority on politics; I knew only a few unimportant figures. But these were the sort that frequented the teahouses, so it seemed that, if I brought them together in a teahouse and reflected social change through the portrayal of the change in their lives, I would be revealing one face of the political change of the time. This is the reason I chose to write a play on this topic (Lao She 82).

In contrast to the playwright's statement, a reading of *Teahouse* reveals strong concerns about the political climate in China. The atmosphere of growing fear and lack of freedom of speech is highlighted through the signs pasted in the teahouse, which read "Don't Discuss State Affairs" and grow larger and more menacing in each new act and with the passage of time. There are numerous references to historical events and political attitudes, as for instance to the campaign against teachers and the teachers' strike, numerous allusions to the arrogance of Kuomintang officials and the dominance of the American culture and to the 'liberation' by the Red Army and the Communist rule to come.

Lao She is careful not to append a fourth act to the play depicting the new 'liberated' society once it is established. Possibly the author may be only too aware of the shortcomings and internal contradictions of this new society during which he is now writing his play, and may find an inclusion of such a reflection too problematic. It is a notorious fact of the first three decades

of Communist rule that socio-political interpretations and views could turn often and quite unexpectedly, leaving writers to explain that they were not national traitors. Hundreds of artists were proscribed in the wake of such reversals of the Party line, with dire consequences ranging from hard labour to publicly being 'struggled against' (interrogated and punished) to execution. On the contrary Lao She's play gained great popularity, as it did not raise the hackles of the censors, and as the new educated audience of the genre of the spoken play were able to watch and safely enjoy aspects of their lives being performed on stage. Lao She went on to win many public accolades and hold high posts like that of Chairman of the Beijing Federation of Writers and Artists.

Despite the playwright's disclaimer, *Teahouse* is certainly a political text. There was no way a play in China in 1959 could have been otherwise.

### ***Cai Wenji (1959)***

Guo Moruo's *Cai Wenji* was written two years after the start of the movement to suppress the "Hundred Flowers Policy". This was a policy that had briefly encouraged critical speech. Momentarily believing that they were indeed free to criticize, intellectuals, writers and Party workers spoke up and aired their views on all matters including art and politics. The Party Command quickly clamped down on them, revoked the policy, and those who had dared go against the Party line were hounded and punished. In this highly regimented and repressive atmosphere, playwrights found their options limited.

**The Playwright:** Guo Moruo (1892–1978), a dramatist, poet and historian, had been in the 1920s among the leaders of the Creation Society. Guo had been an archaeologist and had written books on ancient Chinese society and Oracle bone inscriptions, the earliest known written inscriptions in China ( Feuerwerker, A. 175). But now his stance was basically anti-traditionalist. He played a major role in the resistance at Shanghai during World War II. " Under the P.R.C. he was given numerous government and cultural posts and was one of the very few artists and

intellectuals to remain in favour during the decade of the Cultural Revolution" (Mackerras and Scott 47). It is revealing to note that his last play, *Wu Zetian*, was written in 1960 and revised in 1962. Though he "remained in favour" during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) he wrote no more plays. Guo Moruo generally wrote historical plays which reflect his concern for contemporary events in Chinese history, believing, like Mao Zedong in "making the past serve the present." In appreciation of his achievements, Mao Zedong wrote on 21 November 1944, in a letter to Guo Moruo, "Your historical articles and historical plays are a great contribution to the people's cause. The more of them, the better" (Mao, *Letter* ii). Guo's historical plays received considerable public attention in his day.

**A Woman as the Protagonist:** *Cai Wenji* is set at the time of a turbulent period of Chinese society (196–220 A.D.) when the Han court was under threat from the revolts of poor peasants and the greed of the aristocracy. It dramatises a story well-known to the Chinese: the return of Cai Wenji to the Han court after twelve years' marriage to a tribal chief on the northern border. As a historian and poet, the character of Cai Wenji presents points of interest that throw light on the playwright's view of history and art. Unlike most protagonists of Chinese drama, this one is a woman. Like Mao himself, Guo also believed that "women hold up half the sky", and was a strong fighter for women's rights. This was not a passing concern. Not only were his early plays *Wang Zhaojun* and *Zhuo Wenjun* (1923) named after women, but also his very last play, *Wu Zetian* (1962) deals with the only woman in the history of China to ascend to the imperial throne (684–705). Women characters – both heroines and villains – have been abundant and interesting in traditional Chinese theatre, but save for rare exceptions like the famous Madame Cassia<sup>3</sup>, they do not hold such central positions. Guo depicts intelligent, strong, even defiant women from the past and often places them in influential political roles.

**Historical Plays:** Traditionalists by culture, the Chinese devoted themselves to the study of history like few other people. Their historians were eminent literary personalities who wrote in a sober and scholarly style. The love of history found its way into theatre and historical plays were extremely popular. Whereas the large majority of characters on the Chinese stage

are drawn as more or less universal types, it is in historical plays that we encounter more rounded three-dimensional portraits. Guo turns to this genre to subtly comment on the contemporary scene and reinforce values he holds significant.

It is rewarding to compare *Cai Wenji* with an earlier historical play by the same playwright. Guo's best known play *Qu Yuan* (1942) reveals the author's interest in creating vigorous and complex characters. The protagonist is an upright minister and a renowned poet in the court of King Huai in the South who refuses to be bribed by the envoy from the kingdom of Qin. He falls victim to slander and betrayal, is ridiculed as insane, imprisoned, and goes into exile. In prison he addresses the wind, thunder and lightning: "Burst, my body! Burst universe! Let the red flames leap forth like this wind, like the plunging sea, until all material things, all filth, are consumed in your flames; and let this darkness be consumed, the cloak of all evil!" (*Qu Yuan* 181) Qu Yuan is not only a minister of state, he is also a great poet. The fire of his soul and his poetry are turned against all darkness and corruption, and his searching light is directed both to expose political expediency and to understand his own self:

QU YUAN: I don't want men to pretend to be fools, I want them innocent. I want them all to have good tempers, good natures, good abilities. But I cannot achieve it myself ! My temperament is too extreme. I realize that, but am powerless to correct it. What do you think I had better do? Should I be a peasant? I cannot use the hoe. Should I go on a journey? I do not want to forsake my country. [...] When all men are desperate, then the life force will burst through. (184-5)

The artist, then, is accorded the position of social critic, philosopher and sage in the world. Guo was, at this time, writing in the Kuomintang capital and urging unremitting resistance to the Japanese invaders.

**Writing in Times of Censorship:** By the time Guo set out to write *Cai Wenji*, the Communist Party had consolidated its power, won the civil war against the Kuomintang, and the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) had been established under the leadership of Chairman Mao.

Censorship of theatre activities was firmly in place, and practice was required to be strictly in line with Mao's ideas. Refractory writing would invite severe reprisals. The Marxist ideology of the Communist Party and the policies of Chairman Mao were apparently germane to the mind and heart of Guo Moruo. Still, the political climate being extremely volatile and Party officials being enormously powerful, Guo had to ensure that his writing left no room for mis-interpretation. *Cai Wenji* then, loses some of the fire and passion of the earlier *Qu Yuan*.

**Changing Relationships:** The protagonist of *Cai Wenji* is a poet and a scholar, a woman who is given the onerous task of writing a sequel to her father's famous *History of the Han Dynasty*. She accepts the task with a sense of national and filial responsibility and pride in the work; but the commission means she is forever parted from her young children. In her dilemma she composes her "Eighteen Airs for the Fife." A central motif of the play is Cai Wenji's sorrow incarnated in mellifluous poetry – a theme to be found in Chinese folk stories.

*Cai Wenji* is also about family ties. But Guo Moruo, writing in Communist China in the 1950s looks beyond the Confucian norm of family loyalty and personal grief. The artist subordinates his/her personal concerns to the needs of society. Marxist ideology firmly locates the artist at the service of national liberation and revolutionary transformation. Mao demands:

Does it mean that Marxism doesn't do damage? Oh yes, it decidedly does damage to the creative mood that is feudal, bourgeois, petit bourgeois, liberal, individualistic, nihilistic, art-for-art's sake, aristocratic, decadent, pessimistic, or any other kind of so-called creative mood that is alien to the broad masses of people and the proletariat. For a proletarian artist or writer, shouldn't these moods be destroyed? I feel they should be destroyed and completely so. New things can be built on the site of the demolition (*Selected Works* 804 – 835).

In *Cai Wenji*, the playwright affirms the need for the artist to sublimate her personal needs to the larger social cause. From a historical standpoint, Mao's policy may have been increasingly aggressive, but his theory did, finally, draw from the age-old Chinese world-view that privileges

society over the individual, and a paternalistic government over individualistic expressions of personal rights.

**Political Stance:** Guo Moruo's plays position the playwright as the ally of the Establishment. The character of Cao Cao, the Prime Minister of the Han, is re-interpreted: from a traditional figure of tyranny, the playwright depicts him as an intelligent administrator who is successful in unifying warring tribes and consolidating the Empire. This appears to be a not-too-subtle benediction by the writer on the Politburo and the rising giant figure of Chairman Mao. If his intention was to achieve political correctness, Guo Moruo succeeded temporarily. He received commendations from the Chairman, and was placed in high official posts.

However, *Cai Wenji* was Guo Moruo's last play. In 1966 the playwright was attacked in the Cultural Revolution. He 'confessed' that he had not understood Chairman Mao's thought and agreed that his books should be burnt. But unlike many other writers attacked, Guo Moruo was not stripped of official positions. In the 1970s he regained some of his powers. But he never wrote another play. Perhaps silence was the only viable course of action in the circumstances. This cessation of literary output begs questions about the artistic freedom – or lack of it – accorded to writers in the political climate of the time.

### ***Nocturnal Wanderer (1993)***

**The Playwright:** It was only in the 1980s, after the fall of the Gang of Four and the death of Mao (1976) that theatre experimentation regained some vitality. Gao Xingjian emerges as the foremost name in playwriting. Gao Xingjian was born in 1940, even as the Sino-Japanese war raged, and grew up in the Communist regime. He studied French literature at the Peking Foreign Languages Institute, as an avid reader grew aware of European literature, mainly the work of Stanislavsky, Brecht and Meyerhold. At one point during the Cultural Revolution he was a leader of a Red Guard brigade; he was later banished to the countryside to work with the peasants. He was early exposed to violence and cruelty in society and driven by a desire to

“decipher the meaning of the cruel reality around him” he took to writing. His manuscripts had to be wrapped in plastic sheets and buried, sometimes burnt to avoid detection. Writing was for him above all an exploration of his own self. His translator Gilbert Fong notes:

Instead of serving the Party and the masses, for him writing was to be the means to self-knowledge and understanding of the value of human existence. This individualistic stance was of course anathema to the official dogma of social realism. With aspirations to become a published writer, he tried to avoid officially tabooed topics, even though he felt himself hemmed in by the restrictions imposed on him and his fellow writers. This dilemma apparently tormented the fledgling writer who, working under constant surveillance by officials and fear of censure, found himself in a constant state of siege mentally (xi).

This concern with individuality and the conflicting demands of collectivity which impinges on personal creative space, has continued to be a major motif running through his work. His early plays, *Bus Stop* (1981) – an absurdist play, *Absolute Signal* (1982) – an experimental modernistic production, and *Wilderness Man* (1984) – an “epic describing events from seven or eight thousand years ago to the present”, attracted public notice, the applause of playwright/director Cao Yu as well as an official ban on production and publication. After recurring official censure Gao went into exile to France in 1987, convinced that he would never be able to write, direct or produce his plays in China. His subsequent plays include *Exile* (1989) – a story of three characters running away after the student demonstration at Tienanmen Square, *The Other Shore* (1986), *Between Life and Death* (1991), *Dialogue and Rebuttal* (1992), *Nocturnal Wanderer* (1993) and *Weekend Quartet* (1995). Gao Xingjian was awarded the *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government in 1992 and went on to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000.

**Literature and Politics:** *Nocturnal Wanderer* deals with a nightmare of a Traveller who falls asleep on a train journey, and through the dream enters the inner world of the protagonist. The world of reality in the train provides the characters for the world of nightmare. Through the



dream, and as the people from the real world take on their dream personas – Tramp, Prostitute, Thug and Master – the Traveller's secret fears and desires are explored. Through surreal images and incidents the Traveller walks down the quasi-deserted city streets in the night, encountering, in a sense, himself and the Other. Gao is consistently exploring the self, with all its powerlessness to root out the evil within and around itself. Unlike earlier playwrights in the Chinese tradition, for Gao literature has no obligations. Gao believes that "Literature has no relation to politics. It is purely a personal undertaking, an observation, a look back at past experiences, a speculation, a cluster of sentiments, a certain expression of inner emotions, and a feeling of the satisfaction of contemplation" (Introduction, *The Other Shore* xvi). Not that he advocates the writer's complete dissociation from society. He thoroughly despises art-for-art's-sake. In Gao's view, the writer is to refrain from actively intervening in social or political matters; he should "exile" himself and assume a position on the margins of society from where he observes life and the self. Gilbert Fong discovers in this dilemma the writer's attempt at negotiating his problematic cultural identity:

Therein lies his Chinese heritage, not so much in the superficial display of traditional Chinese theatrical conventions which occasionally crops up in his plays, but in his reluctance to totally cut himself off from humanitarianism in an effort to save the human soul, if not collectively, as individual beings. He is characteristic of the modern Chinese intellectual who rebels against his own Chineseness and yet rejects a Western individualism which pays no heed to society. According to his way of thinking, the latter is injurious to human nature – the negation of the very essence of life itself (Fong xvii).

Plays like *Nocturnal Wanderer* certainly do not aim at being specifically Chinese drama; however, questions do cross one's mind about the role that the playwright's memory of his experience in the troubled socio-political context in China may have played in shaping his dominant themes. Equally, the very consciousness of the writer, geographically and culturally in exile, throws up intriguing questions about the 'pastness' of the past and the 'presence' of the contested order and world-view.

**Political Stance:** In China Gao's work came to be banned, his plays shut down. His insistence on the individual voice rather than a 'hymn to the nation' was seen as subversive and politically unacceptable. This play, as other plays by Gao, can be viewed as a peremptory refusal of the role of playwright as political propagandist or even as a voice of the collective.

As Yan Haiping rightly points out, Gao can be seen as part of the wave of protest against the trends of the Cultural Revolution; however, unlike many of his Chinese contemporaries, he refuses the mantle of speaker for the common folk, and resolutely speaks in an individual voice. His plays not only reveal a structural and ideological departure from the tradition of social realism of theatre and culture in the People's Republic of China since the 1950s, they engage with the individual's quest of re-discovery of self in a turbulent world. In *Nocturnal Traveller*, the self is the centre of Gao's imaginative universe: in the form of a dream, "a nightmare that both employs and suspends the connection between reality and illusion" (Yan 25) the Traveller walks through nightmare situations as he dozes in a train journey, and seems to be bumping into his own fractured self in the many weird encounters. This choice of themes revolving around the self fits in with Gao's understanding of what is crucial in life and literature.

In his Nobel Lecture (2001) Gao Xingjian reaffirms the underlying principles of his life and writing:

What is important is to live in the present, to stop being hoodwinked, to cast off delusions, to look clearly at this moment of time and simultaneously scrutinize the self. This self too is total chaos, and while questioning the world and others, one may as well look back at oneself. [...] Literature is simply man focussing his gaze on himself, and while he does, a thread of consciousness which sheds light on this self begins to grow (9).

Gao unequivocally rejects the Maoist view of literature prevalent in the China that he was exiled from. He declares that literature is not concerned with politics but is purely a matter of the individual: his emphatic declaration, however, can be read as a political statement, the location of the writer's power within himself, for himself, and not the State. Gao's work is an indication that

this playwright, too, is interested in questions of power. Rebelling against the loss of the individual voice in a totalitarian regime, Gao's characters seek the source of power within the self.

Chinese history from the 1950s left little room for the theatre to be a-political. From the catastrophic civil war and the emergence of Communist rule in the 1950s, from the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, to the negation of these in the 1980s and 1990s, the playwright found himself unavoidably propelled into the vortex of politics and obliged to negotiate questions about the significance of his writing and performance. Intense intellectual debate about the role of the writer pervaded the atmosphere. Actual responses varied according to the specific historical situation, the severity of the constraints, and the inclination and courage of each playwright. In the entire period theatre was fraught with questions of meaning and integrity.

The theatre to be examined now is that of West Bengal, a deeply political theatre; the selected plays are studied within this framework.

### **3.6.1. Political Theatre in West Bengal**

**Political Perspective:** One of the most salient traits of Bengali theatre has always been its political perspective. In one sense all theatre is political because it asserts itself in the present moment, its performative character continuously demands that it take a stand and declare its allegiance. As a hugely popular and vibrant social practice, theatre in Bengal in the twentieth century offered a significant arena for debate on questions of authority, power and relations with the State. If we adopt Rustom Barucha's definition of political theatre, "what makes a play political is its allegiance to a people whose oppression cries out to be enacted on stage" (Chatterjee 3), Bengali theatre in its folk form as well as middle-class urban forms, was highly politicized.

Specific notes can be heard predominating in the voice of Bengali theatre: from the

beginning of the century into the 1940s and the achievement of Independence from colonial oppression, the central theme was Nationalism; in the second half of the century it was the empowerment of the subaltern and the rejuvenation of Bengali society. Through the better part of the century, this theatre was on a collision course with the State authorities. Rarely does one find Bengali theatre without a combative posture. The age-old *Jatra* popular with the rural masses was satirical in tone and political in temper, in that it invariably ridiculed the establishment, subverted the local authorities with defiant laughter and offered trenchant comment on their life situations. To thousands and thousands of simple hard-working folk across the land, the theatre offered ribald entertainment, a space for the expression of anger and frustration and the possibility of masked or not-so-covert gestures of defiance. With the arrival of urban proscenium theatre in the late nineteenth century, the note of combat and resistance quickly surfaced and was met with corresponding repressive measures from the colonial government. In *Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage, 1905-1947*, Minoti Chatterjee indicates the stance of protest ever present in theatre in this part of India:

It has to be understood that political theatre is a part of the struggling masses in Bengal. Theatre can and has repeatedly become a rallying point for people's resistance in Bengal. For example, the Dramatic Performances Control Act of 1876 led to the arrest of actors, banning of plays and burning of manuscripts for almost a hundred years. When the Government and the ruling class mobilize legal and illegal forces to crush a play, we can be sure people's resistance is gathering ground, because oppression is the surest way to gather the dispersed emotions of individuals into a collective rage (7).

One may indeed suggest that the vitality of Bengali theatre through the century has been intrinsically bound up with the historico-political upheavals of Bengali society and the vigorous ways in which it constantly re-invented theatre.

The State has been at loggerheads with theatre in Bengal for over a century. With the

arrival of the urban proscenium theatre through the agency of Herasim Lebedeff ( 1749-1817) a pioneer Russian lover of theatre, private theatre took root. Among the prolific offerings one finds a rich strain of social satire. To cite a few instances *Kulinkulasarvaswa* (1854) by Pandit Ramnarain Tarkaratna (1822-1886) satirizes the Brahmins and their polygamy; *Bidhaba Bibaha Natak* (1856) by Umesh Chandra Mitra dramatizes the plight of Bengali widows; *Ekei ki Bole Sabhyata* (1860) and *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron* (1860) by Michael Madhusudan Dutt ridiculed the wealthy young aping Western manners and the hypocritical landlord seducing a low-caste Muslim woman (Chatterjee 14). All these plays invited the rage of the wealthy and influential Hindu community. After the Mutiny of 1857 it was the play *Nildurpan* (1860) by Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873) that created political waves. It was a play of protest dramatizing the exploitation of the Indigo cultivators by the British planters. The play was translated and published by Rev. James Long. In reprisal, Rev. Long was fined and jailed and the play was banned. As the Indigo Revolt raged, and national agitation shook the region, other patriotic plays were staged on historic themes reflecting nationalistic resistance. The government retaliated against the growing anti-colonial sentiment with press control acts and the Dramatic Performance Control Bill (1876). Through the years and the decades many plays were proscribed, some ostensibly for obscenity, others for sedition. In *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, Nandi Bhatia quotes statements made by a Mr. Hobhouse, an official in the colonial government which indicates the growing awareness in government circles of theatre as an expression of political struggle:

(I)n times of excitement, no surer mode has been found of directing public feeling against an individual, a class or a Government than to bring them on stage in an odious light. It is doubtless for these reasons that the laws of civilized countries give to their Government great controlling power over the stage (7).

Bhatia goes on to draw attention to the fact that such statements "collectively [...] form an archive that reveals the authorities' fears about drama's ability to influence via methods that were not easily accessible to them – linguistically, theatrically, or spatially" (Bhatia 7). The plays,

the opinions expressed in the press, as well as the regulatory acts all testify to the acute awareness of theatre as a potentially subversive voice. Thus, the politicization of the theatre in Bengal was inescapably recorded and institutionalized.

**The 'Nation' as a Cultural Project:** There were, certainly, other trends within the theatre, growing commercialism and competition being the foremost. The demands of the market lured playwrights to produce play after play filled with popular song and dance and religiosity. In the early years of the twentieth century one cannot discern a self-conscious programme towards a 'national' theatre, or a sustained critique of the colonial power. However, as Bengali society was cast into the throes of Partition in 1905, followed by wide-spread famine, involvement in the world wars, the Independence movement and Partition in 1947, more and more serious attention came to be given to the nation as a cultural project. Feelings of anguish and humiliation fuelled wide-spread protest and defined the politics of cultural ideology. Every sphere of life was deeply coloured with these concerns and theatre was foremost as a rallying point for the nationalists.

Within this political space yet another note came to be heard louder and increasingly shrill: the Hindu-Muslim divide. Chatterjee indicates the growing trend:

It is interesting to note that Bhadrakol politics at this time marked the beginning of nationalism in Bengal and since the Bhadrakol were conscious of their Hindu identity even more, it was obviously going to result in some sort of "Hindu" nationalism. Much of the idiom of Hindu communal discourse was thus recognizable in nationalistic thought and literature, drama being an essential part of the latter (114).

Historical themes pervaded the stage, with history taking on the mantle of a thought process to promote nationalism. Titles of plays are revealing: *Rana Pratapsingha*, *Chatrapati Shivaji*, *Mewar Patan*, *Shahjahan*. Playwrights like Girish Ghosh make attempts to voice secular sentiments. Siraj, a character in *Rachanabali* has the following lines to speak: "Should there be a blessed day when Hindus and Muslims give up their selfish interests and look to shoulder the common exploited man's cause and feel their insult as their personal humiliation, only then can the foreigners be tamed, or else unfortunate Mother Bengal is bound to be in chains" (Ghosh 364).

As the struggle against colonialism intensified theatre turned to history for parallels and symbols. Historical confrontations were re-enacted and re-interpreted and one unfortunate outcome was the intensification of the Hindu-Muslim communal divide. Chatterjee points out:

Patriotism in Bengal was intimately connected with recreations of the past and in many plays there was a confrontation between a Muslim King and a Hindu Rajput chieftain where the basic framework was the struggle between the "Invader" and the "Invaded", and not necessarily a valorization of a Hindu Hero. These became a regular feature of Bengali literature, dramatic or otherwise because the writers found these forms most congenial for the expressions of contemporary aspirations. [...] Even when no reflection on the Muslims in general was made or intended, the Hero-Villain framework was used as a literary device to covertly express antagonism against the British, and the danger inherent in that framework took its own sinister course (143-4).

Theatre here created an insidious trap of its own as it sought to voice its protest against the State.

In rural Bengal too, nationalistic fervour was expressed and excited through the songs and plays performed by roving *Jatra* troupes. This folk form held enormous subversive power as it portrayed the Englishman as total evil and the Indian revolutionary as the absolute good. These roaming theatre groups fostered an intense process of reflection and action among the rural oppressed.

**The IPTA:** As the horrors of World War II coupled with famine and violence clouded the lives of the Bengali people and plunged society into political and economic crisis of cataclysmic dimensions the Marxist ideology gained immense support and permeated cultural politics; at this point, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) came into its own in 1943. The thrust of this Marxist cultural movement was to contest and subvert the prevailing stronghold of capitalism and feudalism, and create an ideological alternative. The organizers identified its basic aim in the "All India People's Theatre Conference Draft Resolution": it sought to mobilize " a people's theatre movement throughout the whole of India as the means of revitalizing the stage and the

traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organizer of our people's struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice" (*IPTA Bulletin*).

The IPTA saw the light of day in the thick of troubled times: the Bengal famine, political disaffection in India, war in Europe, intensified attempts by the imperialist forces to retain control, and the rising wave of Indian nationalism. At this moment in time, the emergence of the IPTA is a landmark in the cultural history of the Bengali people. Theatre now opened new possibilities: folk forms and traditions that had been marginalized by the dominant western colonial aesthetic were now re-valourised: performance was removed from the stranglehold of an urban managerial class and re-located within specific regional cultures; the economics of staging within the confines of colonial architecture was broken when free concerts were made accessible to one and all; dance and music in the classical tradition; as also folk theatre forms spilled out into the open spaces and powerfully subverted the monopoly of the professional; the themes veered away from the interests of the middle-class to those of the working class; above all, the IPTA provided a political and ideological leadership under the communist banner; the immense influence of the IPTA as a cultural movement was based on the fact that it was deeply rooted in the cultural awakening of the masses, linking an attempt to revive its lost cultural heritage with the real lives and aspirations of the people.

The IPTA responded to the exigencies of the contemporary situation: they preferred outdoor stages for audiences of many thousands in Bombay; they performed on a revolving stage for a Calcutta audience; they experimented with the use of peasants' dialect, *Jatra* songs and props. It can be claimed, as Nandi Bhatia does, that the IPTA is responsible for inaugurating a theatre of collective resistance and liberation (78). Its strength lay in its heterogeneous nature, allowing it to adapt easily to geographical, cultural, and linguistic differences in the country. It is to their credit that they not only produced vibrant political theatre and staged contemporary social problems, but that they theorized important issues such as language, space, geography and culture.



Plays like *Jabanbandi* and *Nabanna* were path breaking efforts. *Jabanbandi* focused on the peasant question and the tensions within the rural world. Here is a conscious attempt to replace a middle-class hero with a peasant hero – a significant departure from accepted theatrical practice. Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* depicts the horrors of famine, and highlights the man-made problems of black-marketing and hoarding, and offers an implied critique of colonialism. *Nabanna* was staged before packed houses, and very often on makeshift stages. About the significant place of *Nabanna* in Indian theatre, Kironmoy Raha writes, "The play and the production had the germinal ingredients of a new theatre movement. The moment was ripe" (155). It was to be a short-lived movement.

The IPTA's rare vitality and influence in the 1940s was undermined by internal dissent in the organization and within the Communist party. Though its role as an effective cultural presence has occasionally been contested, the IPTA marks a chapter in Indian theatre that cannot be lightly dismissed. In *Visions of Cultural Transformation: The IPTA in Bengal, 1940-44*, Aishwaraj Kumar notes its role vis-à-vis the power structures:

Through its cultural intervention the IPTA negotiated very effectively with the existing situation as an agency of change and reconstruction. What is fascinating is the emergence of a vision from within a context of turbulence, which linked the local not only to the national but also to the international. These activities brought in a set of idealistic people who were sensitive to the lives and the problems of the common people, which implied a narrowing-down of the social and cultural gap that existed between the educated middle class and the common people in Bengal (181).

With the IPTA drama assumed an unmistakable political position in India. It set out to take a close look at the catastrophic socio-political events and voice the anger and protest of the vast millions in Bengal.

**Under the Left Front Government:** After Independence, the thrust of resistance underwent change, and internal differences within the IPTA surfaced into a split. Utpal Dutt, the best-known left-wing playwright rebelled against the compulsion for his plays to echo every

modification in party philosophy. He was expelled from the party and eventually formed the Little Theatre Group (LTG) in 1947; another breakaway group, Bohurupee, was founded by Shombhu Mitra in 1948: the latter shook off all political traditions; the former staunchly claimed the political legacy of the left. Dutt's theatre was progressively anti-establishment. In December 1962, the Government introduced a Bill in the Assembly subjecting theatre to police control (Pal 117). Dutt staged frontal attacks on what he saw as a betrayal of the mass revolution by the bourgeoisie. However, with the rise of the Left Front Government to power<sup>1</sup>, Dutt had to lay down his aggressive anti-establishment weapons. In a Colloquium held in 1998, actor-director Bibash Chakraborty (1937 - ) verbalized the predicament of many left-wing theatre writers in Bengal in the decades after Independence:

The problems that have come up in the creative field are genuine. You see, when a battle is being fought, there are dreams, there are visions and hopes of freedom, of positive change at the end of it all. We all stand and fight shoulder to shoulder. Theatre is involved in that as well, as a creative medium which helps the cause. But when the power is won, what exactly is our role? (50)

Manoj Mitra (1938 - ) playwright, director and actor, concurs:

As a group we have become incapable and impotent after this government has come to power. They have not threatened us in any way, they have not forbidden us to do anything, but nevertheless we have moved away from what we should be doing. We do plays about various other issues, but we think twice about taking up issues and events that have taken place in West Bengal, in our own city, in our own locality (57).

This bizarre predicament of these 'anti-establishment' theatre persons is reminiscent of the plight of other theatre groups in other locations, to take a single instance, the famous Theatre of the 8th Day in Poland: this underground revolutionary theatre which thrived on the effort to contest Communist authoritarianism in the 1980s, found itself in no-man's-land with the arrival of the capitalist regime in the 1990s (Dion 185). In West Bengal, though the urban commercial theatre directors have moved away from the confrontational mood of earlier decades,

the mantle of theatre for political and social questioning has merely found itself a place on other shoulders.

Theatre for change does happen away from newspaper advertisements, posters and hoardings and 'theatre halls'. But such theatre in the margins has been labelled 'Invisible Theatre', since it rarely invites the attention of the print or electronic media or ever receives awards, titles or grants. Prabir Guha, an acclaimed activist theatre director himself, writes of such theatre, "But our ignorance is certainly no indication of their non-existence, or of their theatre being insignificant. Quite on the contrary, these groups are actually involved in very serious, committed theatre, that demands extremely strenuous activities. Their urge for social change acts as their incentive" (60). One such theatre group is Jana Sanskriti, working just outside Calcutta, with agricultural labourers in the rural areas. They are followers of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and they are convinced that theatre can help people understand themselves better, and through dialogue, bring about change in people's lives. Sanjoy Ganguly challenges the role played by the IPTA as political theatre:

Many people don't subscribe to my opinion that the IPTA movement, though it was very successful, undermined many segments of our society, like the folk artistes. The talented people in the villages, the power of judgement of the people, the conspicuous mind that is within all of us, this has been totally undermined. And this has happened because ... again I come back to democracy. [...] they need a kind of political space where they can express their political will, where they can discover their own political significance... And whenever this opportunity is given to them, they take the space (59-60).

The work of Sanjoy Ganguly and his group, like that of playwright Mahasweta Devi, reaffirms the engagement of Bengali theatre with political questions right into the twenty-first century.

### 3.6.2. Ancient Aesthetics and Modern Politics

India can boast of an ancient and highly developed science of aesthetics which has informed literature and literary criticism as well as the other arts extensively. The word *Kavya* refers to literature as an art, including drama, poetry and fiction. Indian aesthetics as articulated in the classical text of dramaturgy, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, by the sage Bharata Muni, propounds the theory of *rasa*, concerning the enjoyment of drama or literature by the audience or the reader, and extended from theatre to all literature and to the other arts. A.K. Warder interprets the concept of *rasa* :

A fairly precise equivalent for *rasa* is [...] 'aesthetic experience'. [...] (The) emotions, though aesthetically 'perceived', are not present at all on the stage. The actors are not experiencing them but acting them. The characters represented are present only in the imagination of the audience and it is the imagined emotions of these characters which are the object of aesthetic perception (13 – 15).

One seminal insight yielded by early Indian theatre aesthetics is that the effect of art on the audience consists, not really in the fostering of individual emotion, but in a generalized aesthetic experience, a state whereby the audience contemplates and attains the highest joy. Critic C.N. Patel is of the view that "In moments of artistic enjoyment the consciousness of the individual transcends its sense of separate identity, becomes *sadharana* or pure human consciousness in a state of being, watching the world of becoming without being involved in it. This apprehension is an act of the imagination through which both the artist and the spectators participate in the divine power of creation" (Patel 97). By this aesthetic empathy, what is presented by the artist's creative power acquires a quality of clarity far beyond what is directly perceived. In the moment of deep artistic response both involvement and detachment are aroused. In the Indian's view of the world, then, the artist is engaged in an activity recognised to be of a very high order.

In the Indian scenario in modern times, questions on the nature of literature gained great currency, since they came to be interpenetrated with new constructs of nationhood and cultural identity. Literature and politics formed alliances. In Bengal, from the mid-nineteenth century, a yearning for freedom and reformist fervour found expression in journalism, drama, poetry and the novel, in the work of writers like Debendranath Tagore, Aksay Kumar Datta Rajnarayan Basu, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Madhusudan Dutt and Dinabandhu Mitra. Exposure to Western literature through English education and travel opened a window to world literature. A renewed pride in the regional language led to prolific writing and experimentation. By mid-twentieth century the playwright, as an artist, had assumed a growing political stance, in the face of censorship and intimidation. Plays like *Nildurpan* (1860) by Dinabandhu Mitra reflect the clear self-awareness of the playwright's calling to contest and challenge. As the nationalist struggle intensified, the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (1943) formalized the politicization of theatre throughout the country. The IPTA playwrights, linked to the Communist Party, rejected the nineteenth century Westernised proscenium commercial theatre with melodramatic stories, and sought to devise a contemporary theatre rooted in socio-political reality. The playwright was now a political writer.

### **3.6.3. Four Plays from India (West Bengal)**

In the chequered history of the Bengali people the connections of playwriting with the State and the equations of power are only too apparent. The four plays selected for study grapple with questions of power and powerlessness in diverse ways.

#### ***Evam Indrajit* (1962)**

***Evam Indrajit*** by Badal Sircar can be seen as a watershed for post-independence theatre in India. It was written in Bengali by a civil engineer now turning to the theatre for

deeper self-expression and communication. Critic Satyadev Dubey refers to the year 1962 as an important year. Not only was it a year of political turmoil (the Sino-Indian border war), but equally a year of significance for theatre history in India, when Badal Sircar was writing *Evam Indrajit*, when "the seeds of creative pride had been sown and a determined effort at looking at one's surroundings was to become an imperative which went beyond the platitudinous slogan of seeking one's roots" (89). Whereas Indian writers after Independence had agonized over the need to define and declare their own Indian identity, they had been paradoxically grappling with a reluctant compulsion to gain sanction from the West. Badal Sircar's play veered from obsessions with the cultural past or with fixations on Western models. Though reflecting world trends in form such as elements of Brechtian alienation and traces of European Absurdist techniques, Sircar creates contemporary Indian theatre of transcending value. Playwright and director Satyadev Dubey comments on the significance of the arrival of *Evam Indrajit* on the scene:

With the performance of Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* in Bengali in Calcutta in September 1965, theatre practitioners all over India became aware of a major talent and a major play. The play provided for them the shock of recognition. It was about the Indian reality as they knew it; it was theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations gnawing at the hearts of the educated urban middle class (90).

**The Playwright:** Parallel to his professional work as civil engineer, Badal Sircar nurtured his skill for rendering the speech of the common person on the street. In his posting away from the city of Calcutta he tried his hand at a few comedies. His encounter with world theatre seems to have firmed his interest and creativity: he came face to face with English and European theatre when he studied town planning in England and then in France. His first serious play was *Evam Indrajit*, published in Bohurupee's journal in 1965, when he was away in Nigeria at work on a town-planning project. It is now regarded as a major turning point in Bengali theatre, and

continues to be, to date, the Bengali play most widely translated into other Indian languages (Raha 177).

Sircar's interest in the theatre went beyond playwriting. Not only was he an actor and a director, he went on to found the theatre group Satabdi, produce his comedies and generally explore the possibilities of proscenium theatre. When this kind of theatre left him disenchanted, he turned to writing for the group Angan Mancha, "roughly analogous to what are known as arena theatre, theatre-in-the-round and environmental theatre" (Raha 181). His deepening conviction that theatre must break away from limiting conventions and find ways of serving its social purpose, brought him to develop what he called the Third Theatre. Sircar not only produced a number of plays that tested his philosophy of theatre, but also theorised and probed concepts and ideas. In the Third Theatre he sought to embody the philosophy of live communication: he ventured into attempts to break down barriers between actors and audience, between the urban and the rural. Sircar had lived among the poor and the exploited and was passionately committed to working with these sections of the society to write and produce plays which would voice their concerns and perceptions and also enlarge their awareness of their own social realities.

**The Artist in Search of Freedom:** Badal Sircar never stopped long enough to stagnate. Ever on an exploratory course, he rejected the *Jatra* genre and traditional urban theatre taken to rural audience. His deep-seated need to work unfettered led him to advocate a Free Theatre, where he would have elbow-room to critique the newly emerging culture of success and consumerism still embryonic in India when *Evam Indrajit* was written. Theatre critic and editor Samik Bandyopadhyay points to this Bengali playwright's continuous movement in the theatre:

If for Karnad, Dubey and Karanth [...] *Ebong Indrajit* served to open up an area of freedom that allowed them to experiment with open-ended, skeptical forms, Sircar assumed the questioning/doubting Indrajit role himself, and pursued it to the point where he could identify the forces impinging on his freedom of theatric expression, and

then broke away from the theatre that he had known till then to construct a different paradigm of theatre altogether. Uncomfortable with the first appellation he had chosen – the Third Theatre – he soon came to call it Free Theatre, free both economically ( neither charging for entrance nor depending on nor asking for funding/sponsorship support ) and politically. The major issues that Sircar has since explored/projected in his Free Theatre plays have been those of violence, ranging from antisocial to state to nuclear; exploitation, particularly as practiced in the perpetuation/enlargement of the rural-urban divide, and the deliberate 'denial' of the village in the persistent valorization of the metropolis and the cataloguing of its ills and problems; and the evil of religious obscurantism and intolerance. Sircar, alone amongst his contemporaries, has defined for himself a total project – in which the play, the theatre, and society in change come together in an area of conscience ( " Theatrescapes" 71).

**Dramatic Symbol:** *Evam Indrajit* is peopled with characters belonging to urban society, the middle class intelligentsia. Amal, Vimal and Kamal go through the motions of living through their monotonous predictable existence. Indrajit too, does the same: he is incapable of breaking out, though he is plagued by his own anguish of awareness, by his own urge to discover some meaning in his life. Another character in the play, the Writer, confesses to his desire to write a play. "But... I know nothing about the toiling peasants. Nothing about the sweating coal-miners. Nothing about the snake-charmers, the tribal chieftains or the boatmen. There is no beauty in the people around me, no splendour, no substance. Only the undramatic material – Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit" ( *Evam Indrajit* 6). However, from this 'undramatic material', Sircar creates significant images of routines and relationships. Manasi, the woman who is the inspiration of the Writer and the Mother, bewildered at the Writer's neglect of things as important as eating and sleeping, are two female characters with archetypal overtones. And central to the play are questions of power and its fall-outs, questions of unresolved relationships and the predicament of a whole generation. Sudesha Banerjee correctly views Sircar's play as a landmark:



The skepticism and the anguish, the fate of a post-world-war generation – living with hopes that have remained distant dreams, aspirations that have not materialized, emotional bonds that have been severed somewhere – built up to an overwhelming sense of waste for the enlightened middle-class youth of the 60s. *Indrajit* became a point of identification for all who live through this turbulent phase. The play became a constant source of reference and counter-reference for people who thought intensely and looked upon the problems of humdrum existence with care and concern (64).

Sircar's play and the character of *Indrajit* came to be seen as something of a dramatic image for an age.

*Evam Indrajit* is not overtly political; it does not mouth the Party line as laid down by the government in power; it fails to indicate one particular political ideology; it parts company with the trend of IPTA writing committed to conscientising the masses. Here, Badal Sircar creates a dramatic symbol for the malaise of the urban middle class in Bengal, the educated middle class that constituted the main body of the theatre audiences in Calcutta. This Western educated urban middle class was the pool from which political leadership had largely emerged in post-Independence Bengal – an intelligentsia struggling with questions of identity, ideology and meaning. Satyadev Dubey, in his introduction to *Evam Indrajit* perceptively sketches the prevailing climate:

The intellectually alive middle class regards itself as the backbone of the country. Their so-called middle class values have been glorified and yet their genuine and deeper values have always been attacked by those who swear by fashionable Marxist dogmas. The middle classes have been made to feel guilty for opting for stability, aspiring for culture and believing in a national identity. In Bengal, the contradiction was resolved at a certain level with the middle classes aligning themselves with the left forces. In other parts of the country, the best elements in the middle classes were opting for the armed forces or the administrative services. *Evam Indrajit* is in some ways about the residue; the residue

consists of those who have failed to adjust, align and ceased to aspire, and also those who are enmeshed in the day to day struggle for survival (90).

Badal Sircar's reference to political engagement in this play is at best incidental, as Vimal, Kamal, Amal and Indrajit chat about literature and politics:

VIMAL. Bishi loads his plays with politics.

KAMAL. And why not? There'll always be politics in literature. There should be!

AMAL. Come, come. Literature should embody all that's true, good and beautiful.

It has nothing to do with politics. Politics is dirty.

VIMAL. Look, Brother, I object to 'dirty'. If Truth is dirty, ignoring it would be sheer escapism. Literature should be a reflection of life. Realistic. Don't you agree, Indrajit?

INDRAJIT. I'm not very clear, actually. True, literature should be realistic. But to say that it should be a naked reflection of life... ( 9)

The play does not fit into the form of committed political theatre. As a critic points out, "A political commitment on the part of Indrajit would not have shaped his destiny differently; it would have only dissipated his complexity because Indrajit is the eternal question mark, and he still seeks an answer" (Dubey 93). Like Indrajit, the playwright seeks answers that go beyond politics. Like the Writer, the only answer he finds is that he has no answers, but he must be on the road: "For us there is only the road – so walk on. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top – even if it just rolls down" (59). The indictment that the play makes is against more than political life. It is against all that living entails.

The direction taken by Badal Sircar's political thought later moves him away from the formality of the proscenium theatre in urban circles, into the theatre-in-the-round and the midst of the masses. His group Satabdi and their Third Theatre or Free Theatre, as it is called, rebels against the commercialization of theatre, and offers theatre without a fee to a variety of audiences in a variety of locations. Sircar's theatre career is by itself a political statement and the expression of an evolving political ideology.

### ***Hunting the Sun (1971)***

***Hunting the Sun*** (*Surya Shikar*) by Utpal Dutt is a play written by a political activist par excellence. Here, as elsewhere in the world, we meet a playwright whose engagement with literature-as-politics is total, no holds barred. Utpal Dutt was a card-holding member of the Communist Party of India and, for a while, a leading activist in the IPTA. His was a vision of a theatre that was broad-based, not an exclusive prerogative of the urban middle class. Dutt declared: "To alienate the theatre from the masses is to alienate oneself still further from the social activity of men, and end in an intellectual madhouse" (19). In pursuit of such a mass appeal, and with the intent of validating the robust folk tradition of theatre in Bengal, Utpal Dutt had recourse to the *Jatra* as a preferred theatre form. The ideology of the Left is dramatically presented, couched in a historico-fictional setting.

*Hunting the Sun* was written originally for a professional *Jatra* company, and was directed by Dutt incorporating a number of major *Jatra* actors. In the playwright's long and devoted affair with theatre, this play represents one phase, some would say the most significant phase, in which Dutt turns to the vastly popular, mass-based folk form of Bengal, the *Jatra*: here he hopes to find some of the intimacy with the audience that he hankered after, the mutual interaction that he hoped would lead to the development of a theatrical experiment that would "capture the world-reality for the Indian people more eloquently than hitherto" (Dutt, "Innovation" 91).

**The Playwright and His Work:** Utpal Dutt found theatre when he joined Geoffrey Kendall's touring troupe from England which was producing Shakespeare's plays in India and Pakistan in the late 1940s and early 1950s. From the Kendalls he learnt a professional approach to theatre that served him all his life. In 1947 Dutt founded the Little Theatre Group (LTG) in Calcutta and went on to write plays, translate from the German, act and direct with boundless energy. The group secured an eleven year lease of Minerva Theatre and dedicated itself to founding a politically conscious, professional theatre. His interest in history led him to seek

themes in revolutions like the French and the Russian and in events around persons like Hitler, as also conflicts in Cuba, Vietnam, America and Africa. His deeply political inclinations encouraged him to align himself with the Communist Party and he became a member of the Indian People's Theatre Association which was the cultural wing of the Party.

The political play was not new to Bengal: from the early years of the twentieth century, historical plays and mythological legends had carried political overtones in the cause of Indian nationalism. Now, theatre in Bengal was adopting strong leftist leanings and commitment. Kironmoy Raha aptly remarks about this more recent trend: "What Utpal Dutt and some others did was to give the political play a more substantial theatrical body and a left ideological colouration reflecting the radicalisation of political thinking in Bengal in the post-Independence period" (162). However, Dutt was disillusioned with the LTG for its preference for English plays and with the IPTA for lack of professionalism in theatre and rigidity in political attitudes. He was 'eased out' of the IPTA.

When he turned to the *Jatra*, Utpal Dutt wrote his own scripts and upstaged the usual religious and mythological figures with his new themes of the contemporary problems and revolts of the masses or refashioned old stories to suit his themes. The *Jatra* offered him the space and the interaction to create what he described as Affiliation Under Stress. He explains:

A group of individuals sharing the same danger and stress tend to draw closer to one another. From this arises the battle-line comradeship in war, and the life-long friendships that began in the bomb-shelters of London during the blitz. In the theatre, the danger is simulated, but if the theme of the play is such that it touches the audience's life and if the characters are so drawn from the life that the audience recognizes them or identifies with them, the effect on the audience is almost as if real danger has threatened them during the performance. The result is Affiliation: unification of the audience. And human beings, from the time they passed from barbarism to civilization, have used theater to foster unity among citizens. In this way, theatre contributed to the formation of political life itself ("Innovation" 85).

In this quest, Dutt constantly revisited varied forms, from the Western forms he had appreciated in his youth, to the most alluring of all, the *Jatra*.

In 1992 Utpal Dutt staged his *Janathat Aphein* (Opium of the People), a play-debate in Shavian style about Hindu and Muslim claims to the same temple site, a highly controversial issue in India during the 1990s (Brown 525).

**Political Theatre:** *Hunting the Sun* spreads a wide canvas to include Emperors and Buddhist monks, prostitutes and generals, love and revolt; various themes emerge, from slavery to the relationship between the State and science, and the integrity of the individual. In the midst of historical spectacle, in the reign of Samudragupta a Galileo-like situation arises, whereby the Monk Kalhan faces intimidation and torture to defend science against superstition. The play's larger-than-life setting and style respond to the demands of a massive *Jatra* audience whose interest must not be allowed to flag. However, these same demands offer the director/playwright the freedom to create energetic and colourful mass theatre.

This kind of freedom was what Dutt was always looking for, an artistic freedom that was part of his deeper search for freedom. As Samik Bandyopadhyay sums it up: "... there runs through his life and works one single passion – the desire to be really free – and the awareness that an individual's freedom has to be part of a larger freedom, the freedom of his own people" ("Theatre Poems" 35). For Utpal Dutt, the trail of freedom was to be found in refining a political theatre for himself and his audience.

Political colour has always been a feature of the *Jatra*, as the characters comment on local leadership and in the decades after Independence, on Hindu-Muslim relations and the plight of the downtrodden masses. In *Hunting the Sun*, Utpal Dutt chooses as his theme the age old use of religion and superstition to suppress scientific truth and oppress the populace. His central character Kalhan, a Buddhist monk, is persecuted and has his tongue gouged out as punishment for proclaiming that the earth is round, and for dismissing the sacred scriptures as poetry and not scientific truth. The story is a take-off on Galileo's life, and denounces belief in God and rituals, and social evils like slavery and deification of the ruler.

In the end, Kalhan must die, of course; for the Buddhist monk “has swept the sky clean of fiction and chased the gods back to the primitive twilight when they had sprung” (612). Just as Emperor Samudragupta questions the right of anyone but himself to hunt the sun, the playwright questions the right of the political or religious establishment to suppress the truth and hunt the sun.

In the tradition of the IPTA, *Hunting the Sun* is indisputably political theatre. It appropriates historical narrative to interpret contemporary reality, a technique often utilized in earlier decades by Girish Chandra Ghosh. But whereas earlier historical drama had mounted attacks in disguise against the oppressive colonizer, now Utpal Dutt trains his ammunition against repressive forces in Independent India. He targets despotic political authority, the use of religious authority to suppress independent thinking, and the role of superstition in impeding the progress of knowledge. The slave rebellion in the play dramatizes the need for the subaltern populace to find its own voice. Dutt turns the stage into a space for debate. In bold strokes he problematizes postcolonial rule, where power structures continue to silence and disempower the subaltern. Utpal Dutt’s theatre suffered attacks and oppression and the playwright was to spend two terms in jail: Like the Emperor Samudragupta, the State reserved the right to hunt the sun.

### ***Mareech, the Legend (1973)***

***Mareech, the Legend (Mareech Sambad)*** was written and directed by Arun Mukherjee and was produced by the theatre group Chetna. Mukherjee, like many other playwrights, actors and directors in West Bengal, had grown under the umbrella of the Indian People’s Theatre. In the latter 1960s politics in the state was marked with uncertainty and upheaval. The Congress Party which had been in power in West Bengal since Independence was crippled by internal squabbles. Its main rival, the Communist Party of India was equally torn by dissent, and a splinter section, calling itself the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] came into its own and captured power. Yet another split resulted in a breakaway group that was violently

repressed. The so-called Naxalite movement was connected with a rash of violent armed clashes all over West Bengal <sup>2</sup>. The movement was ideologically in tune with the Maoist line and the Chinese revolution. The internal instability in the State was compounded by the war with Pakistan in 1971, the waves of refugees entering the country from East Pakistan, and the creation of Bangladesh later that year. The Congress Party regained power. The social stress was now deepened by the declaration of a state of Emergency in the country in 1975.

**Theatre of Protest:** It was a time of turmoil and the theatre of the day reflected it in creative and energetic ways. Critic K. Raha throws light on the connection of theatre with politics:

Its initial and sustained motivation of protest gained a new thrust, somewhat diffused though it was by ideological heterogeneity and lack of firm direction. But dominance of the theme of protest in a majority of plays staged became pronounced. So was the message of the need for change which, of course, is implicit in plays of protest. Most theatre groups were on the side of CPI (M), not always directly or even sympathetically, when it fought the elections in 1977, won and formed the Government (192).

Arun Mukherjee confesses to the political overtones of his writing. In an interview with Paramita Banerjee and Sumita Banerjee he comments:

All my plays – whether adaptations or original – have not been directly political. But the more experience I have accumulated, the more I have realized that a rich political insight is an essential condition for a good play. How the political dimension will come through, is, of course, another matter. Brecht brings it in, in a certain manner, Chekhov in a different manner ( *Falling in Love with Theatre* 102).

**Political Stance:** *Mareech, the Legend* borrows elements from the *Jatra* but transforms them through a clever and innovative structure. A traditional Ustad (or Director) ushers in characters from the legend of Mareech from the Ramayana, interspersed with incidents from contemporary rural life and the American intervention in Vietnam. With a Brechtian kind of alienation techniques, he steers away from realism to telescope together various zones of time and space and dramatize changing forms of exploitation. Mukherjee refers to *Mareech, the*

*Legend* as a 'poster play'. At a directors' colloquium on Bangla Group Theatre, Mukherjee takes up cudgels for this form:

I consider *Mareech Sambad* a very good poster play. [...] It has a definite objective. A specific problem is taken up and discussed, even repetitively at times. [...] A poster play is a separate form, with a process of its own; it has an obvious political ideology. Unfortunately for us, poster plays are performed only during elections. Poster plays or street plays can be a continuous process, performed throughout the year. It needs a different kind of skill and a different style of acting. It needs to be written differently. Those who take it up as a passion stick to it. [...] The question of ideology cannot be wished away or ignored (*Colloquium* 71–72).

*Mareech, the Legend* depicts yet another of the many faces of Bengali political theatre, a hybrid form that responds to the needs of the hour.

*Mareech, the Legend* uses an interesting theatrical form to engage his audience, make a political statement about the society of his day and link it to a larger, international and universal context. Arun Mukherjee was a member of the IPTA, a convinced adept of Marxism. "I was drawn to Marxism in my search for a solution of the crises that affected human relationships in our times. I was convinced that it was only Marxism that could provide the solution. Later in life, I have read more political books" (Mukherjee 102). The Ustad presents three stories for the delight of his spectators, an ancient legend, a tale with contemporary local colour, and a scoop of foreign scandal. Various actors are supposed to intersperse the legend of the demon Mareech with the tale of an oppressed peasant, and the account of an American press correspondent. As the three tales unfold, the actors get them mixed up, with characters and dialogue and theme flowing from one story into another, to the consternation of the Ustad. Any confusion on the part of the audience is soon cleared as it is apparent that a common current underlies all the stories, and the diverse plots and locations all converge on a single theme. The play centres around combat against coercion by political powers, and the courage and commitment that an individual may be called upon to exercise in defence of his integrity. As two of the 'heroes' – Gregory, the



American correspondent and Mareech, the mythological demon – are crushed by their oppressors and die, they sing:

We are the losers, this is our song.

We were not able to stand our ground.

We didn't know whom to call our own.

That's why we lost, remained all alone.

We are the losers, this is our song. (*Mareech, the Legend* 569)

But one of the heroes refuses to die; Ishwar, the peasant declares, "If this is the face of the law – then let me shape the law with my own hands." To arbitrate and find a proper ending for the play, Valmiki, the classical writer of the Mareech legend is called back into life and onto the stage. His pronouncement is an unmistakable Marxist cry for the unity of the masses:

VALMIKI. Very complicated! When a person is not afraid to die, you can't have him die at your whim and fancy! Do you know the reason? Just as being alive is as good as being dead in certain cases, one's death in certain cases is more significant than being alive. Don't you see that he is no longer simply a hired goon or an isolated peasant? He is now a group, a great human collective. Unless this entire group is wiped out, his death will fulfill no purpose. Even if you kill him, he won't be dead. Yes, by virtue of the fact that you are not afraid to die, I am granting you your life! Never bow your head in fear before Ravan. Hold your head high (576).

*Mareech, the Legend* reaffirms the significance of the theatre as a vehicle of political thought. Arun Mukherjee unequivocally stresses the moral right and duty of the self-respecting citizen and collectives to question and resist any form of oppression by the State.

### ***Water* (1977)**

***Water*** by Mahasweta Devi is a dramatization by the author of one of her short stories, *Jal*. Devi found her *métier* primarily as a novelist and short story writer. Her novels, published from the 1960s, established her as a chronicler of the histories of the tribals of eastern India. Drawing upon her painstaking research into archival records, oral histories, legends and folk ballads, Devi wove history, folklore and fiction to defend the exploited. She began to dramatize a few of her novels and stories in 1973 with the hope of reaching and challenging a wider audience. Her hope was sadly belied. Her volume of *Five Plays* including *Mother of 1084*, *Ajir* (Slave), *Urvashi and Johnny*, *Bayen* (Witch) and *Water*, was published in 1986, but the plays were only rarely staged.

**The Playwright:** Mahasweta Devi was born in Dhaka, east Bengal, and grew up during the turbulent decades of the Independence movement. She studied at Shantiniketan, the experimental school founded by the poet/dramatist Rabindranath Tagore. As a result she volunteered to help with relief work during the severe famine that devastated Bengal in 1943: this was her initiation into the political and cultural movements among the Bengalis. In 1947 she married Bijon Bhattacharya, dramatist and author of the famous play *Nabanna* dealing with the Bengal famine. She worked at the Postal Department and tried her hand at various other jobs. In 1962, she divorced Bhattacharya and married the writer Asit Gupta. On receiving her Master's degree in English literature, she took up a teaching position at a College situated in a working class district (Satyanarayana 15). In 1984 she resigned, to become a full-time writer, socio-political commentator and a deeply political social activist. Her best-selling novel *Aranyer Adhikar* won her the Sahitya Akademi award (1979) and her prolific and challenging literary career has been accorded recognition with the Jnanpith Award (1995). The Government of India honoured her with the title of Padma Vibushan (2006) for her social commitment to the tribal areas in West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

**Cultural Representations:** *Water* is the longest of Mahasweta Devi's plays, running into some fifty pages and fourteen scenes. Set amidst the Dome tribal community by the river Charsa, it dramatizes the exploitation of the poor peasants by the local landowner and petty government officials. Central to the play is the slow and painful transformation of Maghai Dome, the traditional water-diviner in the village, to a leader of men, courageous enough to act and protest. Deeply enmeshed into the structures and textures of the play is the inescapably historical network of relationships from which the people in the village derive their identity: the caste hierarchy, the familial bonds, the age-old myths and rituals linking the human and natural worlds. Maghai, the water-diviner, has an instinctive connection with the movements of nature: his failure to ensure a regular water supply to his people in summer when the river dries up and the wells are monopolized by the upper caste Santosh is the source of much agony. The idealistic teacher, Jiten, discovers the possibility of building a dam. Excitedly, the tribals pool their resources and set about the task. Samik Bandyopadhyay reflects on the subtext in the play:

There is poetic irony when Maghai, after a lifelong love affair with the river Charsa and deeply felt sense of betrayal in the river's seasonal bounty, seems to decode for the first time the offering of perennial water that the river has made to him all along, feels guilty for having misunderstood nature. When the authorities strike, they strike from a sense of threat from a community that has begun to learn to control/dominate nature and thus begins to threaten the dominance of the present system. But behind the naturalistic surface there runs the other plot of the old water-diviner's 'affair' with the whore of a river, a love and hate bond that is also there in *Urvashi and Johnny*, between the ventriloquist and his 'talking' doll. In the animate-inanimate affair, Mahasweta sees a desperation, a life and death involvement that demands from the man a commitment more than human, and a commitment that eventually proves to be fatal ( Introduction xii – xiii).

As this critic suggests, this 'life and death involvement' is the subtext of the play and other plays by Devi. At the end of *Water*, Maghai evolves into a leader, more fully aware and defiant of

earlier uncontested caste hierarchies. He pays for his involvement with his life. As the police officers summoned by the landlord begin to demolish the dam and shoot at the protesting villagers, Maghai is wounded and the waters of the Charsa carry him away in a torrent.

**The Artist as Activist:** A 'life and death involvement' is possibly the way Mahasweta Devi sees her own relationship with her writing, her life's work with the tribals, and the role of the artist. Living her days through decades of intense social upheaval, Devi refuses to take refuge in a cocoon in middle class complacency. She is unequivocal about her position:

Bengali literature has been for far too long a field for a retraction from objectivity and an atrophy of conscience. The writers refuse to see the writing on the wall... The most surprising thing of all, in a country abounding with problems and injustices, races and rituals, these writers seem to find nothing in the experience of the land and its people. [...] After thirty-one years of Independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness, and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning, and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these terrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writing ( Introduction, *Five Plays* viii – ix).

Devi has been denigrated by some critics as a 'mere' activist, and her work as stereotyped. She is unfazed by the accusation, her commitment to her vision is deep. She reiterates, "I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt and shame" ( Introduction, *Five Plays* ix) Critic Maitreya Ghatak looks beyond the activism and discovers in Devi's creative writing which is rooted in her intimate knowledge of what happens at the ground level, a deeper literary value:

Mahasweta has been criticized by literary purists who feel that she is merely a chronicler of social reality. But even a superficial reading of her fiction will establish that this is unjustified. She transcends the boundaries of material concerns, and highlights the value of a universal consciousness of exploitation and the strength to protest against it. Dr. Nelson Mandela, handing her the Jnanpith – the highest literary award – in Delhi

recently, said that 'she holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium' (x).

Devi's creative work has received great appreciation and analysis from Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in numerous forewords, prefaces and translations of Devi's stories. Spivak assigns subaltern status to Devi and her writing and in the foreword to the volume *Breast Stories*, which she has translated, expresses her view that "Mahasweta is certainly one of the most important writers writing in India today" (5). Devi expresses her own vision of the artist:

It is my conviction that a storywriter should be motivated by a sense of history that would help her readers to understand their own times. I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art's sake. [...] Literature should be studied in its historical setting. One fails to evaluate a writer if the writer's setting in time and history is not taken into account ( Introduction, *Five Plays* xii).

Mahasweta Devi's plays can claim a significant place in a discussion of Bengali (and Indian) theatre and its response to the turbulence of the twentieth century.

*Water* is a scathing indictment of the government machinery which fails to protect the tribal communities and guarantee their basic human rights. By her own admission, Mahasweta Devi is, first and last, a chronicler of the injustices meted out to her people, and a defender of the oppressed. Her stance towards the State is one of radical antagonism, since she sees the poor marginalised from all quarters. She raises her voice in anguish and conviction:

Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game of politics. [...] All the Parties, to the Left as well as those to the Right have failed to keep their commitment to the common people. I do not hope to see in my lifetime any reason to change this conviction of mine. Hence I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame. For a writer faces his judgement in his lifetime and remains answerable. (Introduction, *Five Plays* viii – ix)

This preoccupation infuses all her writing, her essays, her novels and short stories, and undoubtedly her plays.

Like the playwright herself, the central character in the play *Water* faces the question of commitment. Maghai, the elderly water-diviner from the tribe of the untouchable Domes, lives in a community that is denied the use of the village wells. Summer after summer, the people watch the local upper caste landowner monopolise all the water for himself, his rich family and his fat cattle, while the Domes die of thirst. The play follows Maghai through the years of growing desperation until one day, he is led to grasp the gift of perennial water that the river has been making to him year after year, though he has never understood it. Maghai and his people labour to build a dam on the river, which will ensure their regular water supply and will break their dependence on Santosh, the rapacious landlord. This the upper caste man will not permit and soon the authorities strike to break the dam, and break the back of the Dome community, and crush the person of its leader, Maghai.

*Water* dramatizes the evolution of the character of Maghai from a water-diviner carrying the privilege and the burden of being the priest of the nether Ganga, to being an awakened and confident leader of his community. He takes on an adversary too powerful for him. The police, led by Santosh, shoot Maghai in the chest. His body is washed away by the bursting dam water. But the knowledge and the courage revealed by Maghai cannot be erased.

"It is impossible to think of a Bengali theatre without a political perspective", claims theatre critic Minoti Chatterjee in her analysis of colonialism, nationalism and the Bengali stage from 1905 to 1947. A perusal of plays by writers in W. Bengal even in the decades after Independence does indeed reveal a theatre that retained its political character, albeit in changing avatars - from plays that are unashamedly toeing the party line, to others that are more nuanced in their perception of the political situation, to others that shun a particular political ideology in favour of an insistent demand for social justice from the State, whatever its political colouring.

In the next section the engagement of theatre with politics in Sri Lanka is examined, as well as ways in which individual playwrights have articulated this relationship in their plays.

### 3.7.1. Permitted Space for Sinhala Debate

Before the nineteenth century the Sri Lankan theatre tradition was restricted to folk performances and a few instances of Buddhist dramatic ritual. Unlike its counterparts in China and India, the predominantly Buddhist Society did not possess a well-established classical tradition of theatre. Theravada Buddhism underscored individual salvation and underplayed community ritual or festivity. As noted by Neloufer de Mel in *Women and the Nation's Narrative*, "Theravada Buddhism had had a detrimental impact on the development of elite theatre. In its doctrinal form it emphasized individual meditation over collective participatory ritual, shunned adornment of the body, spectacle and the seeking of pleasure. It had therefore been antithetical to the arts of dance and theatre" ( 61). The resultant dearth of the dramatic arts continued through Sri Lankan history into the colonial period. E.R. Sarachchandra, one of the first great playwrights of the contemporary Sinhala theatre also remarks on the Buddhist doctrinal position and its impact on the community activity: "With its ideal of individual salvation, it tended more towards solitary contemplation and the attainment of insight (vidassana) than towards congregational practices or participation in community life" ( "Development" 7-8). Though some instances of Buddhist dramatic ritual did exist, the dance-drama and participatory ritual which flourished in the form of entertainment and religious devotion in royal courts and temples in India, were historically non-existent in Sri Lanka, with rare exceptions.

Since Buddhism was for many centuries the State religion, the general ambience in Sri Lanka was unfavourable to the development of theatre. Some writers observe internal conflicts within the larger framework of Sinhala culture. Ranjini Obeysekere comments:

Throughout the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, one is aware of the tension between the highly individualized form of the religion as it was expected to be practiced by monks or individuals seeking salvation, and the continuous ongoing pressure for it to be transferred into a practical religion of this-worldly support for the laity in their day-to-day activities (87).

For instance, one needs to take note of the influence of Hindu religious rituals on Sinhala courts: South Indian forms of music and dancing in procession percolated Sinhala festivity and the rituals at the Temple of the Tooth Relic at Kandy are a good example of this influence. Obeyesekere believes that after the tenth century music and dance had entered the court and even infiltrated monastic culture. She opines that "The fact that King Parakramabahu 11 (1236 -71 C.E.) is recorded as having issued an injunction to monks to refrain from 'poetry, drama and such despicable arts' (*kāvyanātakādi garhita vidyā*) even though he was himself a reputed poet, author, and a noted patron of the arts at court (*Folk Drama* 9), suggests that even monks had begun to engage in these arts" (87). However, there are no records of this performative activity. Since the Buddhist restrictions permitted the monks to engage only in more solitary arts like painting, sculpture and writing, the monks did not record secular theatrical activity. The theatre traditions that did survive were the folk forms like *Sokari*, *Kolam*, *Nadagama* and *Pasku*.

In the late nineteenth century a new urban form of Sinhala theatre emerged, developed and achieved great popularity. This was the *Nurti*, a theatre of the educated Sinhala middle class, which became, in the hands of the famous Sinhala playwright John de Silva (1857 – 1922) a massive instrument of nationalistic ideology. This new form was an amalgam of the native folk theatre, *Nadagama*, and the traits of the Parsi theatre; it was also influenced by Bengali and English drama (de Mel 63). C. Don Bastian established the Sinhala Nurti Society which marked the beginning of the modern Sinhala theatre. The new theatre adopted western stage technologies like the proscenium arch, naturalistic sets, properties, costumes, acting styles and music and adapted them to the *Nadagama* form. All these additions demanded capital, which was provided by the emerging native professional and entrepreneurial bourgeoisie.

It is revealing to note that the donors of funds for the productions of John de Silva's *Nurti* plays, as recorded in his diary, ranged from the local aristocracy to timber merchants; their addresses cover the entire southern and north-western provinces; and they belonged mainly to the Buddhist and Christian communities (de Mel 65 -66). This heterogeneity indicates the growing sense of cultural nationalism cutting across caste, religious and professional divides, and



building a common front against the colonial government. Equally revealing is the fact that certain communities were not represented among the supporters of the new theatre. Neloufer de Mel points out significant trends:

Noteworthy, however, is that while John de Silva did have sponsors from the Colombo Chetty (Charles Chitty of Borella), Muslim (Cassim Ismail and Abdul Cadar, advocate), and even Parsi (Mr. Nilgiriya of Fort) communities, there are no Tamil sponsors noted in his diary, largely because his language left out the Tamil spectator. Moreover, as time went by this theatre began to address specifically Sinhalese audiences, sowing the seeds of an ethno-nationalism that made the Tamil, Muslim, Malayali and Burgher minority communities the Others within the emerging nation (66).

One must remark that this gulf seems to have only widened, so that while Sinhala audiences and playwrights increased, we find hardly any records of Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka in recent years.

It is to be noted that the names of the drama societies (*Sinhala Arya Subodha Natya Sabha* (1902) and the *Vijaya Ranga Sabha* (1913)), the plots drawn from Buddhist Jataka stories and the revival of ancient Sinhala mythology and history, all speak of a powerful Sinhala hegemony at work through theatre.

There are few references in the critical literature to overt suppression of theatre by the colonial government in the country<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps theatre was viewed as being outside the political discourse, and its influence as an agent of nationalistic sentiment was underestimated. After Independence, the State continued to generally tolerate theatre and its often critical stance, possibly as it was considered too insignificant to really matter, or, as Ranjini Obeyesekere claims, as a 'permitted space' in the traditional Buddhist sense of a forum where subversive voices could be safely allowed some leeway. It is an inescapable inference, however, that the 'permitted space' did not extend to Tamil theatre. Here we discover a near total vacuum.

The Sinhala hegemony survived well into the post-colonial present in Sri Lanka. There exists, even half a century after political Independence, a total absence of Tamil published play-scripts, at least in English translation. The long-drawn ethnic conflict seems to have completely

stified Tamil theatre. An anthology entitled *Modern Sri Lankan Drama*, (1991) edited by D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke features twelve plays by Sinhala playwrights. In the 2005 edition of his seven-hundred-plus-page book *A History of Sri Lanka*, K.M. de Silva refers to the reanimation of Sinhala drama in the twentieth century and dismisses Tamil theatre with a passing remark: "In Tamil drama too, there was this same trend towards a more sophisticated theatrical taste, drawing its inspiration from western drama" (598). And in *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror*, Ranjini Obeyesekere deals solely with Sinhala theatre. She concludes her preface with the following remarks:

(A)lthough Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic society and there is a significant minority Tamil population in the island I make no reference in the book to Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka. I do so partly because it is extraneous to my central theme of Sinhala theatre and its 'permitted space' which I see as a feature strongly influenced by Sinhala Buddhist culture; but also because by the 1980s the civil war in the North and East and the tensions and disruptions it caused had made Tamil theatre almost non-existent other than in small pockets in the North and East. I have heard that in the Jaffna peninsula with theatres bombed out and non-functional, performances did take place often in the courtyards of homes. On the East Coast temples became the space for performances that were ostensibly and chiefly rituals to the Mother Goddess (Amman) but had deeply political undertones and implications. As with the early Sinhala ritual performances, these latter-day rituals of the East Coast Tamils, though grounded in a religious context were also an implicit commentary on the political traumas being experienced. [...] [ "Oracles", Lawrence]. Such performances rarely moved outside their well-defined spaces and though in one sense 'public', they were also very much confined to a specific locale and context unlike the Sinhala plays which performed around the country (15-16).

We have noted earlier that the folk *Nadagama* form of theatre used a free mixture of Tamil and Sinhala languages. That theatre in incipient form was present among the Tamil community

and held in esteem, is revealed in a brief comment on "Language, Poetry, Culture and Tamil Nationalism" by A. Jeyaratnam Wilson in his book *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*. "Other distinguished Tamils included (in the International Conferences in Tamil Research) K. Kanapathipillai, whose play *Sankili* ( 1956 ) won much admiration, and S. Vithiananthan, who devoted unflagging energy to the promotion of his key interest, Tamil village drama, or *koothu*" (34). He goes on to add that in the 1980s the writing and theatre of the period "speak of defiance and a determination to resist and die rather than be abject victims of the military superiority of the terror state. [...] The Tamil language and literature await the arrival of a democratic ethos in order that its flowers may bloom. The alternative is a literature of pain and despair" ( Wilson 38-9). The Tamil minority theatre has been unable to raise its voice against the State in the inhospitable political climate of crushing ethnic conflict.

Attempts by Sinhalese artists to bridge the gap between the two communities have met with resistance from hardliners. In 2003 internationally renowned theatre playwright and director Dharmasiri Bandaranayake reports having received death threats from Sinhala extremists for acting as a facilitator to bring peace to the island. Bandaranayake's *Trojan Kanthawo* – a Sinhala language version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* – was staged throughout the country, including the war-ravaged Northern and Eastern provinces and was widely acclaimed. At a festival of Sinhala and Tamil arts held in the New Town Hall, Colombo, armed gangs attacked the participants, and accused the playwright of being pro-Tamil. He believes that the publishers of a Sinhala newspaper played a prominent role in the hate campaign. Bandaranayake reflects:

To put it into a nutshell, it must be the stand I have taken against the anti-Tamil war, which is not to the liking of the chauvinist elements. After the successful premiere of my drama, *The Trojan Women*, in December 1999 in Colombo, I staged it in many cities in the south. Then I decided to stage it in the North and the East, as it is an anti-war drama. [...] To me, the enslaved, persecuted women of Troy so many centuries ago, are no different from the modern day women who have become victims of war-ridden Kosova, Kashmir or Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, the North and East suffered the most due to

the war. The sufferings of the Tamil women in those areas, at the hands of the security forces, are reflected in *The Trojan Women*. [...] Staging this play and taking its unique dramatic message to all corners of the land, I believe, is the most powerful service and contribution that I can make as an artist to the efforts to end war" (2-5).

Theatre, then, continues to this day to be a contested site and a site for contesting, in the troubled landscape of Sri Lankan society.

### 3.7.2. The Sri Lankan Playwright as Satirist

The location of the artist in the Sri Lankan culture seems to emerge not from the formal monastic writing tradition, but from the common tradition of the folk, syncretic in its combination of pre-Buddhist with later cultural elements. The role of the theatre artist was seen as satiric and curative. The folk ritual/theatre in Sri Lanka made room for satire and ridicule of persons in authority. Ranjini Obeyesekere traces this 'stance of skepticism' to the Theravada Buddhist tradition, in fact to the Buddha himself, regarding the very doctrine that is being preached. She notes:

In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha preaches the following sermon to the Kalama peoples: "Do not be misled by report or tradition or hearsay. Do not be misled on the authority of the Scriptures, nor by mere logic or inference... But when you know for yourselves: these things are unprofitable, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the intelligent, these things when performed and undertaken conduce to loss and sorrow – then indeed do ye reject them..." (23)

And the writer comments, "Many of the dialogues and suttas were permeated by this reflexive, ironic, skeptical voice of the speaking Buddha. It was refracted by generations of Buddhist monks in their sermons, and filtered down to the village level through these sermons, stories such as the *Jatakas* (Birth Stories) and popular Buddhist writings" (Obeyesekere 23). She states her view of the space the culture made for satire: "This critical tradition was given dramatic expression in the

ritual performances and folk dramas of the village where divine and secular authority was implicitly as well as explicitly satirised and parodied. The ritual arena thus became a 'permitted space', a public arena where political and social criticism was expressed and tolerated" (23 –24). This astute observation indicates that the artist then, makes free with this 'permitted space' to encourage discussion and criticism, and the performance takes on a cathartic function that is ultimately healing to the social fabric.

### **3.7.3. Three Plays from Sri Lanka**

The Sri Lankan theatre experienced an ebullient surge through the decades of the greatest political turmoil and terror. Sinhala theatre became greatly popular even as socio-political chaos was unleashed on the nation. Other sections of the population, mainly Tamil, were not able to access the stage except in isolated pockets in the North East. Sri Lankan theatre in this period of its history spoke almost exclusively with the voice of the Sinhala majority. It must be understood that this majority did not constitute a monolithic entity and was fractured by varied political shades and attitudes; it was however the same cultural majority that dominated both the political scene and the world of theatre. It is intriguing to investigate the relationship of this theatre with the State in a situation of deep and violent ethnic strife.

#### ***A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy (1973)***

***A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy*** by Ernest MacIntyre shows the influence of Absurdist drama, innovative and arresting to this playwright's generation. This one-act-play enters the contemporary world of violence, linking it to the prototypical aggression between Cain and Abel of the Old Testament, but also proscribing it for its modern day casual trivialization. It is hardly surprising that theatre depicts, though as miniature portraits, the violence and

criminalization of mundane life and the State in a country like contemporary Sri Lanka, endemically mined with ethnic strife.

**The Playwright:** Ernest MacIntyre was not only a playwright, but an actor with inside knowledge of theatre, its craft and energy. He performed in productions by the University Dramatic Society under the direction of the distinguished Professor E.F.C. Ludowyk. MacIntyre, writing in English, was deeply influenced by the avant-garde experiments in drama in the West, especially the Absurdist Theatre. He was one of a handful of playwrights writing in English in preference to Sinhala in the 1960s and early 1970s. His preferred form was satiric comedy. However, in his last years in Sri Lanka, MacIntyre and his theatre group were collaborating with Sinhalese folk theatre. In 1974 the playwright emigrated to Australia, where he continued writing and staging plays, now about the lives of immigrants to that country. A more recent of his plays that continues to deal with the ethnic riots is *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* (1990).

**Staging Fratricide:** *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* is possibly one of the rare Sri Lankan plays available in English that ventures to deal with the theme of ethnic strife through the metaphor of fratricide. The tone of the play, however, is grotesquely inappropriate to the theme. The four characters named Father, Son (Ranjit), Mother and Grandmother, talk about Upali, the brother Ranjit has murdered: by shoving his head into the oven. The parents discuss the event:

MOTHER. No, I didn't want to disturb you, that's why I waited till you came.

FATHER. How did he do it?

MOTHER. Pushed his head into the oven and held it there till Upali was dead. I wanted to show you the kind of thing Ranjit is up to, so I left Upali with his head in the oven just as he was when he died – here, have your cup of tea and I'll show you – condensed milk or fresh? (209–10)

It is the half-deaf Grandmother who keeps singing off-key "Oh come and mourn with me a-while." The boy tries to wheedle out of his parents a promise to have another child. Simultaneously the grandmother reads an article in the paper where, "they say that the miracle

of Indo-China is not their will to survive, but their ceaseless power to reproduce. For every Vietnamese who dies in the mud, three others with roughly the same features are born in the slime." As the parents are about to embrace, the boy's eyes roll, his mouth twists as if "the mark of Cain is emerging again" (223).

The paste-board figures of the four characters, the undercurrent of hysteria beneath the casual conversation, the fragmentary ritualised mourning, all remove the play from the realm of realism to a kind of nightmarish reality, a universal paranoia. This short play can be read as a severe critique of the socio-political reality in Sri Lanka where the Sinhala and Tamil populations have been engaging in dehumanizing fratricide and where children have been conscripted into guerrilla troops and trained to kill. Like writers elsewhere who find themselves unable to cope with their fragmented world, Ernest MacIntyre emigrates to greener pastures.

*A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* is a comedy of the Absurd that forces violence centre-stage. In a country torn by ethnic differences, the story of brother murdering brother has unmistakable political overtones. Ranjit, we are told, has killed his brother Upali by pushing his head into the oven. The mother complains to the father about this "devilment" and insists that he give the boy "a sound telling off". Ranjit admits that he did kill his brother, but swears that it was "Upali's fault": he wanted part of the pie that Ranjit was baking in the oven.

RANJIT. He shouted at the top of his voice, like this – "I must have my share of the pie, because everything in our father's house belongs to all of us."

FATHER. Everything in your father's house belongs to your father. I hope you put him straight on that before you shoved him into the oven (213).

The theme of the play can possibly be handled only in such a grotesque fashion, since the alternative would be to allow it to be truly gruesome.

MOTHER. No, no, the same thing happened last month when Ranjit smashed up the Pyrex dinner set. You postponed it for the morning, and Ranjit got off without even a telling off. That's why he's going from bad to worse... Killing Upali – My God, I shudder to think what awful things he'll do the next time.

If you don't deal with him immediately, he might do something really serious, really terrible (214).

The inappropriateness of the responses to this ghastly fratricide is a biting social comment on the growing acceptance of violence in Sri Lankan society.

The significance of the play derives from the fact that it dares break the silence. As we note in other sections (Chapter 4) trauma usually results in a breakdown of communication. What is emotionally too painful is usually incommunicable. Moreover, pragmatic considerations like political disfavour or fear of being accused of partisan views can dissuade a playwright from touching upon such intractable themes. MacIntyre has used a convenient form to speak of the unspeakable. This playwright, Sugathapala de Silva (1928–2002) with his *Dunna Dunu Gamuwe* (1971) and Regi Siriwardena (1922-2004) with his play *Widows*, are seen as the precursors of the serious political theatre which emerged at the end of the 1980s.

### ***The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain (1989)***

***The Golden Swan*** by Ediriwira Sarachchandra draws its material from the *Jataka* tales, the stories about the Buddha before his Enlightenment. Like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in India, the *Jataka* tales in Sri Lanka have been an ever alluring and fertile granary for Sinhala literature and culture. The actual story that inspired Sarachchandra's Sinhalese play *Bhava Kadathurawa* was *Swarnahansa Jataka*. The author then wrote the English version, described by editor D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke as "not a 'transcreation' but seems to me an original effort, somewhat like Beckett's French and English versions of his plays" (*Modern Sri Lankan Drama* 8).

*The Golden Swan* attains a lyrical quality, with terse prose and melodious song by the Chorus and two of the characters, alternating to dramatise a story of family relationships and offer social critique. It is set in the cottage of the Brahmin Somadatta, who has passed away, and centers around the Brahmin's widow and his two beloved daughters Sundarinanda and Nandavati. The Brahmin, apprehensive about the declining financial situation of this family,



returns after his death in the shape of a golden swan and leaves a gold feather after each visit as a source of income. The avarice of the widow prompts her to allow greedy merchants to brutally bind the swan and snatch all its feathers, thus causing its death.

**The Playwright:** Ediriwira Sarachchandra is Sri Lanka's most acclaimed writer. This is his first play in English, written at the age of seventy five. Sarachchandra has made his mark as a playwright, a novelist in English and a critic and is the recipient of the Asan World Prize in 1983 and the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1988. He was a Professor of Pali and later Professor of Modern Sinhalese Literature, and wrote extensively about Sinhalese theatre, as in his critical work *The Folk Drama of Ceylon* (1966).

The playwright can be credited with having originated in his earlier years a new form of Sri Lankan drama soon after Independence from colonial rule: this was the dance-drama which broke away from the earlier Europeanized theatre, by then a spent force within the culture. *The Golden Swan* belongs to a later phase of Sarachchandra's writing, more assured of his own identity. Sarachchandra's concerns are literary and aesthetic rather than political. He declares:

I have not used theatre for any 'ulterior' purpose. I've used it only with aesthetic ends in view. What I wanted in theatre was to give the spectators a deeper understanding of the human condition, a better grasp of complicated human relationships, and to move them in a way that would open their eyes to more things than they are aware of, ordinarily ("Latest Play" 9).

This preoccupation with aesthetics led him to experiment and explore with genres and styles.

**Exploring Identity through Art:** As elsewhere in Asia, the postcolonial impulse in Sri Lankan theatre has been to define and refine a Sri Lankan sensibility, both in literature and performance. Since ancient Sinhala culture did not really possess a classical theatre tradition, the work of Ediriwira Sarachchandra and some of his contemporaries laid the foundation for the edifice of modern Sri Lankan theatre rooted in its own cultural identity. Here we encounter a playwright totally absorbed in creating a theatre culturally genuine and exploring essential human values. The immense popularity of Sarachchandra's plays and the high respect he is accorded in

literary circles in his country seem to indicate that he has truly touched a deep chord in his people.

Indeed, critics elsewhere would claim for this playwright a grasp of the universals of drama, or perhaps more definitely, of Asian drama. In his intriguing essay entitled "Bharata Today: An Analysis of a Sinhala Play" the Indian critic Krishna Rayan investigated the appearance of dramatic tenets propounded by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in Sarachchandra's play *Pemato Jayati Soko* (Rayan 125-128). Sarachchandra does reveal an over-riding concern with isolating and plumbing whatever is most basic and essential in human nature, an impulse that takes him beyond the merely topical or political.

*The Golden Swan* witnesses to the playwright's objective of encouraging social critique and creating a dramatic national voice. It is a tale based on the ancient Jataka stories which form a repository of source material for Sri Lankan literature. It dramatizes the growing greed of modern society which counters traditional values and is corrosive of the social fabric. The story of the rapacious Brahmin woman who sells the golden feathers of the Golden Swan reposing in her shed – an incarnation of her late husband – and eventually causes his destruction, is a social commentary, not primarily a political critique.

Sarachchandra belongs to the generation that saw the birth of Sri Lanka as an independent nation. His plays, beginning in the 1950, went a long way in shaping a sense of national identity on the Sri Lankan stage. This playwright, however, does not identify with specific political ideologies of emerging factions. These had not, in any case, at the beginning of his writing career, split into unbridgeable poles. A Sinhala drama critic, D.M. de Silva, assesses Sarachchandra's work:

His plays quite definitely represented in their own sphere a decisive phase in the 'struggle against imperialism'. They expressed potently the national sense of identity, reassured it, perhaps, and certainly transfigured it – a function of abiding significance in post-colonial society. That they performed this function without themselves subsiding in a nationalist hysteria is a vital factor in explaining their continued effectiveness and

validity. For though the playwright derived his stimulus from the intensification of nationalist feeling around 1956, he was not himself trapped within its confines.[...] Consequently, his plays do not address themselves to the transient mood of a nation but to its permanent experience, and with it to the experience of all mankind; they contrive to be national without losing their claim to be universal (30-31).

*The Golden Swan* was written in 1989, when the general taste in Sri Lankan drama had shifted. The stylized operatic dance dramas had lost their appeal. The political ideology had changed: Marxist socialism had arrived on the scene, and the emerging aesthetic philosophy saw art as basically functional. Realism made its appearance in the theatre of the day and contemporary socio-economic issues came in for discussion. Sarachchandra however, speaks with the voice of the earlier generation. *The Golden Swan* does not venture into political discussion or take up any topical issue hotly debated in the print media. It reaffirms the values that the Sri Lankan people prided themselves on as they gained a national identity.

### ***The Bearer of Woes (1990)***

*The Bearer of Woes (Dukgannarata)* by Prasannajit Abeysuriya is the work of a young theatre artist writing his first play. After a few performances it received good reviews and was selected for the Annual Drama Festival. Theatre critic Ranjini Obeyesekere watched the play and was greatly impressed. She writes, "It was brilliant – both in the seriousness of its socio-political critique and its excellent stagecraft. In spite of its minimalist sets and costumes – perhaps even because of it – the drama was powerful. The play seemed the work not of a novice but of a mature dramatist" (76).

**Questioning the role of theatre:** In Abeysuriya's play the Man is one who sees himself as the bearer of woes, a writer agonizing to alleviate the burden of his people; simultaneously, the Woman too, in a different way, bears the burden of her poverty, the anxiety of supporting her children, the indignity of living the life of a sex worker, and the burden imposed upon her by

the Man and his ideals of rescuing her. The plot cleverly weaves realism with alienation techniques as the drama of the quarrel between the Man and the Woman disrupts the troupe of actors about to enact a 'romantic performance' popular in Sri Lanka at the time. The cast, the director and the sponsor find themselves in the 'real-life drama' and attempt to find solutions to their predicament. *The Bearer of Woes* then, is a comment on the capacity of theatre, or the lack of it, to touch upon the 'real world'. It also provokes thought about the function of theatre in times of social crisis. Further, it places centre-stage the paradox of a writer in society who finds his strong social commitment ridiculed and questioned by the Woman who is merely trying to manage to survive.

**The Playwright:** Prasannajit Abeysuriya struggled to find his way into theatre. Born into a middle income family, he was unable to enter University and began to work in a government factory. But the little experience that he had had of drama in school continued to exercise a deep fascination for the young man. He worked for the theatre doing all kinds of jobs but had no opportunity to act. The break came when he attended a six-month workshop conducted by the Ministry of Culture taught by well-known theatre personalities. Abeysuriya never looked back. Without a job he turned to theatre to earn his survival. *The Bearer of Woes* gained him public recognition, and came to be filmed for national television.

*The Bearer of Woes* is yet another play that raises questions about the nature and function of art in general, and theatre in particular, specifically at a point of history when such issues demand re-interpretation. The open-ended conclusion of the play indicates that the playwright, though young, suffers from no naivety in offering facile solutions to this vexed question.

Sri Lankan drama, then, was enormously re-vitalized in the twentieth century. Arguably, this was the outcome of a felt need by the artist to reflect on social issues and processes, and contribute to the climate of thought. With no funding at all, but only a small ticket fee, the young playwright went out to stage his own original play. This was despite intense political upheaval and personal risk. Abeysuriya remarks:

It was a time of great tension. It was the time of the *bhisana* (terror); of political killings and witch hunts for young men believed to be JVP (Nationalist Freedom Party). My parents were very scared. The mere fact that young people were meeting in a house at night was dangerous. My mother would send my friends away when they came for rehearsals saying I was out of town. I was very angry and we quarrelled a lot over the play. But I was determined to continue with it. I was obsessed with my play. Day and night I could think of nothing else (75).

*The Bearer of Woes* does not venture into serious political engagement. It does however enter into socio-political questions such as social inequality and poverty, the man-woman power equation, the role of the artist, and the whole location of theatre *vis-à-vis* economic and social trauma. The plot depicts a stage play being interrupted by a woman with a baby, who seeks refuge from a 'persecutor' inside the theatre hall. The woman, who is a prostitute, argues with her lover turned protector-prosecutor, with the entire cast of actors, director and sponsor all joining in to debate, suggest and perform. It is a lively tale of the bridging of social life and theatre life. It ushers front-stage the sordid existence of the woman eking out an existence in the 'shanties by the canal'. It spotlights the Man who is a writer, who writes about "a world free of exploiters", but could never gain any recognition:

MAN. I wrote two books. Both were banned.

2<sup>nd</sup> ACTOR. Why? Do you write pornography?

MAN. They must have seemed obscene to those who banned them (179).

The actors find the Man mad, possessed by the devil and perform a song-and-dance exorcism over him. The traditional practice of exorcism is here spiced with stylized references to mass-killings, the migration of local women to foreign lands as domestic servants, and other social evils that blight the land of the Man, and conclude with a chanted prayer:

SPONSOR. Bring the goddess of wealth by airplane to your abode

By your powers cure him oh you powerful gods! (193)

As the guards chain the Man and try to drag him off he protests against "this rotten acceptance",

and draws some understanding from an actor:

1<sup>st</sup> ACTOR. No, that's a deception. That's a crime that will go down in history.

Knowing what is right and what should be done can we permit such things to happen? (194)

Eventually, the Woman leaves, with her child, and the Man follows her. The actors, unsure of themselves, leave with a shrug of the shoulders. It is left to the audience to debate this apparent lack of closure.

A critic reads in the play "a commentary on the role of theatre during this period of crisis and anomie – where it was seen as a forum for the discussion and the exploration of socio-political issues even though its impact was several degrees removed from the actualities of the political scene" (Obeyesekere 196). *The Bearer of Woes* is successful, not only for its elaborate stagecraft, but for its socio-political critique, and its self-reflective attitude of struggling optimism.

### **3.8. Conclusions**

The thrust of this chapter has been to take on board the socio-political events and processes and responses to them by playwrights that made the text possible and intelligible. The attempt has been, in the vein of Edward W. Said, "not to eliminate interest in the events and circumstances entailed by and expressed in the texts themselves" (4). Questions have been asked about the perception within each culture of the nature of the arts and the theatre; and about ways in which specific playwrights have handled such problematics in specific plays.

How do the plays reflect stretched horizons? In varied ways: the Chinese take a new and penetrating look at the artist's role in a changed social, economic and political paradigm. They explore realism and under Maoist influence view the arts in the service of the State. Labouring under more severe constraints imposed by the State they pour their energies into experimentation in form and technique rather than in overt subversive political stances. The Bengali playwrights ride on the crest of a wave of experiment in political theatre and create a

body of unprecedented socio-political critique. They are the boldest of the playwrights in the three cultures in offering social critique, in exposing oppression and in exploring new relationships with their audiences. Sri Lankan plays try to re-inscribe Sinhala identity, explore the fair amount of 'permitted space' in theatre for social satire, and in rare and notable instances, dramatise, unlike their Indian and Chinese counterparts, clearly volatile issues. In all three cultures playwrights test the waters of experimentation. In all three locations many social tensions surface: between the professional and the amateur, between the city and the countryside, between raising cultural standards and popularizing art, and between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Theatre, as performative art, is placed under severe stress and challenge. And playwrights variously discover and test their agency in new modes.

The middle of the twentieth century, which effectively marks the end of the European colonial era and the beginning of a new phase of Asian history, has deepened the interconnections between literature, performance and political life and thought. Not only have aesthetic experiments created new theatre forms, they have also generated theoretical debate about aesthetics, culture and politics. The last five decades of the century have given birth to a clear revival of theatre practice and theory. Aparna Dharwadkar points this out with reference to the Indian theatre scene:

To a significant extent, the historical origins of this evolving tradition of texts and performance practices lie in the genres, discourses and institutions of theatrical modernity that emerged under European influence in such colonial cities as Calcutta and Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century. But to an equally significant degree, practitioners of the new drama have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other pre-colonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization (2).

Though China's encounter with Western powers was not strictly 'colonial', similar processes of self-reflection and practice have been at work in Chinese theatre, just as in the Indian and the Sri Lankan.

The four Chinese plays, four Bengali plays and three Sri Lankan plays analyzed here have clearly underscored the point that, as Said believes, "texts are worldly, so some degree they are events, and even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (4). In fact, it can be claimed that theatre has, in these times of socio-political transformation in the twentieth century, affirmed powerfully, as never before in these locations, the connection between texts and the facts of human life, in their socio-political aspects.

Some of the debates in aesthetics, as for instance between the polarities of 'modernist' and 'nativist', 'urban' and 'rural/folk', 'indigenous' and 'hybrid' will form the subtext of chapter 5, which deals with the more formal frames of theatre. However, before an analysis of form is conducted, a glance will be cast in the next chapter at how theatre contributes to one significant area of contemporary discourse: the problematics of gender.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> After Independence the Indian National Congress was in power in West Bengal, followed by a coalition of Left parties with breakaway Congress groups. In 1969 the United Front came to power. The Left Front won the elections in 1977 and has continued in government since.

<sup>2</sup> State repression in the 1970s was so stringent that regular and organized oppositional policies had been made impossible. See Chatterjee, Partha 27-30.

<sup>3</sup> *Madame Cassia* is the title which Yao Hsin-ming gives to the play *Ch'i Shuang Hui*. This rare female protagonist is a super-sensitive wife, full of wit. The play was translated from Chinese into English in 1935. See Wells, 12.

<sup>4</sup> One rare instance of a play banned by the Sri Lankan government (the Sirimavo Bandaranaike coalition government) after eight shows is *Pusloadung* by Simon Navagattagama (1940-2005).

## CHAPTER 4

---

### GENDERING THE THEATRE

## Chapter 4

### Gendering the theatre

The following story comes out of the death camp at Treblinka. A dancer stands naked in line waiting for her turn to enter the gas chamber. We see a human being with its natural power to command space reduced to a body taking up space, passively submitting to the prospect of death. A guard tells her to step out of line and dance. She does, and carried away by her authoritative action and by her repossession of a self and a world she dances up to the guard – now within the compass of her space – takes his gun and shoots him. What a surprise to the guard that a zombie-like creature can spring back to life by means of performance!

- Yi-Fu Tuan

#### 4.1. Women's Presence in Theatre

"Every woman is an occupied territory", declares the title of a paper by Simona Sharoni on the politics of militarism and sexism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (447). The metaphor is taken straight out of the battleground to indicate the classic feminist perspective of the woman, conquered, subjugated and humiliated by man, one half of humanity 'occupied' by the other half. However, the image of the battleground begs the questions whether the terrain was at all contested, whether women found or created strategies to challenge the oppression with a greater or lesser degree of triumph, and what was the degree and nature of the woman's agency. As one views the social fabric in the contexts of China, India and Sri Lanka in the latter

half of the twentieth century, one would do well to avoid a simplistic re-assertion of the image of the woman crushed by patriarchy; it is significant and rewarding to analyse modes in which the highly asymmetrical power equation has been challenged, seldom through blatant resistance, but more often in discrete or explicit ways of subversion.

In the turbulent decades of the twentieth century one of the most salient discourses concerns power apportioned on the basis of gender. In this chapter the endeavour is to conduct, around the world of theatre, "an exploration of the relationships of power which, by their very nature, are contested and negotiated every moment that human beings come into direct or indirect contact with one another, each using diverse resources and modes of their deployment in the contest" (Mukhia 15). From the 1980s feminist discourse includes a perspective of the ways in which women have created and enlarged space for themselves. Michelle Perrot indicates 'that recent feminist research, "in its desire to go beyond the 'miserabiliste' language of oppression, subvert the viewpoint of domination, [...] has sought to show that women are present and active, that they have full roles and a coherent culture and their powers are real" (161). It is within such a perspective that one can locate the relationship of women with theatre. Of all the arts, theatre has traditionally been the one least accessible to women artists in patriarchal societies: here then, one can fruitfully trace some of the attempts by women to enter the public stage and secure for themselves a sense of identity, an identity that went beyond theatre. Moreover, the theatre reflects in the choices of its themes and characters, in what it chooses to say and what it chooses to ignore, the tensions at work in the gender equation. Here the focus will be on female agency: on women actors, playwrights and characters. The attempt is to establish traces of women's growing presence in theatre and society in the face of their marginality and repression.

#### **4.2. Feminist Standpoints**

Feminist drama and feminist theatre scholarship have taken shape in the West since the 1960s. Feminists in the women's movements fought for political and social reform that would free

them from oppression under patriarchy; equally, feminist critics fought to extend their insights into the realm of culture. Feminist Theory arose in the wake of the debates stirred by Marx and Freud, and later by critical theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Lyotard. The way was paved for the emergence of Feminist Theatre. Hélène Keyssar asserts that "although plays about women have existed since the origins of drama, and plays by women have been written and performed in the Western world at least since Sappho," it was only in the sixties that "Feminist drama emerged as a distinct theatrical genre" (1). Taisha Abraham concurs and identifies two reasons for this: " First, the resurgence of the women's movement in America; second, the avant-garde movements in European theatre that radicalized American drama in the sixties and helped create a " revisionary" framework in which women dramatists could experiment." (13) These were powerful influences; equally influential were the seminal writings of Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex* 1949) and Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique* 1963). In the following decades women in theatre came to question dominant modes of western theatre which they denounced as predominantly male constructs.

White feminists have been accused of Eurocentricism, of imposing Western models of feminism on other cultures, and of ignoring the endogenous roots of Third World feminism, Sri Lankan writer Kumari Jayawardena argues that feminism is not an ideology imposed by the West on the Third World, but has existed, in incipient form, for long in Third World countries. She points out that there were debates in China on women's rights in the eighteenth century and movements for the emancipation of women in India in the nineteenth century. Jayawardena recalls that "struggles for women's emancipation were an essential and integral part of national resistance movements" (*Feminism* 8), and that women in Third World countries have developed their own endogenous feminist movements with their own specific goals. Uma Narayan, writing about India, aptly stresses that Indian women have specific problems like dowry-murder, health and communalism, that the Indian feminist movement seeks to address (13). Similarly, Chinese author Li Xiao-Jian in a paper on "Xingbie or Gender", even as she demands women's liberation as part of social progress, questions the rightness of imposing the Western construct of 'gender'

on Chinese society. This society, she believes, finds it repugnant to see nature and culture as antagonistic. The Chinese categories are more harmonious:

It is a general worldview, the Weltanschauung, with special reference to human identity that involves the relationship between women and men. In this perspective, one finds that women and men are born different, which makes human reproduction possible; that the concomitant social roles women and men play respectively contribute to human civilization and social development; and that the human needs including sex, love, marriage, and family are treated in a way that never separates absolutely social from natural or Yin from Yang (Li 99).

Consequently, gender constructions and feminist stances in China, India and Sri Lanka need to be investigated within the framework of their specific cultural locations.

In twentieth century Asia, theatre has remained to date largely the bastion of male dominance that it had traditionally been. However, wider space within theatre is available for women. Chinese women playwrights are rarely heard of; in India, a few names of women are to be found in playwriting (though many have ventured into the fields of the novel, short story and poetry): earlier Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938 - ) (Bengali), Varsha Mahendra Adalia (Gujarati), Kusum Kumar (1939 - ) ( Hindi) Mamta Sagar (1966 - ) (Kannada), Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry (Punjabi), C.S. Lakshmi (1944 - ) (Tamil); and later, Mahasweta Devi (1926 - ) (Bengali and English), Dina Mehta (English), Manjula Padmanabhan (English); in Sri Lanka one reads of Nedra Vittachi (English), and Ruwanthie Chikera, a young award-winning playwright in English and Sinhala. However, in all these cultures, acting has opened its doors wide to accept women artistes; also, in India, women directors like Anuradha Kapur, Usha Ganguli, Veenapani Chawla, Anamika Haksar, Vijaya Mehta, Vimal Allana, Arundhati Rao, B. Jayashree, Padmashree Josalkar, Prasanna Ramaswamy, Shanta Gokhale, Shailaja J., among others, have recently made remarkable contributions to the Indian theatre scene; and theatre audiences are today a mix of men and women. Mention must be made of recent women theatre critics whose output has been not only prolific, but also brilliant: Nandi Bhatia (*Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance*) (2004);

Minoti Chatterjee (*Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage*) (2004); Tutun Mukherjee, editor, *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (2005); Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker (*Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947*) (2006); and Vasudha Dalmia (*Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatres*) (2006). In none of these cultures has a 'feminist theatre' *per se* seen the light of day.

In the following sections the situation of women in theatre is studied, first in China, then in India, and then Sri Lanka. A profile of one prominent woman in each culture is sketched: this is in the nature of a case-study of how highly motivated women found in the theatre a location for empowerment, their own or of their society. Subsequently, the plays are analyzed as to the kind of space they may have made for women.

#### **4.3.1. Women and Theatre in China**

The status of Chinese women in the feudal imperial society was considerably low. Women had no right to inheritance of property and no freedom of employment. Rural women shared equally in all the farm work, but in case of bad crops or drought, farmers often sold their young daughters into slavery. Among the urban upper classes, women enjoyed the benefits of wealth within the confines of the ancestral home. They might be taught the arts of cooking, singing and fine embroidery, and even, in some cases, reading and writing, but no woman could ever sit for an imperial examination or hold a government post. The most glaring symbol of the restrictions imposed on the woman was the binding of the feet. "Why did this inhumane custom ever get established and moreover persist for almost 1000 years? Men, for unknown reasons, prefer small feet on women" (Dun Li 86-87). Men preferred small feet on women perhaps because the steps the women would take outside the homestead would necessarily be small and few.

Theatre was, however, an integral part of the lives of all Chinese, and rural women usually attended performances by itinerant troupes in the countryside. In the cities, the freedom accorded to the womenfolk seems to have depended on the male head of the family. One Han Chinese woman relates in her autobiography set in the early twentieth century:

The house was convenient to the garden where my father worked part of the time. It was also convenient for my mother and my aunt to see the plays on the open stage across the street. My father was very strict and would not let them out to see the plays. My mother and my aunt took benches and stood on them so they could look out the high north window (Pruit 88).

Another Han Chinese woman's autobiography contains a passage about her grandmother, who was, in the 1930s, a concubine to a general: "Almost the only time she was allowed out of the house was to go to the opera. Otherwise, she had to sit at home all day, every day. She read a lot, mainly plays and novels, and tended her favourite flowers" (Chang 44). The avenues for women of the gentry to enjoy theatre were thus rather limited, except when the operas were performed within their own courtyards on certain festive occasions like weddings, or rarely in a temple in honour of the gods.

Women were generally not allowed to be part of actors' companies, as strict segregation of the sexes was enforced. Female roles, called *tan*, were usually played by men (except in rare all-female troupes) (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 24). Unlike Peking, districts known as the 'foreign concessions' – the areas controlled by foreign powers by trade treaties – did allow actresses on stage by the early twentieth century. However, 'sing-song girls' often sang and provided some kind of theatrical entertainment to guests of tea-house theatres. These were generally prostitutes. The social status of the actress was extremely low and it was an accepted norm that "decent women did not appear on the stage" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 69). However, the situation changed drastically when the Communists came to power and the practice of teaching boys to play women's roles was stopped altogether. Henceforth men and women acted together on the same stage. Social security benefits were provided to the theatrical



profession and dramatic activity was frenetically stepped up as an instrument of education and socio-political reform. More and more women became actresses, first in theatre, then in the cinema. One such prominent woman was Jiang Qing, later Madame Mao.

The Communist Party succeeded, in great measure, in enhancing the status of women in Chinese society. As the Party gained control of the administration, it advocated equal status for both genders. However, as time passed, practice did not always tally with precept. Richard Evans notes the attitudes of Mao: "Mao had been an ardent champion of women's rights (his concern had been reflected in the Marriage Law of 1950, which gave women equal status with men in relation to property and divorce). But he knew that prejudice against women rulers was very strong in the Chinese political culture" (194). So when it came to grooming a candidate to replace Zhou Enlai, whose political authority radicals were keen on destroying, Mao did not consider any woman for the post, not even the ambitious Jiang Qing, his wife, but set his eyes on Deng Xiaoping.

The next sub-section shines a light on the entry of Jiang Qing through theatre to power.

#### **4.3.2. Jiang Qing: An Actress Catapults to Political Power**

One glaring instance of a woman who astutely amassed for herself an unbelievable amount of power and used and abused it to the detriment of many, is Jiang Qing, or Madame Mao as she was called. Daughter of a concubine, the young girl defied her mother by refusing to have her feet bound. It was an act of rebellion that impelled her to further steps on the road to freedom. She fled the poverty and misery of her early days into the excitement of the life of an actress with an opera troupe. She gained access to the cut-throat competition of the cosmopolitan world of Shanghai theatre, where she played Nora, in a translation of Ibsen's *The Doll's House*. Through the complicated political reverses of the Nationalist-Communist tug of war and through numerous liaisons with influential men, Jiang Qing found her way to the rising

political star Mao Zedong. Her life took on an operatic quality, as the emerging new hero of China became her lover, and later, her husband.

Once a young struggling small-time actress, Madame Mao became a powerful figure standing a step behind Chairman Mao to liquidate his enemies and crush the old order. Madame Mao heard of a play by professor and historian Wu Han that dramatized the historical fall of the emperor Jian-jing. She convinced Mao that it was a not-so-covert criticism of his leadership. She got him to call for a national denunciation of the play. The Cultural Revolution was proclaimed. She organized the national Festival of Revolutionary Operas, a thirty-seven day festival for some three hundred thirty thousand people (Min 244). Madame Mao banned all forms of entertainment except for eight model operas. She procured funding from the National Treasury to turn her operas into films. She gathered powerful allies and as the Gang of Four they let loose a flood of violent revolution. They commandeered five hundred thousand Red Guards who unleashed terror on the land. The meteoric rise of Jiang Qing to the status of Madame Mao and a powerful producer of a big cultural drama did not last forever. Mao's health declined, his opponents in the Party thrived, Mao died, the Gang of Four was arrested. Jiang Qing died in jail in 1991 after fifteen years of imprisonment, a heroine to very few.

This woman, it must be admitted, does not represent the millions of women in her day in her country. Although Mao insisted that "women hold up half the sky", although Communist China did greatly liberate women from feudal oppression, the majority of women negotiated their quests for power in very restricted circumstances, as a spate of autobiographical works by Chinese women today, such as *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang, and *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Cheng reveal. The stage, by itself, offered a narrow passage, but a passage, nonetheless, into a wider social sphere.

The Chinese plays will be considered next. A telling and interesting fact is that these are all written by male authors. It is interesting to ask how men constructed their women characters.

### 4.3.3. The Chinese Plays:

#### *The White-haired Girl*

The first play to be considered is *The White-haired Girl*, an opera in five acts. The title appears to place woman centre-stage. In a sense the play does focus primarily on a young woman, Xier, the daughter of Yang, a tenant of Landlord Huang. Also, the authors depict a cross-section of female characters: a peasant woman who struggles to support her family despite crushing poverty; the landlord's aged mother, cruel and oppressive; the old servant in the landlord's house, who protects Xier and helps her flee. The young Xier who is driven to escape from civilization into a cave in the mountains; superstitious village women afraid of the white-haired goddess. Most of the characters are stereotypes. The character of Xier, the protagonist, is not extensively developed. Her vulnerability is underscored and her bid for survival is celebrated. But the victim is turned into a victor through the agency of male saviours. The women in the play are endowed with fortitude but with little self-reflection or awareness.

Xier, slave turned 'goddess' is the 'protagonist.' Yet the play does not seem to be primarily concerned with the plight of a woman, rather, the plight of a peasant. The young girl's body becomes the site of exploitation and oppression. The authors investigate the exploitative relationships of landowners with the peasant workers. The liberation and emancipation of women, then, from the Chinese Communist's perspective is part of the larger question of the liberation and empowerment of the millions of impoverished and victimized peasants. The play celebrates both the liberation of the peasants by the Red Army and the fierce spirit of the masses that helped them to endure and prevail. Seemingly, the 'woman's question' has been neglected; but from another perspective, this refusal to treat women as a separate category may be read as a freeing and empowering process.

One is tempted to find parallels with Mahasweta Devi's stance of subsuming the stories of women under the 'wider' category of the oppression of tribals of both genders. But there is a

noticeable difference: the woman playwright depicts strong and evolving women characters who glow with personal charisma.

### ***Teahouse***

The next play to be considered is *Teahouse*, by Lao She. *Teahouse* went on to become a fair favourite with Chinese audiences in Communist China. Written in 1951, it spans half a century (1898-1945) in the course of which the far-reaching social, political and economic changes affecting China are dramatized. In *Teahouse* the 'post-Liberation' society is asked to watch, and reflect on the fall of the Manchu Empire, the rising intrusion by foreign powers and the rule of the Kuomintang. From the perspective of the Communists, this is a period of scant progress, or rather an era of chaos heaped upon chaos.

With reference to the status of women in China, the Communists could indeed be proud of having made monumental strides forward. In line with Chairman Mao's famous statement that "women hold up half the sky", Party cadres and officials all over China were recruited equally from among women and men. Men and women were required to work with equal responsibilities in commune farms and factories. At all but the highest levels, Party workers belonged to both genders. This was a situation never hitherto experienced by Chinese society.

The women one encounters in *Teahouse* are generally victimized and powerless. Except for Wang Shufen, the wife of Proprietor Wang Lifa, who wields a certain amount of responsibility in running the Yutai Teahouse and commands some respect, the other women have no rights and no privileges. A peasant woman begs for food for herself and her starving little daughter, since the peasantry is in dire straits. Poverty drives Sixth-Born Kang to sell his young daughter to an elderly palace eunuch for the paltry sum of ten *taels* of silver; in another part of the teahouse a pocket watch is being sold for five *taels* of silver. Rich men are willing to pay high prices to acquire talented concubines for themselves. As Director Shen and Little Pockface Liu take over Yutai Teahouse and announce that they will proceed to renovate it, their first move is to find

themselves 'come-on hostesses' and Ding Bao is their first prey, a seventeen year old without a family. She confides to Wang Lifa: "You're right, Old Proprietor, I'm traitor's property too. I have to wait on whoever has power and influence. Son-of-a-bitch! I'm only seventeen, but I often wish I was dead. At least my corpse would be my own. But this kind of work – I'm slowly rotting away" (49). In a country undergoing extreme social stress, the woman is depicted as being one of the first and worst victims of exploitation.

Lao She writes and performs his plays after the founding of New China. His *Teahouse* reflects the degeneration of Chinese society in the years past and hints at the coming of hope from 'the Western Hills', the rising sun of Communist rule. Writing in the 1950s, Lao She, an ardent supporter of the Communist ideology and Party, could not have foreseen any of the excesses that would be committed in later years, by Party workers, for instance, against women teachers and writers; or the instigation of children by the Party to perpetrate violence against 'reactionary' parents. Nor could the playwright have foreseen that he would himself be a victim of such harassment. He was later to commit suicide in 1966, after ill-treatment by the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution.

### ***Cai Wenji***

The play to be considered next is *Cai Wenji*. Guo Moruo, writing after Liberation in 1949, revisits history, and re-interprets it for his contemporaries. Very conscious of the Chinese sense of historicity, Guo delves into tales from China's history and myth to re-inscribe them with meaning relevant to his own day and contemporary political ideology. In accordance with Mao Zedong's request to "make the past serve the present", Guo sets his plays in turbulent periods of Chinese history which mirror the turbulence of existence in mid-twentieth century China. In *Cai Wenji* he explores the theme of racial and tribal unification. And within this larger circumference he centres the question of priorities in loyalty. The title foregrounds a woman who is both mother

and scholar. Cai Wenji is the female protagonist, a woman torn between her love of her family and her duty to scholarship and service to the community.

Cai Wenji is depicted as a loving mother, just as she is also a dutiful wife, and was a devoted daughter. Torn between love for her young children whom she has now to leave behind to return to the Han kingdom and her sense of duty to her community, Cai Wenji learns to accept the higher duty of serving her state rather than only her family. One is tempted to wonder what might have been the consequences of a possible refusal of a ruler's 'request' by a woman.

The protagonist is characterised as a scholar and a poet. In line with Communist Party policy, women are assigned important responsibilities in the state. Since the action of the play takes place in the years 208 -216 AD, the hierarchy of the feudal society is maintained, with patriarchy prevailing. However, the playwright takes pains to portray women as forceful characters unafraid to follow the dictates of their conscience and common sense. But the traditional duty of self-sacrifice by the woman to her family is now shifted to the service of the larger community and the state. Cai Wenji is set up as a model to audiences in early Communist China: a woman who subordinates her private feelings to a goal loftier than family loyalty, i.e. loyalty to the country. This is a re-interpretation of history, and a rejection of the traditional Confucian values which are primarily family-oriented. Here the theatre re-defines the 'value' of the woman in terms of the unquestioning service she offers her country. The playwright's *penchant* for re-visiting history and creating vigorous women characters is seen at work in his other plays as well: in *Wu Zetian*, he dramatizes the life of the single woman to ascend the imperial throne as an Empress; and in *Qu Yuan*, the playwright fashions unforgettable female characters in the scheming Queen Zheng Xiu, and Chan Juan, the lovely and lively student of the famous poet Qu Yuan. In Guo Moruo, we find a Chinese advocate of women's emancipation.

### ***Nocturnal Wanderer***

The fourth Chinese play, *Nocturnal Wanderer* is set within the internal world of the protagonist, the Traveller on a train journey. Written in an absurdist mode, it moves from the Traveller's brief encounter in the actual train with a woman and a few men, into encounters with their corresponding characters in the nightmarish world of his imagination. As he wanders through half-deserted city streets, encountering violence, desire, death and good and evil, the Traveller discovers his own consciousness.

There are three levels of consciousness in *Nocturnal Wanderer*; the real and objective world of the train, where the Traveller speaks in the first person; the level where the Traveller become the Sleepwalker, and speaks in the second person; and a level of self-reflection where he observes a world that he finds difficult to understand.

The two female characters are the Woman in the train, and her counterpart in the dream, the Prostitute. The Sleepwalker meets the Prostitute in the nightmare streets of his consciousness. His only wish is to take a quiet stroll in the streets by night; however, he is inescapably assailed by evil. The Prostitute tempts his soul. In an absurdist sequence, he sees her walking off with the Thug and is very disturbed at the thought that she may be raped; she later returns to him and he wavers between desire and indecision; he pushes her into a doorway and unwittingly causes her to come in the line of a gun that is fired; but though he is convinced she has died, and is accused by the Thug of having killed her, the Prostitute later returns to become his friend and exposes the lies of his life.

Gao Xingjian is, self-confessedly, an intensely private person. Consciously rejecting the Communist attempt to collectivize, Gao "forces his way into the self and compels it to reluctantly admit to its own inadequacies, its fragmentation, its impotence to act, and its inability to eradicate the evil in and around it" (Fong xv). *Nocturnal Wanderer* illustrates Gao's journey into the psyche of the protagonist. The Young Woman in the train for instance, is metamorphosed into the Prostitute of his dream. For Gao it is not socio-political or religious ideologies that need

representation, it is the "images of the heart" which control consciousness that need to be revealed. Gao comments: "What I strive to capture is the reality of the feelings of the psyche, a naked reality which needs no embellishment, and which is larger and more important than all the exegeses on religion, ethics or philosophy, so that human beings can be seen as more human, and their true nature can be more fully revealed" (Gao, "Another Kind of Drama" xxxvii-xxxviii). Thus, gender and gender politics, do not engage the attention of this playwright as external realities. They permeate the inner consciousness of his characters.

The road that the woman had to walk in the course of the last decades in China was far from smooth or easy, and theatre documents and examines some of the struggles along the way. The woman's body is depicted as the site of exploitation and violence in the patriarchal society of imperial feudal China. The vulnerability of the woman, specially the young girl, in periods of social stress like drought and civil war is forcefully underscored, particularly in plays like *The White-haired Girl* and *Teahouse*. In the cause of the creation of a national identity and unification, the woman is posited as a model of transformation, one who is required to subordinate other age-old profound loyalties like the family to the highest goal of national service. *Cai Wenji* dramatizes these national goals. Woman is also seen as the inner energy that both seduces to evil and exposes self-deception, the yin that cannot be excised from the yang, as the encounters in *Nocturnal Wanderer* reveal. A study of the Chinese theatre in the last fifty years of the century does all this and more. It indicates that women – as actors – entered the newly found opportunities offered by theatre to explore its space as both leisure and work. Theatre is even seen as the launching pad for the exceptional woman's bid for power.

However, these plays do not throw light on the woman's more recent use of her newfound space in the social sphere. Theatre does not seem to explore the breadth of this space. Sources other than theatre indicate that women in China today are negotiating the tightrope between modernization, economic independence and material comforts on the one hand, and tradition and state coercion on the other. The Beijing Women's Conference of 1995 notwithstanding, women's rights in China today are circumscribed by the Chinese negotiation of



human rights vs. state control. Melinda Tankard Reist, who has investigated and documented the abuse of women in international family planning programmes, reports: "In the People's Republic of China, a woman's body is not her own. China enforces an intrusive one-child-per-couple birth control policy (only slightly relaxed in outlying regions) with fertility decisions controlled by the State. [...] (T)he heavy hand of the Government reaches into the intimate lives of Chinese women and their partners with merciless precision (359-364). Theatre has failed to record such suffering. The State is vigilant and exercises stern surgical control over the arts and the media. The complex situation of women in China entering the twenty first century seems to be more than the theatre can handle.

One fact to be noted is that hardly any women playwrights are referred to in the literature about twentieth-century drama or theatre, the more public of the arts. A single volume of plays by three contemporary women finds mention in the relevant literature: *The Women Trilogy*, edited by Bai Fengxi. An anthology of women's writing published in Beijing in 1985, *Seven Contemporary Chinese Women Writers*, features seven fiction writers, but no playwright. In her article entitled "The New Era for Women Writers in China" Bettina Knapp, writing in 1991, lists the names and reviews the work of contemporary women writers. Her list includes novelists, short story writers and poets and one single woman connected with the theatre: Zhang Xinxin (1954 - ) "... one of China's most popular writers and theatrical directors, and also a poet" (Knapp 436). Zhang Xinxin is the author of noted novels like *Orchid Madness* and *On the Same Horizon*. She is the director of Beijing's Popular Arts Theatre. However, she is not a playwright – and this startling fact begs a question.

#### **4.4.1. Women and Theatre in India**

The discourse about gender in India is far from monolithic; as one surveys the field one discovers diverse strands. Anjum Katyal remarks on the deep tensions fissuring the area: "The divide between activists and theorists/writers/intellectuals is one of them. The divide between

rural and urban perspectives is another. That between differing politics and ideologies is a third; that between the upper and middle-classes and lower classes a fourth. The result is many differing forms and directions of feminist activity, one could say many differing feminisms" (52-53). These stances and positions are simultaneous and are discernible in the work of female and male writers in India.

The debate about women's place and space was far from peripheral to Bengali intellectuals, social reformers and writers. It claimed their attention inseparably from their nascent nationalist aspirations and urge for socio-economic reform. Banani Mukhia accurately puts this problematic within a larger perspective:

In the turbulent intellectual milieu of nineteenth century Bengal, it was the women's question that came to occupy the central space from Raja Rammohun Roy to Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and beyond. This space was marked by a growing tension between the existential reality of women's abject subjugation to men's authority – enlarged and sanctified as a social norm – and the rising aspirations of the reform movements which predicated general societal advancement upon at least partial emancipation of women – a transition between history's inertia and imagination's soaring momentum (15-16).

The growing visibility of the woman's question was due to various contributory factors. Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and other reformers viewed the treatment of women, including child marriage, the plight of widows, and *sati*, as a national shame. Intellectuals exposed to Western liberal thinking and practices grew aware of the weaknesses in the Indian social system. Later, the Brahmo Samaj<sup>1</sup> reformers and others widened the scope of the effort to embrace education and roles within the family. These issues were nuanced and passionately debated, as for instance, it came to be observed that education for women was primarily meant to provide better housewives for men. The departure from 'feminine ideals' and the 'baneful' effect of Western culture and education on women aroused much ire in conservative circles. By the end of the nineteenth century a number of women from the wealthy families in

Bengal like Hiranmoyee Devi, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Swarnakumari Devi, and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani had ventured into writing poetry, biography, stories and essays for magazines (Bhattacharya, M. 1-16). This was incontestably a bid for power. Tanika Sarkar notes that the anti-colonial effort in India offered some liberating opportunities: "[...] the emergence of the political woman and her alliance with male-dominated politics loosened up many of the material constraints of patriarchy, even when they were not explicitly named" (Sarkar xiv). However, the literature of the first decades of the twentieth century, including journalism and fiction, witness to the still fragile status of women's 'empowerment'. The theatre, particularly, reflects the resistance of patriarchy to contestations by women.

#### 4.4.2. Women and Theatre in West Bengal

Traditionally, the theatre of rural Bengal was an exclusively male stronghold. *Jatra*, the most popular folk theatre, was produced by men, with a cast of men. The stories did, of course, include women characters, and women did form part of the audience, but the perspective was entirely patriarchal. If this was true for rural Bengal, the scenario was somewhat different in urban circles when the westernized proscenium theatre made its appearance in Calcutta in the late nineteenth century. As playwrights like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Girish Chandra Ghosh burst upon the scene with their prolific writing and passion for the theatre, they opened the doors of theatre to women. Until the advent of girls on stage, the female roles had been played by men, and less frequently, by boys; the male impersonators were *bhadralok* (upper middle class men), whose traditional occupation had never been theatre. The breakthrough came when Madhusudan Dutt insisted on hiring women to act in his play *Shormishtha*. The first four professional women were Golap, Shyama, Jagattarini and Elokeshi, all from the prostitutes' quarters. In her introduction to the biography of the famous actress Binodini Dasi, Rimli Bhattacharya indicates the process of the transition:

For one, women as actors were now in demand: Madhusudan stated that "clean-shaven gentlemen just would not do any more for [his] heroines." Also, "despite impressive social reform movements, increasingly, seclusion of women itself became a marker of respectability. Correspondingly, the taint of money – or 'professionalism', in what was perceived as art or a nationalist enterprise, was held against those who came to the theatre simply to earn a living" (11-12).

Women were now extremely vulnerable. The young girls who joined the theatre came from *a-bhadra* (dis-respectable) households. Widows, poor women from the lower classes and discarded wives of high-caste or *kulin* men trooped to Calcutta to make a living. Ashis Nandy notes that "one marker of kulin status was hypergamy," and records that Madanmohan Bandopadhyay had "established his kulinhood" by marrying fifty-four times (52).

Actresses like Binodini gained great renown for their powerful acting, singing and dancing; they often earned tidy sums of money. However, they were totally dependent on their male directors/managers/playwrights. Very often their sustenance depended on whether they had a regular 'Babu' or patron. It is not surprising that these actresses used their sexual favours to secure for themselves challenging roles on stage, and conversely used their careers to gain themselves wealthy and generous patrons. But however successful and glamorous she may have grown to be, Binodini Dasi was ever marginalized in the world of theatre. She invested most of her savings in the project of building a new theatre that would belong not to a commercial board but to the artistes themselves. She was broken-hearted when the men back-tracked on their promise of naming it after her, and called it the Star Theatre. She was betrayed, she believed, because she was a woman, a prostitute – though she was one of the chief elements of the spectacle, and a much toasted actress of high theatre circles.

Rimli Battacharya indicts the theatre for obliterating the work of the actress towards gaining worth in/through work: "Bindoni can only be cast as either *patita* ('fallen woman') or *bhadramahila* (middle class woman) or both, but little or no space can be accorded to her sense of identity as a worker who is a woman" (195). Indeed, below the surface of its apparent

liberality, the metropolitan Bengali theatre in the nineteenth century made rather conservative statements about women.

This is not to say that women were not contesting patriarchy in theatre even at such a point of time. Another section of women was entering theatre through other doors. A substantial number of plays were written and published by women at the turn of the nineteenth century. Swarnakumari Devi, an elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore, wrote not only novels, short stories, poetry and articles for the press, but also plays like *Paak Chakra* and *Koney Badal* (Mukherjee 31). Sukumari Dutta (1857-1890) wrote and produced a play at a time of personal financial crisis, in 1875. She also participated in the Hindoo Female Theatre, an all-woman company which performed in the 1880s and which unsuccessfully tried to organise an acting school. Tarasundari Dasi (1875-1948) taught acting and financed many productions. Niharbala (1898-1954) a versatile singer-dancer-actress choreographed dance sequences and trained actresses. Tripti Mitra opened her own drama school in 1983 (Battacharya 43). Also, 'respectable' women did act in the amateur theatre of the day, where productions were mounted by individual playwrights or upper class families like the Tagore family at Joransanko. It was commonplace for daughters and daughters-in-law of the Tagore family, for instance, to perform in the private theatre hall at their estate at Joransanko. In large part this freedom derived from the fact that these were private performances and that many of the Tagore clan were members of the Brahmo Samaj, a progressive reformist organization. The Brahmo Samaj encouraged the education of women and actively involved them in literary activities including journalism and the theatre, and saw the stage as a forum for discussion of women's issues like *sati* and widow remarriage. This was however, viewed by the bulk of conservative Hindu Bengali society as an aberration and an instance of corrupting westernization threatening the fabric of Indian society.

Thus, the stranglehold of patriarchy over theatre in Bengal did not go unchallenged in the first half of the twentieth century. The stretching of the traditional boundaries came from two diametrically opposite quarters: the prostitutes who came as professional actresses to the public stage, and the educated reformist upper class in the private theatre. It was not, however, until

the post-Independence period, that women actors came into their own in Bengali theatre. Among the contributory factors for this growing agency of women were the inclusion by political leaders of women in the freedom struggle, and the resultant self-confidence; the gradual empowerment of women through the new democratic Constitution; and the ideology and practice of the nascent Communist Party in Bengal. In the second half of the twentieth century women actors and directors had found their place in the sun. Usha Ganguli is a prominent name among theatre directors and actors in Kolkata. Women like Seema Ganguly and Rohini Mukherjee of the Jana Sanskriti empower other women through the grass-roots Theatre of the Oppressed. However, despite the surge in the current of women writers in the fields of the short story, the novel and poetry, the realm of writing for the theatre has not been widely accessed by women in India.

#### **4.4.3. Usha Ganguli: directing, acting, translating**

Usha Ganguli is a well-known figure in theatre circles in India. She has been leading the theatre group Rangakarmee which performs generally in Hindi. Born in Jodhpur, she relocated to Kolkata in the 1950s. A lover of dance, she trained in Bharat Natyam, took a Master's degree in Hindi literature, and joined the Kalamandir Theatre Group. Unhappy with the unprofessional functioning of the group, she eventually became a founder member of Rangakarmee, a group that has worked consistently for the last twenty-eight years. Usha Ganguli dances, acts and directs. Her solo performance in her own original play *Antaryatra* (The Journey Within) was very well received, and has elicited wide debate. Ganguli spearheads Hindi theatre in Kolkata, wooing Hindi-speaking and Hindi-knowing audiences in Bengal, a feat on its own; among her many performances one of her favourites is *Rudali*, which she has translated and adapted from Mahasweta Devi's story into a play and turned into a powerful women's text. Ganguli's themes often highlight social injustice and exploitation of the weak. She has been honoured with innumerable awards including the Safdar Hashmi Puraskar from Uttar Pradesh's Sangeet Natak Akademi and the national Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1998.

This director is entirely serious about her work in the theatre, and gender must not be allowed to cloud more important matters. Ganguli remarks: "There is a place beyond masculinity or femininity where our artistic selves are. I feel bad when I am described as a 'mahila kalakar' [woman artiste] or 'mahila nirdeshak' [woman director]. I feel I am being demoted in stature. A director is a director; a male director is not called a 'man director'. [...] That is one place in the artistic world where we rise above gender ("Colloquium" 154).

Yet, Usha Ganguli is deeply concerned about the exploitation of women and many of the plays she has directed and acted in witness to this commitment: *Lok Katha*, *Mahabhoj*, *Beti Ayee*, *Court Martial*, *Holi*, *Mukti*, *Rudali*, *Himmat Mai* and others ( Mukherjee, Tutun 32). It is this keen interest in women's stories that leads her to Mahasweta Devi's Bengali story *Rudali*. With the author's stamp of approval, she translates it into a play in Hindi. In the process, the discourse turns from that of class, which is Devi's choice, to a woman's narrative. The play is metamorphosed from a tale of rural exploitation to a story of an exploited woman, and staged in proscenium theatres for an urban audience. Like Devi, Ganguli refuses to sentimentalize or romanticize her characters. Through deft adaptation to a realistic style of presentation, she creates a powerful account of the struggles of women in rural India. Commenting on the transformation of *Rudali*, Anjum Katyal writes about the different focus of each of these two women:

Here we have two important women practitioners in the field of cultural production, who see themselves as progressive, and who are responsible for works which are widely perceived as feminist – or, if one quarrels with that term, as important from a woman's perspective. We see how their texts are shaped by an agenda, by priorities which are in turn determined by a basic ideological position and by the purpose of the text: in one case, activist intervention, in the other, performance for an urban audience. The metamorphosis of 'Rudali' allows us to address the simultaneity and asymmetry of feminist stances and positions in this country today (53).

Not least among the achievements of Usha Ganguli is the fact that she translates across the Indian languages and stages plays in many parts of the country. This is a significant trend in India today, a recognition and celebration of the multilingual nature of contemporary Indian society. Aparna Dharwadkar strongly states her views in this respect:

(M)ultilingualism and circulation in their post-independence forms have had a pioneering effect on dramatic authorship, theatre theory, and the textual life of drama. Playwrights who conceive of themselves as literary authors write with the anticipation that the original text of a play will soon enter the multilingual economy of translation, performance, and publication. [...] All these playwrights construct authorship and authority as activities that must extend across languages to sustain a national theatre movement in a multilingual society. [...] Thus, for both authors and audiences, the total effect of active multilingualism and circulation is to create at least four distinct levels for the dissemination and reception of contemporary Indian plays – the local, the regional, the national, and the international ( Dharwadkar 83-4).

This is an intelligent and positive reading of the situation of the theatre scene in India, to which a director like Usha Ganguli, for one, has been making a noteworthy contribution for the last quarter of a century:

#### **4.4.4. The Bengali Plays:**

##### ***Evam Indrajit***

The appearance of *Evam Indrajit* on the stage in 1965 resounded in the minds and hearts of theatre practitioners and theatre lovers in India. Rejecting realism, it presented in an absurdist vein, the mirror image of their own inarticulate angst. In the words of Satyadev Dubey, "It was about the Indian reality as they knew it; it was a theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations gnawing at the



hearts of the educated urban middle class" (90). This startling awareness that the play produces, includes a more than fleeting glimpse of the woman in Indian society.

She makes an appearance in the very first line of the play, as Auntie enters to berate the Writer for scribbling away to the neglect of basic necessities like eating. She is a stereotype, perhaps intended as a prototype. The stage directions/comments declare: " 'Auntie' enters. She is called 'auntie' here only for convenience. She could be 'mother', 'elder sister', anything. She is frantic because she can't make any sense of her boy's behaviour. But then, not being able to make sense is the prerogative of 'aunties.'" The Writer is feverishly in search of material for a play. As he tears sheet after sheet of his manuscript, Manasi makes her appearance – the woman who is his inspiration. Manasi has been viewed as " 'the creation of the mind' and perhaps an Indian counterpart of Jung's *anima* " (Dubey 90). The Mother/Auntie and Manasi present two dimensions of the feminine in *Evam Indrajit*.

Manasi and Indrajit have been friends for a long time and find companionship together. They walk in the park and talk of marriage but Manasi is unable to decide. They are cousins, their families will oppose the marriage and a girl must go by the rules. Eventually Indrajit moves to Bhopal and away from her. Later, when Manasi veers towards marriage, Indrajit is moving out of the country. He does marry, years later, when he returns, but he marries another woman, another Manasi. Manasi is the generic name assigned to the wife of Amal/Kamal/Vimal, the happy young wife in a recent marriage, the disgruntled middle-aged wife caught in an insipid marriage, the enraged and bitter older woman ranting against an irresponsible husband. Manasi (as well as Auntie/Mother) is everywoman, the caricature of every woman in the urban audience.

Manasi speaks for the undimmed spark of life in the human race. To Indrajit's claim "To seek a break in the unchanging rhythm of death is perhaps the most foolish and futile attempt of Man in this world", Manasi responds with "I may be a germ, but still I seek, seek without shame. The audacious assertion of life claims immortality in its brief spark." (41) The relevance of Manasi to his writing and to life does not escape the Writer. He declares that he is planning to call his play ' Amal, Vimal, Kamal, Indrajit and Manasi'. He pontificates:

Indrajit and Manasi. Indrajit and Manasi. As you all know, different conditions, different cultures, different countries have produced plays about Indrajit and Manasi. [...] The love of Indrajit and Manasi. An immortal dramatic theme...(15-16)

However, this grandiloquent pronouncement finds no corresponding space in the play. The love of Indrajit and Manasi peters out with a whimper. Like Amal, Kamal and Vimal, Manasi too, fails to make it to the title. But like the rest of them, and Indrajit, she has to go on walking. As Manasi insists repeatedly, "You have to go on walking", since "there is no escape" (55).

In Badal Sircar's play, the woman is assigned a fair amount of space. Her several avatars are presented: nurturer, friend, wife, mother – all roles she plays vis-à-vis the men in her life. She is straight-jacketed by rules and roles, and fits into stereotypes, like her male counterparts Amal, Vimal and Kamal. However, unlike them, she is endowed, close to the end of the play, with a degree of awareness of her own condition and that of humankind. This is a growing reflectivity that she seems to have in common with the Writer and Indrajit. Woman shares with Man the absurdist's location on the 'unromantic', 'un-lofty' walk on the road.

### ***Mareech, the Legend***

*Mareech, the Legend* by Arun Mukherjee does not touch upon gender issues. It does not make place in its rather eclectic cast for a single woman character. And except for a reference to a story in the Ramayana – where Ravana's sister Surpanakha is wounded by Lakshman, and Ravana sets out to take revenge on Rama by abducting Sita – the entire play is totally devoid of themes or viewpoints that consider women. Surpanakha is spoken of as "beloved by all." Mareech, the demon, decries her humiliation at the hands of mere mortals. But when he learns that it is Rama who has rebuffed her, Rama, whom Mareech admires and worships, he changes his tune with a stereotypical sexist accusation:

MAREECH. Who in the name of God

Asked her to offer her love so shamelessly?

A human has rejected

The advances of a demon-damsel

I see nothing amiss here. (541)

Mareech refuses to help abduct Rama's wife, Sita. Ravana reminds Mareech that his own mother was killed by Lakshman and Rama and offers him this opportunity to avenge her. But Mareech will not weigh even the loss of his mother against his loyalty for Rama. He declares his mother's "irksome antics" were to blame and she lost her life in battle and he will not hold Rama and Lakshman responsible. Mareech, repulses Ravana, but eventually does obey him and dies at the hands of Rama. The women in the play are not characters, they are only talked of. And they are projected merely as excuses for action by men.

Why are there no female characters in the play? The Ustad provides a facetious answer. When the dancer who is supposed to do the golden deer dance does not show up, since he has sprained a leg, the Ustad rants: "If there's one thing I know, it's that girls are best at all this singing and dancing." But the girl he had hired was snatched away by a circus party manager. "Good riddance, in a way. Because when she danced, some people would whistle – some would throw burning glances and some would even throw coins, and the real idea of the show would be wiped out" (564).

Perhaps leaving out women characters was a choice made in response to the exigencies of the performance situation. *Mareech, the Legend* was written to be staged by travelling troupes, and male characters might more easily be found. Or perhaps the cursory treatment of women is a satiric reflection of the social reality. These questions are unresolved, but beg to be asked when one remembers that Arun Mukherjee was an active member of the IPTA, which propagated the empowerment of women in Independent India.

### ***Hunting the Sun***

In contrast to Arun Mukherjee's near total exclusion of the gender dimension from his play, Utpal Dutt, a committed Communist Party member, devotes considerable space in *Hunting the Sun* to issues and themes that relate to women. Three major characters in the play are women, and one may even be justified in suggesting that the protagonist is Indrani, the Shudra disciple of the Buddhist monk Kalhan. Counterpoised to Indrani, the heroine, are Mahasveta, the outspoken and worldly-wise prostitute, and Urmilla, the Empress with insatiable sexual appetites and the cunning to satisfy them.

If *Hunting the Sun* explores questions of power, as the title indicates, then women are accorded wide space within the scope of the play. The portrait of Mahasveta, the prostitute, servicing rich clients, dancing in the street in honour of the gods by royal order, and bribing the officials to keep from being thrown into prison indicates a class of women who manage to fend for themselves by their sexual favours. Mahasveta is depicted as a woman not without sensitivity, but in the last analysis a woman without honour, in that she is prepared to go to any length to save her skin, including presenting false testimony in court against Indrani and her Guru Kalhan. The Empress Urmila is the butt of ridicule not only of General Hayagreeva whom she shamelessly pursues, but even from Dardura, the Vidushaka, the court fool. In contrast we watch the young Indrani, low born but highly principled and high spirited speak forthrightly for the teachings of her master and in opposition to superstition and blind faith. She dies for her totally unacceptable subversion of caste hierarchy and challenge of political authority, but not before she is imprisoned and tortured, and not before she gains the respect and passionate love of General Hayagreeva. She manages to salvage some of her Guru's books and though she is unable to protect her beloved teacher, she dies for what she believes. Indrani and her lover are trampled upon by an elephant in a grand public spectacle.

In *Hunting the Sun* women are not portrayed as weak or as victims. Each of the characters faces psychological and social pressures but eventually makes considered choices.

Mahasveta, the prostitute is touched by Kalhan's sensitivity when he addresses her as mother, but eventually chooses to betray her better self. Urmila succumbs to the temptations of unbridled power and passion. Indrani chooses to follow her best lights, even though this leads her to death. Utpal Dutt has drawn forceful women characters and has placed them on par with men. He has done this from a male perspective, 'raising' women to the level of men in the social milieu, to dramatize his theme of rejection of superstition and oppression. One cannot claim, however, that in *Hunting the Sun* we find women's perspectives. The women we meet here are generally exceptional women; on the other hand, the universe of the common woman in the grind of daily work, exploitative relationships, and struggle for survival, finds no place in Utpal Dutt's play.

### ***Water***

Mahasweta Devi has centred the tribal community and its unacknowledged suffering in the vast body of her literary work. By her own admission, class and tribe considerations far outweigh her other perspectives, including that of gender. Nonetheless, a reading of her stories, particularly her *Breast Stories*, and of her plays, including *Mother of 1084* and *Bayen*, reveal a thick vein of concern for the voice of woman. Here we find fertile material on offer for a gendered reading of her work. We note too, that Mahasweta Devi is one of the few women playwrights in India today – though, as we noted earlier, she dismisses the claim that she is essentially a *woman* writing. Her play *Water* depicts a wide range of male characters, including Maghai the old water-diviner of the Dome tribe who gains heroic stature. Counterpoised to this focus on the male stance, we meet the mytho-poetic figure of the Charsa river, the holy mother, the nether Ganga, which flows into significance in the title of the play. Here is nature as the feminine, and Maghai has had a lifelong affair with the river. It is a deep love-hate relationship which provides a sub-plot within the larger framework of the story of oppression of the

'untouchables' by the upper classes. The river is a "whore" forever enticing Maghai, never fulfilling her promise of abundant water. She is a co-wife to Phulmani, Maghai's wife.

The river is a goddess, the deity who commands Maghai's unflinching devotion and obedience. He draws his identity from his service to her. "This husband of mine is a water-diviner, he worships the water, draws out the hidden water." (103) For Maghai the goddess is a mother who prevails over, and provides for, her children:

MAGHAI. Then, from the bowels of the earth, the nether Ganga herself (raises his folded palms to his head), the mother deity of all the hidden waters, spoke: You're my chosen priest. I'm the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you'll gather the offerings, pray for water, and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig. (111)

Maghai is the priest mediating between the divine and the community. He agonizes over his failure to provide water to a tribe dying of thirst, while the upper caste Santosh monopolizes all the wells. He cannot refuse to be the water-diviner for Santosh. When he does invoke her, Maghai looks inward and discovers her indwelling presence within him. "Nobody has seen her ever, no one knows how she looks, my goodness! So there's no idol, no puja for her. When I pray for the sign for water, I pray to her in silence, within myself." (112) When he does receive the insight to decode the offering of perennial water that the river has been making to him all his life, the courage to do what he must gushes from within.

The knowledge of the great and powerful abundance of the river waters empowers Maghai with confidence in himself and his role in the community. He grows in stature as he leads the people to build a dam that will ensure their perennial supply of water. Inevitably, the authorities – male and aggressive – hit out at the threat of a community maturing in courage and assertiveness. They shoot Maghai, whose body is finally snatched away in the enraged embrace

of the waters that burst forth from the broken dam. "Look at her, there she goes, there, there, carrying Maghai away" (146).

Maghai, the water-diviner is depicted as an impotent and frustrated man until he listens to the promptings of the river – who finally makes herself heard through Jiten, the schoolteacher. It is when he does hear the voice of his wife/whore/mother/goddess, the voice within, to which he prays, that Maghai can rise to his full potential and become an effective leader. When the feminine principle within himself is acknowledged and responded to, the leader gains potency, the community gains muscle. The establishment is, of course, too strong to be easily resisted, but the subversion has begun.

*Water* is peopled with the shadowy women of the village who live their lives in poverty and hard work, scratching the bed of the river with their fingers to collect a little water overnight. But the lack of water is the enemy of domesticity or joy, the children die of starvation and thirst, Dhura cannot contemplate getting married when he is unable to offer his wife a comfortable existence. The only rounded female character is that of Phulmani, Maghai's wife. She is no delicate submissive housewife, but a compelling personality, agonizing with the men-folk at their terrible emasculation by the upper caste Santosh who denies them access to water, pays them low wages for their labour and siphons off the 'drought-relief' provided by the government. She can easily be roused to anger by the injustice of the situation of her family and community. She weeps when she considers that her son Dhura too may die in the violence and hunger that has claimed many young men, including her own four sons. She despairs of ever having a grandchild to hold in her lap. She is loud in her protest, even against her husband's docility and fatalism, but will not allow her son to be disrespectful to his father. Phumani is often the voice of sanity and wisdom in the community. She prods and cautions the men, leads the women with their pots to the river, and leads them in their ritual lamentation in the nature of a Greek chorus:

There's none to care for us,  
For our hearts bleeding. (106)

Though her short stories and novels, and to a lesser extent her plays, have been seen by scholars as sites of feminist discourse, Mahasweta Devi herself clearly intends that gender be subsumed into the discourse of class. Samik Bandyopadhyay, who interviewed Devi, comments that to emphasize gender at the expense of class is a "denial of history as she sees it" (Introduction 16). Devi states her perspective unequivocally: "When I write, I never think of myself as a woman... These are stories of people's struggle, their confrontation with the system... I look at the class, not at the gender problem" ( Bandyopadhyaya, Introduction 16). Critic and translator Anjum Katyal comments that Devi's text "shows us that gender and class need not be viewed as polarities; that one's discourse can be informed by class and simultaneously be gendered. One political stance need not rule out the other" (17). In Mahasweta Devi's plays, gender and class perspectives complement and enrich each other. Her preoccupation with the struggle for the rights of the oppressed bring her into close contact with the common folk – including unforgettable women. She confesses that the lives of bonded labour have provided her with a character like Dopadi and believes that their stories also impart a narrative immediacy to her language.

Mahasweta Devi locates women within a discourse of subalternity that includes both genders, into the domain of tribal oppression where men as well as women are seen as marginalized. But within this framework, one can read a kind of 'sub-subalternity' in the disempowerment of women, revealed in the "entrapment of female characters in an unyielding, traditional society" (Mukherjee 20). Some of the impotence felt by Phulmani can be heard in her cry:

PHULMANI. ( raising her hands skywards ) : Could I turn into a thunderblast and pierce the hardened earth, or turn into a cloud and pour into the ravines, I'd find solace. God, you are not there. If you were there once, you're dead now. Else how'd Santosh alone have all your water, your gift to all living creatures? (106)



Of all the plays under consideration here, *Water* is the one that comes closest to genuinely touching upon the daily experiences of millions of nameless women, and weaving them into a larger context of social exploitation. It has been noted earlier that theatre in China failed to do justice to crucial aspects of the lives of present-day women. A shortcoming of a similar nature can be laid at the door of Bengali theatre.

#### **4.4.5. The Women of Bengal that Theatre Forgot**

How did Bengali theatre respond to the cataclysmic events around the Partition of India in 1947 – and Bengal in particular? The political dismemberment of India along religious lines into India and Pakistan had far-reaching effects in every sphere of the lives of the people of Bengal, the public as well as the private spheres. The pain and suffering caused in the process was on a scale unprecedented in South Asia.

Women have always been at the receiving end of great cruelty in any catastrophe that has befallen the human race, whether war, natural calamity or poverty. The experience of Partition was no exception. Urvashi Butalia records: "thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders [...] were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced into marriage, forced back into what the two sides defined as "their proper homes", torn apart from their families once during the Partition by those who abducted them, and again, after the Partition, by the state which tried to 'recover' and 'rehabilitate' them" (17).

A chapter that explores the relationship between theatre and women seemed to be the appropriate place to study how theatre had responded to the unspeakable suffering of women in Bengal around Partition. This study yielded only silence. To the unspeakable suffering of women, theatre responded precisely by not speaking. This is a most unsettling finding, indicating the total and complete absence of theatre writing and performance in West Bengal from the 'Partition literature' that gradually arose on both sides of the border.

Stories like Sa'dat Hasan Manto's "Mozel", Satinath Bhaduri's "The Mass Leader", and Sulekha Sanyal's "The Confrontation" register the brutal attacks on women's bodies and identities. These short stories give voice to the nature of individual experience. They represent a shift away from the debates of high politics and hegemonizing discourses and the history of blame. It is the short story, as a genre, that ventures most courageously into the terrain of women's lives and the catastrophe that shattered them. Some of them attempt to map the groping trajectories of women re-discovering their selfhood and re-defining their identities in the face of forced migration, rape, violence and blame for acts to which they were forcibly subjected. More recently, autobiographical accounts are beginning to surface. *Old Maps and New: Legacies of the Partition* (2004) by Kavita Panjabi is one such journal by a woman who today teaches at the Jadavpur University in Kolkata.

But theatre in Bengal seems to have chosen to forget, or to maintain a studied and stubborn silence in voicing women's experiences around Partition. This refusal to embrace the trauma of the women in their society sounds extremely uncharacteristic of a people who vigorously debated women's issues like child marriage, widow remarriage, women's education and political participation a few years earlier. The apparent amnesia is confirmed if one surveys the themes of the major theatre productions in the entire fifty years under study. In a detailed list of productions in Bengali theatre from 1944 to 2000 compiled by the *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, the sixty six titles run the gamut of themes from the mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy to famine ravaging the land, from translations of Pirandello to adaptations of Chekhov. But one fails to find a single exploration of the experience of Partition in general or of the excruciating suffering of Bengali women in particular. What could be the reasons?

Journalist Pamela Philipose, trying to gather views of painters, writers and theatre personalities, concludes that Indians have, by and large, been unable to come to terms with what is the most catastrophic moment in their recent history (Ravikant 161). Partition seems to have been relegated by the vast body of creative artists for more than half a century to near total oblivion. Writers might have been apprehensive that any attempt at characterization and

contextualization would be interpreted as partisan. Objectivity would be a difficult proposition for anyone who has lived through that traumatic experience. Another factor responsible for this abysmal omission may be the fact that the social and political agendas that caused Partition are still unshakably in place. While historians and academicians calmly discuss Partition as a "transfer of power" and debate "whether Partition was inevitable", theatre persons may be only too aware that passions are still raw and sentiments too volatile to risk igniting yet another of the recurring communal riots that traumatize the nation. Unlike a novel or a short story that is read in the privacy of one's home, theatre uses public performance spaces and addresses large audiences that could be provoked to raging violence and carnage. Years earlier the famous Bengali actress Binodini Dasi (1863-1941) relates in her autobiography incidents when the audience was carried away by similar communal passions: at a performance of Jyotirindranath Tagore's play *Sarajini* (1876) with its stereotypes of Hindus and Muslims, "the entire audience grew so agitated that they could not restrain themselves anymore and leapt over the footlights crying murder" (Dasi 152).

The theatre person who has come closest to touching upon this issue is Usha Ganguli, in the trilogy *Badnam Manto, Sarhad Par Manto* and *Manto - Aur Manto*, (2004) adaptations from stories from the Urdu short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). This writer of short stories had lived through the horrors of Partition and had never really recovered from them: but the stories he wrote in Lahore have given voice to his experiences and his perceptions of women. In an interview with Ranjita Biswas in July 2004 Usha Ganguli dwells on her choice of subject:

RANJITA BISWAS: Why have you chosen to tackle Saadat Hasan Manto after all these years?

USHA GANGULI: Because he's still so very contemporary. Manto's stories on the Partition, the Hindu-Muslim divide, his humanist outlook are as alive today as at the time when he wrote them. Manto has always been an inspiration since I read his translated work in

Hindi (he wrote in Urdu) but frankly I didn't have the courage to tackle this vast and complicated subject. His comments on society were very subtle; he was never into politics yet the sensibilities were political in content. To turn them into a play was also very challenging. After my last play *Kashinama*, which took away a lot of my energy, I read and re-read Manto's work and wondered anew at the relevance of his work today. Besides, 2005 will be Manto's 50th death anniversary. It is a kind of tribute to the great writer and humanist.

RANJITA BISWAS: Is it also a response to our times when a Gujarat happens?

USHA GANGULI: Yes, in a way. The Gujarat incident made me feel helpless. It brought me closer to Manto as I delved into his book *Why I Write*. In a way, it seemed that what he had written about and foreseen continued to happen even 50 years after Partition

(Interview with Ranjita Biswas, *The Hindu*. Sept. 2004)

Ganguli's play is the nearest that theatre in Bengal has come to looking in the face at this particular instance of pain.

In the next section the scenario in Sri Lanka is investigated in terms of women's relationship with the theatre.

#### **4.5.1. Women and Theatre in Sri Lanka**

Women in Sri Lanka had no connection with any theatre tradition. Folk forms of theatre like the *Nadagama*, and the *Kolam* did exist in various regions of the land. No women acted in any of these performances, but there are records of some women in the audience.

However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that a significant urban theatre movement took shape in Sri Lanka, and women gained entry into it. As in Calcutta, in Colombo too, the middle class came to be exposed to visiting British drama troupes performing

Shakespeare and other European classics. No less was the influence of the Parsi theatre that visited Sri Lanka from Bombay, and fired the imagination of the urban elite with the possibilities it suggested for a local theatre. It was through the initiative of men like John de Silva and Charles Don Bastian that the new *Nurti* form was nurtured and popularized in the first few decades of the twentieth century. To begin with, women's roles were performed by male impersonators of women, but as the *Nurti* plays developed into a flourishing commercial enterprise, and audiences needed to be wooed so as to ensure financial success, the stage was set for the new enticement: the entry of Sri Lankan women into theatre.

The *Nurti* plays undertook a nationalistic project. At a period of history when Sri Lankan aspirations for freedom from colonial rule were escalating, the theatre was recognized as a fulcrum of the nationalist agenda. Here was an opportunity for the media to influence hundreds and thousands of people, even those who could not read the print media, to be impacted by mime, song, dance and dialogue. In the process, large numbers all over the country could enter into, and reinforce, assumptions, world-views and cultural practices held in common. At this point of time theatre in Sri Lanka grew into a powerful vehicle for propagating ideology and commenting on the socio-political situation. Sinhala women became an intrinsic part of this nationalist project in more ways than one.

Sinhala playwrights like John de Silva and Charles Dias exploited the space offered by theatre and used language and stories selected and adapted from mythology, history and other sources to a conscious political end. Neloufer de Mel elaborates:

Their goal was to forge a Sinhala consciousness among the audience which would be central in the anti-colonial/British drive that gathered momentum in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this project Sinhala women, as embodiments of the community, took on particular roles. From Sita in the *Ramayana* to the queen in *Daskon Natakaya* (1888), Sirisangabo's queen in *Sirisangabo Charitaya* (1903) and Ehelepla Kumarihamy in *Sri Vickrama Rajasinghe* (1906), queens and aristocratic ladies drawn from historical legends and Buddhist Jataka stories perform the roles of dutiful wives, good mothers and chaste

partners. The aristocracy, by its very nature was inaccessible, distant and therefore to be "aspired" to. The constructions of aristocratic feminised identity were therefore formulated to fit a patriarchal framework metonymic of a large nationalistic discourse and design. They would inculcate respect for the indigenous culture, show up the foreign ones as debased, and inspire the audience, through the personal sacrifice, decorum and selflessness enacted on stage, to be courageous participants in the nationalist struggle for independence (58-59).

As de Mel indicates, women in Sri Lanka at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth became an important location on which nationalism was constructed.

Playwright John de Silva was on the forefront of this movement to define Sinhala identity and culture with reference to women. Not unlike the situation in West Bengal, the education of women was looked upon in an ambiguous light. Neloufer de Mel clarifies some of the issues at work:

Counterpoised to the chaste and dutiful woman as embodiment of the nation are those who have come under the influence of western colonial rule and culture. They are pilloried in the nationalist theatre as in John de Silva's *Sinhala Parabhava Natakaya* (A Satire on the Modern Sinhalese) performed in 1902.[...] Women were disallowed the cosmopolitanism permitted to men, and their duty to nurture future generations in Sinhala culture, language and the Buddhist religion was reiterated with greater vigour (59).

John de Silva was himself a product of the new cosmopolitanism shaping Sri Lankan society. His bi-culturalism is visible in the fact that he adapted Shakespeare even as he wrote original plays in Sinhala. This cosmopolitanism was not allowed to benefit Sinhala women. It was not reflected in the characterization of women in de Silva's plays. Woman became a site for the construction of stereotypical Sinhala identity, and patriarchy saw the need to fix her as a repository of tradition and a bearer of values for the future. When women in Sri Lanka began to ask for an English education, they came in for satire and ridicule in theatre.

In the years of nationalistic awakening and resistance to colonialism gender became symbolically interlinked with nationalist discourse. In Sri Lanka, as the ethnic antagonisms hardened, the Sinhala Buddhist conservatives devoted all their efforts to maintaining the hegemony of the majority within the country and subordinating the ethnic minorities. Kumari Jayawardena reveals that gender can be viewed as a core element in the ethnic issue. The post-Independence effort to re-inscribe a national identity developed on deeply ethnic and religious lines and women came to be looked upon "as upholders of cultural and religious identities and as the progenitors of a pure unpolluted community through their roles as good wives and mothers" (*Religion and Political Conflict* 162). Women were postulated as mothers of heroic males, in opposition to the Tamil separatist struggle.

In the next section a prominent theatre woman, Annie Boteju, is briefly placed under the spotlight in a bid to explore the gendering of theatre in Sri Lanka.

#### **4.5.2. Annie Boteju: portrait of the first Sinhala actress**

Annie Boteju joined the Tower Hall stage in 1917 as the first professional Sinhala actress. She can be viewed as a significant figure in the national theatre in Sri Lanka; as a contributing agent in the modernization of the country's theatre; and as a visible sign of the gendering of the nation. She gained huge acclaim as an actress-singer, had her voice recorded on gramophone for HMV and other reputed companies, and was employed by two rival theatre companies. She was highly paid, received awards and trophies and gold sovereigns from her dotting audience. In later years, Annie and her second husband Edwin Perera ran their own theatre company.

Like the playwright John de Silva, who was also her patron, Boteju was an avowed nationalist, and theirs was a nationalism that carried deep racist and communal overtones. (Amunugama 288) Like de Silva, she voiced anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim sentiments, as did other members of the Tower Hall theatre. Her painstakingly constructed persona was that of the staunch nationalist, the personification of all things Sinhalese, the icon of Sinhala womanly virtue.

The personal life of this celebrated actress belied the image of the traditional 'respectable' Sinhala lady. Her sexuality was transgressive and certainly not in keeping with traditional bourgeois respectability. Neloufer de Mel seeks to interpret this problematic oscillation between stage respectability and off-stage promiscuity. "Why [...] did the Tower Hall patrons and playwrights, desperate to make the theatre "respectable" and acceptable to middle class morality, accommodate such transgression? The answer lies in the fact that actresses had, by this time become valuable capital" (89). The actress found herself commodified in the theatre. Paradoxically, this very commercial value strengthened the hand of the actress, and she gained leverage on the bargaining table. Annie Boteju claimed that the salary she received was unjust and forcefully negotiated contracts with rival companies, the Vijaya Ranga Sabha and the Arya Sinhala Sabha. The woman, in this case jettisoned the identity of victim, and ensured that theatre companies weighed their obligations. The theatre of the twentieth century offered her many possibilities – including tradition and modernity – and the actress asserted her agency. During her years on stage Annie Boteju was a very rich woman. When she died, in 1982, around eighty two years of age, she was a near pauper, forgotten by everybody. The tides of her life had risen and fallen with the early nationalist Sinhala theatre as she sought to reconcile the pulls of private and public spheres, the demands of personal life, of theatre, and of nationalist ideals of womanhood.

In the next section the plays from Sri Lanka come in for examination. What light do they cast on women in Sri Lankan society and theatre?

#### **4.5.3. The Sinhala Plays:**

##### ***A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy***

The family in *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* includes a Mother and a Grandmother – and they do not as much as exchange a single word. Written in the absurdist



genre, the play features four paste-board figures for characters, without any depth of characterization. The four characters are almost allegorical, with Ranjit and his dead brother Upali clearly indicating the Biblical fratricidal relationship of Cain and Abel <sup>2</sup>. Father and Mother are modern man and woman – he, harried about sales conferences and club meetings, she, as preoccupied with making a good deal with some “auction people” who “came for the cane furniture” as she is about the fact that their son Ranjit has just killed their son Upali. Father and Mother bicker and quibble over trifles, until the Father cracks under the strain. They then admit their grief and anxiety and mourn the loss of their son.

It is the Grandmother who, stone deaf and bemused, juxtaposes the fratricide against news reports of mass graves in Bangladesh and Carnival in Rio, and sings out of tune ‘O come and mourn with me a while’, a hymn sung only on Good Friday. The Grandmother, a chorus-like figure, is the voice of wisdom and spirituality that refuses to conform to the horrifying mundane reality. But the Grandmother is shooed away into her room, and the voice of *sophia* or wisdom is blotted out of earshot. The play uses Christian imagery, and if Ranjit and Upali represent Cain and Abel, and their parents stand for Adam and Eve, the Grandmother may embody the Spirit of the divine mourning for creation run amuck.

The two women in the play, the Mother and the Grandmother stand in stark contrast to each other. The Mother, flustered and restless, fusses with the same nervousness about the furniture, the tea, and her son’s murder by her other son. She seems to represent a generation that is materialistic and confused about its values. The Grandmother, who might be seen as somewhat crazy and out of touch with ‘reality’, actually reveals greater perspicuity. She grasps the absurdity of mass murders and Carnival celebrations being reported side by side in the newspaper. She mourns – not just the death of her grandson, but the suffering of humanity. Tragically, the Grandmother’s chanting of hymns and the Mother’s worries about ‘cleaning the mess’ of her son’s death never seem to find a meeting point. They are representatives of generations with very different values.

### ***The Golden Swan***

How does a play by the most noted Sinhala playwright, rooted in a Jataka tale, construct women's images? *The Golden Swan* draws for its story-line on a Jataka tale, the rich fund of stories of many births of the Buddha before enlightenment. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke acknowledges, "This ancient collection has proved an inexhaustible source of nourishment for Sinhalese literature and Sinhalese culture, and has shown itself to be perennially relevant" (*Modern Sri Lankan Drama* 8). Prof. Sarachchandra is the most honoured of Sinhalese men of letters, a diplomat, a one-time ambassador of Sri Lanka to France. In the post-independence decades he becomes a spokesman of Sinhalese culture, and his plays reinterpret cultural values and re-establish Sinhala identity. *The Golden Swan* was written in the author's seventy-fifth year. The playwright satirizes the acquisitiveness and commercialism of the new society and juxtaposes them with ideals of simple living and loyalty to one's kin. The Brahmin Woman in the play, having lost her husband, battles against poverty and struggles to raise her two young daughters. A reincarnation of her husband visits them, a *Sanyasi* by day, a golden swan by night. He leaves an exquisite golden feather for them each time he comes. Despite her children's remonstrations, the Brahmin woman sells the feathers for household expenses. As her avarice swells she binds the swan and plucks all its feathers for cash – even as she understands who the swan is and the fact that her rapacity will destroy him. The Brahmin Woman is the representative in the play of the rising tide of commercialism that brushes aside nobler consideration for beauty, gratitude or love. The *Sanyasi* embodies traditional Buddhist values of selflessness and serenity. The daughters represent the new generation that witnesses the clash of conflicting values and is helpless before the surge of avarice of their mother.

Like John de Silva in earlier decades, Sarachchandra finds in theatre an effective medium for reinscribing the Sinhala culture and stereotypical identity in the young nation. The frame of reference for this author for an exploration of human relationships, is the traditional Buddhist value system. Sarachchandra writes, "Greed and the attachment to worldly possessions have

been condemned in all religions, but in the Buddhist system of values, which guided Sinhalese society in the past, they acquired special emphasis. Today such values are despised" (*Development* 5-6). Clearly, Sarachchandra is critiquing the emerging social values, abhorrent to traditional Sinhala society. Interestingly, in *The Golden Swan* the threat to the traditional values comes from a woman, and the grieving over the loss comes, too, from young women. As in other traditional cultures women are here seen as vital repositories and transmitters of cultural values.

### ***The Bearer of Woes***

*The Bearer of Woes*, first performed in 1990, focusses its plot on a set of theatre persons – director, actors, sponsor – pressurized by circumstances to halt their performance and intervene in a quarrel between a Man and a Woman. The play problematises the impact of theatre on 'real' life, and the audience watches an inconclusive ending, where the Man poses an ultimatum to the Woman to go back to him, but where the Woman gives him a long look and walks away – with him following her in confusion. Though on the face of it, it is the Man, writer and idealist, who is the bearer of woes of the title, in another sense it is the woman who bears the greatest woes, and the play is a feminist statement.

Prasannajit Abeysuriya writes in the thick of social and political upheaval in Sri Lanka in the 1980 and 1990s. His play has a distinct flavour of social critique, his very theme exploring the capacity of theatre to connect to the insistent social suffering surrounding it. Pivotal to this investigation is the woman's perspective to the twists and turns society is taking, and the intractable dilemma of the relationship between her harsh reality and the Man's idealistic quest. The feminist perspective is created from a collage of fragments, small in the eyes of the dominant culture, but significant to the playwright's purpose. As the Woman disturbs the performance and seeks shelter in the theatre hall, the reactions are varied.

1<sup>st</sup> ACTRESS. Hurry up. Do whatever you have to do and let's get on with the performance. I have to go home alone after the show tonight.

1<sup>st</sup> ACTOR. Don't worry. You won't die from a short walk home alone. You call that a problem? Look at what this woman has to face!

SPONSOR. Such questions are irrelevant. Throw the woman out and let's get on with the show. (168-9)

But the Woman's problems will not go away. The Man stands there trying to persuade her by argument and main force to return to him, but she sees no future in a relationship where a Man cannot provide for her and her children. The Director proposes that they delve into history for enlightening solutions. The actors enact the story of Queen Madri who sacrificed all including her two children, so that her husband, King Vessantara, can attain his goal of Buddhahood. But history has no appeal for the Woman here and now.

The satire is unremitting. The Guards pounce upon the Man and exorcise him, parodying the draconian measures employed by the administration in Sri Lanka to restore law and order. Solutions are not in sight, everything has been attempted, persuasion, parody, violence. The Woman walks out, the Man follows her hurriedly. Undoubtedly, the specific problems of the woman caught in the throes of a war-ridden society have engaged the imagination of the playwright. Within the social satire in *The Bearer of Woes*, the problematic gender issues remain as usual, problematic.

#### **4.6. Conclusions**

A discussion of theatre and its manifestations in times of social transformation is enriched by a study of how gender has been recognized or problematised. In Asia, as elsewhere in the world, the woman's question has made its appearance in diverse forms. The education of women came to be a major item on the agenda of nationalists in West Bengal; the emancipation of women in the socio-economic-political arena was central to Chinese Communist ideology and practice; the Sri Lankan woman was posited as the embodiment and transmitter of Sinhala identity. How did theatre respond to the forces of change?

Women, who had traditionally been denied, almost totally, access to the profession of theatre, gained entry into it. Many women ventured into acting and over the years dispelled many of the prejudices connected with performing in such a public space. In the last few decades women directors and theatre critics have done a significant volume of creative work in India and Sri Lanka. A few exceptional women carved out for themselves, through theatre, spaces of undeniable power. Vast numbers of women in the audience discovered in theatre entertainment, debate and leisure spaces hitherto denied to them. Dramatic texts in China, West Bengal and Sri Lanka have located women well within their central discourses, generally nationalistic in character, as the discussion of most of the selected plays reveals. The theatre has been stretched in many directions and women have been given, and have appropriated for themselves, diverse and significant roles within it.

However, the doors of theatre have opened to women only by a narrow crack. The coercive nature of gender roles unmasked by Simone de Beauvoir and a stream of writers after her, the paradigm of knowledge and power indicated by Foucault, the silence of the subaltern underscored by Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, all these continue to prevail. One glaring lacuna on the theatre scene is the insignificant number of women playwrights in each of these Asian cultures even as the twenty first century begins. Though women short-story-writers, novelists, poets, screenwriters and theatre directors have burst upon the scene with voices and stories that demand to be heard, there is a dearth of women writers for theatre. Uma Ramachandran discusses the gendered nature of 'censorship' in India. She believes that women censor themselves in deference to social acceptance, fear of rejection by family and friends, and restrictions imposed by fathers and husbands. The censorship spills into the public sphere too.

But the market and literary establishment have their own subtle and unremarked forms of censorship, and equally subtle manipulations that sometimes barely conceal outright bias. More than one writer said she had been advised by literary 'well-wishers' to avoid certain subjects ( feminist poetry, sex, politics, religion) if she wanted to be published – but if she was arrogant enough to persist the attacks could be vicious (5).

Ramachandran quotes Malayalam poet Sugatha Kumari in her view that poetry by women may be tolerated because "society considers poetry a harmless activity, like buying a sari" (5). This kind of censorship is insidious and appears to have effectively silenced potential women playwrights who would have had to contest a much more public sphere.

Is part of the explanation to be found in the fact that drama is written to be performed; and that women recognize the logistics of production to be beyond many of them in a society still dominated by patriarchy, not only in economic circles but also in artistic spheres? Tutun Mukherjee concurs with such a view: "Theatre seems to reflect, like other cultural activities, an institutional structure in which artistic and administrative control still remains largely in the hands of men. Although this does not necessarily suggest a deliberate conspiracy of exclusion, it nevertheless reveals the existence of a complex consequence of received assumptions about the roles of the sexes in the social sphere" (4). These assumptions concern the perceived polarity between the public sphere, 'appropriate' for men, and the private sphere, 'natural' to women, and the work that is done within these domains.

Arguably, women may not push their way onto the playwriting scene because they may believe, like the Writer in *Evam Indrajit*, that they know no one and nothing. They may be deterred by the apprehension that their private realms of experience, their labours and relationships within their restricted worlds may fail to resonate with the public at large. One major consequence of this near absence of women playwrights is that women's experiences and women's worldviews do not really make it to the stage. Among the playwrights studied here, it is Mahasweta Devi who comes closest to entering women's lives in her work. *Mother of 1084* looks at the incomprehension of a mother of a murdered Naxalite young man; *Bayen* exposes the plight of Chandidasi who is ostracized as a witch by superstitious villagers; Devi's story *Rudali*, adapted by Usha Ganguli into a play, enters the minds and hearts of professional mourners and sex-workers; and *Water* brings us the vibrant figure of Phulmani whose struggle for drinking water combines the domestic and the public domains. Until more women write for the stage, play-scripts will voice perspectives that are inescapably masculine. In retrospect, we note that

when theatre has performed women's lives, this has been generally done within the dominant masculine discourses of national and cultural identity, skirting vital issues concerning women.

The emancipation of women within and beyond theatre in each of the three cultures being studied here is not easily quantified or understood in comparative terms. However, it appears that Chinese theatre and society have made, in the last fifty years, enormous strides in empowering women – economically and artistically – as audience, actors, or members of society in general. But this has been done within the highly controlled and regulated structure of the modern Chinese Communist political system, which valorizes unquestioning conformity over individual rights. The Sri Lankan theatre, moving, for the first time, out of the confines of religious ritual and folk celebration, has offered ample opportunities to a new class of educated women, as actors, researchers and critics. The Buddhist respect for learning and tolerance of debate, coupled with the urge to modernise Sinhala society seem to have accelerated the process. But the most positive indication of changing attitudes is apparent in India – and not only West Bengal – with the emergence of women directors of high caliber, grass-roots theatre workers and very recently, women playwrights. The democratic set up and the access of higher education to growing numbers of women have certainly been instrumental in this. Some ground has been gained for women on stage, and elsewhere in the theatre, but more spaces await exploration.

The gendering of theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka is a measure of the small but significant bid by women to challenge marginalization and move towards greater empowerment. The response of conservative societies to women in theatre and women's emancipation, repressive for many centuries, seems to have relaxed, but only marginally, in the twentieth century. Women have often taken stances of negotiators. They have played upon the fact that they are important assets on stage; that they are seen as repositories and transmitters of social values vital to the construction of a national or cultural identity; and that they are professionals among professionals in theatre work.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Brahmo Samaj is a social and religious movement founded in the nineteenth century movement known as the Bengal Renaissance. Its reforms included attempts to abolish the caste system, the dowry system, to bring about the emancipation of women, to abolish child marriage and promote widow re-marriage.

<sup>2</sup> The story of Cain and Abel related in Genesis, the first chapter of the Bible, Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, commits the first murder by killing his brother Abel out of jealousy.



## CHAPTER 5

---

### THE CHANGING FRAMES OF PERFORMANCE IN ASIAN THEATRE

## Chapter 5

### The Changing Frames of Performance in Asian Theatre

The drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians, too, anyone who is there).

- Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*

#### 5.1. Change in the Formal Aspects of Theatre

The meaning that theatre engenders is invariably culturally specific. Theatre productions are a form of cultural space, events created within culturally accepted parameters. The culture creates the conditions, the ideologies, the genres, the styles and the discourses within which theatre practitioners work. The audience's interpretation of the production is dictated in large measure by the culture. As the cultural paradigms shift, often gradually, sometimes precipitously and drastically, the theatre's frames of performance also undergo change. This chapter explores some of the ways in which Asian theatre changed in its formal aspects as the cultural context underwent transformation.

The literary and the performance texts are complex entities to which accrues, over a period of time, a system of signs and conventions; however, these remain, ever vulnerable to

being contested, re-formulated or rejected. The written text, where it exists, is usually associated with a narrative or plot, characters and theme, the use of written and spoken language, literary genre and style. The performance text interweaves the actor (who uses voice, gesture, movement) with music, visual and spatial arts (performance space, architecture, sets, lighting, painting, costumes, masks) with the director and technical crew who are usually invisible and the audience who is watching and being watched. Since theatre is a cultural creation, it involves interpretative acts, encoding and decoding of meaning. Prevailing and shifting ideologies impact on this interpretation; varied discourses can roost in it; and intertextuality nuances it.

In the fifty years that delimit the present study of theatre, the cultures of China, India and Sri Lanka came under cataclysmic assault, and underwent complex transformation. Unsurprisingly, the theatre within these cultures negotiated its own stresses, aesthetic and material, and re-invented itself, not only in content but also in form, in a variety of ways. Though each of these cultures responded diversely, a number of areas of similarity and convergence are discernible and seem to indicate the wider response of Asian theatre to the profound challenges to its society. This chapter sets out to chart some of the significant routes that Asian theatre has traversed with reference to literary texts and performance practices in the latter half of the twentieth century.

## **5.2. Distinguishing Traits of Traditional Theatre in Asia**

Traditional theatre in Asia has been so immensely varied in styles, genres, performance conventions and aesthetic principles that one hesitates to crowd these distinctive kinds of theatre under the generic rubric of Asian theatre. Theatres in China, India and Sri Lanka, for instance exhibit enormous differences and dozens of genres. South Asian cultures like India and Sri Lanka are extremely fertile in mythological themes and multifaceted dance traditions, and favour exuberant theatrical displays of colour, rhythm and emotion. In China, with its blend of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideals, the performing arts show a preference for decorum and

restraint, and structural simplicity. Whereas the aesthetic of the Indian theatre is founded on the congruence of emotions expressed by the actor and the effect, *rasa*, on the spectator, the Chinese principle of *yin-yang* tends to emphasize the oscillation between light-and-dark, opposition and balancing, with the performer aiming to achieve harmony. A critic remarks, "Different aims of performance are summed up in two expressions: in India a theatre-goer is 'one who sees' the play, while in China an audience goes to 'hear theatre' " ( Brandon 9). Though both cultures have theatres rich in visual spectacle as well as music and song, they appear to prioritize these elements differently. Nonetheless, the term Asian theatre seems appropriate when one perceives that the theatrical performances in the Asia-Pacific geographical region have traditionally shared a number of significant traits.

For one, the 'classical' or the elite forms of theatre in Asia developed with the active support of the monarchy, voiced the dominant ideologies of the rulers and played to upper class audiences. The performances were generally connected with the seats of political, economic and religious power. Plays were staged in the palaces of kings, in the courtyards of temples and often formed part of civil or religious celebrations.

Another distinguishing characteristic of theatre in Asia, both in its classical and folk manifestations, is that it was deeply coloured by religious beliefs. Themes of plays in India and dance rituals in Sri Lanka were drawn from ancient myths and concerned relations between human beings and the gods. The performances were often intimately associated with religious festivals. The performer invoked the blessings and presiding presence of deities, and at times, the performer was seen as a medium for possession by the gods or demons.

Thousands of plays all through Asia draw for dramatic material on lives of gods and saints and are rooted on the religious world-views of their communities. Characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* populate innumerable dramatic performances in India through the centuries. Buddhist *Jataka* stories or stories about the Lord Buddha in former lives, form the material for plays all over the Far East. Confucian ideals of respect to ancestors, loyalty to family,

clan and ruler, permeate the traditional Chinese theatre. Asian theatre with its religious colouring takes on the nature of a ritual.

Romantic literature was characterized with passion and sensual elements and stressed the value of marital relations. But romantic literature was not held in high esteem by scholars. The Yuan play *Chang Boils the Sea*, a love story of the daughter of a dragon king and a human being is depicted in a humourous vein even as the lovers expiate their sin. Liu Jung-en comments, "To the Chinese love between man and woman has always been acknowledged as a debt or sin which has to be repaid or atoned for in whatsoever agonies and sorrows are requisite, and there is no end to the anxiety, heartache, ruthlessness and even cruelty to be endured till this is done. Only then will the gods appear and bring the lovers peace" (Liu 31). This is a general literary convention that embraces various literary genres like poetry, the novel and drama, though there is no lack in Chinese literature of love songs and love stories. But even in the twentieth century plays studied here, the love story is subordinated to other themes.

Yet another striking element of Asian drama is its music, song and dance. The acting itself may be said to be dance-like, in the sense that it follows well-defined movement codes. Stage movements of feet, hands and face are carefully and minutely choreographed and synchronized with rhythmic music and often with sung lyrics. Many of the theatre forms in Asian countries can be aptly called dance-dramas. Actors are expected to acquire highly sophisticated skills, and actor training involves dance, acrobatics, singing and speech. Theatre critic James Brandon reflects on the rich and composite nature of Asian theatrical performance: "Most Asian theatre is 'total theatre' in which all performance aspects are fused into a single form. The nature of each form is largely dependent upon the particular balance among its many components and constituent parts, what element is emphasized and what element is subordinated" (7). Unlike most performing arts in the Western tradition, which involve specialization and compartmentalization, as for instance ballet or concert music without speech, Asian performance tends to welcome multiple elements like masks, puppetry, acrobatics, dance, song, music and

spoken dialogue and fuse them into a rich spectacle. The written and spoken word is rarely privileged above all else.

Its performative nature is the key element of Asian theatre, as against the representative quality in much of modern Western theatre. In this respect, it seems closer in nature to the medieval European theatre. In his essay entitled, "An Epistemology of the Stage: Theatricality and Subjectivity in Early Modern Spain", critic William Egginton throws interesting light on the pre-modern theatre in Spain:

The stage for this production is the dance floor itself; the actors are everyone in the room; the story is a role-playing game around flashy spectacle; and the roles themselves are like positions in a field; they have meaning only for the present reality in which they are participating. Whether used to enhance the splendour of a king or noble at court, dazzle churchgoers with the glory of God or entertain townspeople at a traditional festival, theatricality in the fifteenth century was primarily a question of performance and spectacle, not of representation (395).

Likewise, traditional Asian theatre often used stock characters, some of them mytho-historical, gorgeous costumes, makeshift props and codes of movement to create a festive performance event.

The twentieth century has been the cross-roads for the convergence of many forces in the theatre which have radically modified the ancient theatres in various countries and occasioned the birth of a new or modern, mainly urban, theatre. These forces were, in large measure, unleashed by the encounter of the Asian civilizations with Western political powers, their culture in general and theatre in particular. Far-reaching trends have been set in motion and they have gradually led theatre to transform itself as Asian societies questioned, reviewed and recreated, their own identities.

### 5.3. Significant Changes in Asian Performance Today

Some of the changing directions are now highlighted, with special emphasis on theatre space (including language as space), body, actor and audience; styles of performance, the emergence of a dominant urban theatre, de-colonization and its manifestations. These are placed within the aesthetic generally defined as Eastern; and the trajectory of their transformation is traced as they interface with the Western aesthetic in the twentieth century.

#### 5.3.1. Theatre Space

Theatre, as performance, requires and commands its own space. The performance must have a venue where it can "take place". Whereas earlier literary practice and critical theory privileged time over space, recent critical writing about spatiality refuses to see space as an empty container within which the real drama of history and human passion unfolds. Foucault notes the 'devaluation of space' that had prevailed for 'generations of intellectuals'. "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" (70). Phillip E. Wegner notes that such a paradigm had implications for the treatment of time and space both in literature and performance:

This privileging of temporality and history over space has its literary analogue in a critical tradition that, especially beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century with writers like Henry James, celebrates the portrayal of the complex psychology of characters as the highest achievement of narrative art. Characters are fundamentally temporal constructs that unfold in a space or 'setting', which, once established, seems to remain constant. Space is thus once again treated as the 'stage' upon which the drama of character development unfolds, and setting in such a tradition is viewed as distinctly secondary in importance to character. Moreover, in the increasing interiorization that occurs in certain strands of modernist fiction – which, in turn, have a marked influence

on how we read earlier literary works as well – any concern with setting or space outside that of the monadic consciousness seems to all but vanish (180).

As nineteenth century writers downplayed the spatial problematic, the way literature was written and received came to be deeply transformed. Wegner points out that these pre-suppositions have been increasingly called into question over the last twenty-five years by an emerging interdisciplinary formation centered on the problematics of 'space', 'place' and 'cultural geography' (181). This new attention to the production of space has been enriched by contributions from social theorists, architects, anthropologists as well as literary and cultural critics. It has opened new vistas in the study of theatre through the work of cultural materialists like Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City* 1973), social theorists like Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space* 1974) Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* 1975) and performance theorist Yi-Fu Tuan ("Space and Context" 1997). There is today an increasing recognition that the place of performance inevitably affects the interpretation of the play being performed. The geographical location of the venue is significant because it places the performance within social, cultural and historical contexts.

Theorists have differentiated between 'place' and 'space'. Place is "viewed as defined, specific, occupied, whereas space offers the potential for occupation, which endows it with the apparent quality of infinite emptiness" (Wilcox 543). Theatre critics also investigate ways in which a play performed in one location may represent another place. This section explores the problematic of performance spaces in the traditional theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka, the transformations that occurred in the fifty years under study and the significance of the changes. The term preferred in this study is 'space', with the potentiality it offers, the quality of mutability, and "the ability to be particularized by being shaped, used, and endowed with meaning" (McAuley 601). Also, what is discussed here is how people organise space for performance, not how they organise theatrical space to represent an absent place.



### **Traditional Asian Theatre Spaces**

Asian theatre spaces were diverse, but they seemed to favour the outdoors. Traditional Chinese theatre was so rich and varied, and it was so much a part of the lives of the people, that theatre organized space for itself almost anywhere. Performances took place in market squares and by the beach front in rural districts, or in town squares, in tea-houses and in the houses of the gentry as well as the banquet halls of the nobility. Such diversity points to the vitality of the theatre in China over the centuries and perhaps accounts in part, for the immense variety of styles of performance. The character of the spaces of performance must of necessity have interfaced with the nature, style and genre of the performance. As Richard Schechner points out, squares and other large open places draw festivals with unpredictable outcomes, they invite carnivalesque performances which may fuel revolutionary energy; on the other hand, thin and elongated streets invite processions and parades and tend to channel carnivalesque energies in ways that are socially accepted and predictable ("Street" 44). Chinese theatre by its ubiquitous nature penetrated every social layer and enjoyed immense popularity; whereas the public officials claimed that they distrusted the theatre and sought to police it, they nonetheless frequented it regularly. Performance spaces were as diverse as the demands of the public.

Though the spaces for performance varied – from areas within tea-houses to raised stages in the market place – the Chinese theatre did not observe a strictly demarcated separation from the audience. In the open spaces, people came and went freely, in the tea-houses they moved around as they pleased, bought and enjoyed tea and snacks, and offered loud comments on the performance. The proscenium theatre with an arch separating performer from audience did not exist, and stage lighting did not plunge the audience into a dark space. Though there are records of very large theatre houses in the cities of Beijing and Shanghai (Brandon 44), the element of interaction between performer and audience was high and added to reciprocal enjoyment. In some of the tea-houses the patrons could request the item from the actors' repertoires that they wished to enjoy. The arrangement of space was not specifically hierarchical

and the 'flow of knowledge' was not, as it came to be later, one-way, from the higher stage to the lower-placed audience. The entire performance was a free-flowing continuum with performer and audience both valorized in the shared space. Though theatre performances were very frequent, they were usually associated with festivals and celebrations and the entire community was part of the celebration.

In the Indian traditions, too, performance spaces have been varied. Classical theatre spaces were generally connected with temple festivals and welcomed large numbers of devotees to the performance. Initially the performances were staged outdoors, but with the passage of time, closed theatres were built. No visual evidence is available of the ancient Sanskrit theatre and the only substantial source of information is the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Chapter II of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* deals with the theatre house. It contains specifications for the three main areas, the stage, the auditorium and the dressing room (Tarlekar 191). The theatre house should have a sloping roof, a raised stage supported by pillars, and a lower platform for musicians. Different styles and structures are mentioned for performances to be staged in temples, public open spaces and the king's palace. No painted backdrops are referred to, and generally a curtain was held by two attendants as the actors entered the stage and then removed (Tarlekar 202).

There appears to have been a connection between the specifications for the shape and size of the stage and the dance movements of the performers. In the highly stylized performance each scenic movement had a ritual meaning. The performance space was meticulously prepared, each part of the stage taking on a specific significance, with the Sutradhara or narrator/presenter starting the ritual consecration. Commentators on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* point out some of the intricacies of the process. To cite an instance: "As we reconstrue the logics of the Sutradhara's movements we can say that the sacralisation of the stage started with singling out its centre, ritually the most important point, symbol of the centre of the Universe materialized on the symbolic plane in the *Brahma-mandala*, where, according to the treatise, the god was present in person" (Lidova 10). These rites of playhouse foundation and consecration indicate the marked sacral function of the theatre in the Indian classical tradition.

No remnants of ancient theatre houses seem to have survived. Yet, theatre scholar Natalia Lidova ventures a plausible explanation:

To this day, we do not know a single extant playhouse – hence the doubt of whether the theatre construction practice existed at all. Nevertheless, we dare to ascribe their current absence to other reasons. Proceeding from contemporary ideas, archaeologists sought theatre buildings of a pronounced secular character, entirely designed for theatricals, while they ought to look for templar edifices, mainly serving the *pūjā* and only then, the mystery drama (100).

The *Natya* house then, may have been a “unique temple for rites in the drama form” (Lidova 102).

One rare instance of contemporary theatre performed for centuries in line with the ancient classical theatre is *Kutiyattam*.<sup>1</sup> Around nine theatre structures or *Kuttampalam* have survived since the sixteenth century. They range in size from the tiny Gurivayur Temple Theatre to the impressive Vatu Kumnathan Temple Theatre of Trichur. They are rectangular in shape, with square raised stages and pillars that support the roof. The surface beneath the roof is sometimes embellished with sculptures of deities that depict scenes from the epics. The audience sits close to the front of the stage ( Farley 454).

In contrast with these early classical performances, the later folk performances like the Bengali *Jatra* were generally held outdoors since the players were itinerant troupes travelling the countryside after the harvesting season. The etymology of the name *Jatra* itself suggests the journey or procession that the performers undertook. Darius Swann indicates the robust and earthy nature of this performance:

This suggestion of open-air performance is strengthened by the fact that the primary early accompaniment was the *khol*, a deep-toned drum more suitable for open-air activity than an enclosed theatre. [...] The traditional Jatra stage was a temporary affair. It consisted of a carpet or canvas spread on the ground. The audience sat on all four

sides, only leaving a narrow corridor through the crowd to allow the actors to come from the dressing room to the playing area (Swann 241-2).

The makeshift nature of the performance, as well as the tradition of song and dance tended to create an atmosphere of interaction and informality. The actors were generally drawn from the common folk and acted in their free time. The performance area was level with the audience, the themes from the life of Krishna presupposed a shared mytho-poetic value base. The style of improvisation coupled with vigorous music and dance made for a fluid use of stage space as the story developed.

Folk performances, to this day, usually define their spaces with bamboo poles connected at the top with colourful decorations, at times a canopy. The absence of stage scenery offers the actors and singers the opportunity to define locations and change of place through word, song and movement. The simple properties used on stage are often borrowed from the homes of the people living in the neighbourhood of the performance site.

In Sri Lanka folk performances emphasized the use of masks and dance and were probably connected with the Indian *Nāṭya* (Tarlekar 312). There was no tradition in Sri Lanka of enclosed performance spaces, and the folk performances, like their Indian and Chinese counterparts, were enacted outdoors and created their signified locations with a minimum of stage settings or properties. The spectacle was essentially performance, not representation, and spaces were created and defined with narration, song and movement.

The ritual ceremonies conducted on the Island are abundant and situated in diverse locations. The bathing ceremony of the sacred Bo-tree (believed to be a sapling of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment) is performed at Anuradhapura and elsewhere as a temple ritual (*Nanumura Mangalle*) as well as a village procession (*pan perahera*); the Elephant Perahera at Kandy around the Temple of the Tooth Relic is a grandiose street pageant; the *gam maduwa* or fertility rite governing the harvest is held in a *pandal*. *Pirit* ceremonies relating to healing or invoking blessings on an expectant mother are usually held within the home. These rituals have marked dramatic components (Fernando, M.S. 31-85).

The folk 'dance-dramas' like the *Kolam* are held in a makeshift circular area, *karaliya* (Chopra 203). The popular *Nadagama* is a kind of theatre-in-the-round, and may be performed level with the audience, or, at times, on a makeshift raised platform without a curtain. Audience participation is lively. A researcher documents: "The actors in their theatre garb mingle at times with the audience to collect donations but even this action is cleverly and meaningfully integrated with the action of the play (Goonetilleka, M.H. *Nadagama* 18). In Sri Lanka, as in China and India, the emphasis seems to have been on performance in open spaces, with a minimum of stage properties, and active audience participation.

As Asian theatre became modernised, the spaces were drastically redefined, and the dynamics of theatre relationships were consequently altered.

### **Changing Spaces in Modern Times**

Contemporary Asia has borrowed from Western theatre the pre-fabricated performance space that effectively separates performers from audience. Unlike the earlier performance which was ritualistic and dance-like, modern theatre veers in the direction of the mimetic representation of reality. It acquires an illusionistic status and the style it adopts is realistic. The symbolic space thus created is signified by spatial and architectural arrangements: raised platforms, empty areas between spectator and performer – all these " indicate that the time/space of the performance should be regarded as separate from the ordinary social space of the audience" (Counsell 18). As meaning is created in the theatre, one of the creators is the audience. In a sense, notes critic Colin Counsell, the audience itself is 'created'. Playbills often remind the audience not to use cameras or cell-phones. Various other proscriptions apply, with reference to body posture, movement and sound levels in the audience.

There are practical reasons for all of them, but, being social, such 'practicality' is always shot through with relations of power. The prohibition of non-theatrical activities, the alignment of the body and the gaze, the eradication of anything that might detract from

stage utterance – together these work to determine our relationship with the stage. At the very least they indicate that we must view it as something with considerable cultural prestige, a space which demands uninterrupted interpretative scrutiny. [...] Such uniformity of behaviour, however, is always to some degree also a uniformity of response. Sitting quietly, still and in darkness, for example, we effectively remove ourselves from the readable whole of the event. That does not mean we overlook our own and our fellows' presence; rather, our behaviour *signifies* that the audience is *non-signifying*, excludes the spectator from the frame of what is interpretative so that the text consists solely of the fiction being enacted on the stage (Counsell 21).

This kind of space is bound to affect interaction and perception very differently from the way traditional spaces did in pre-modern Asia.

This is the kind of theatre space readily available to playwrights in the three countries under study. The Bengali theatre was a direct inheritor of the conventions of the English stage and a whole generation of playwrights had their plays thus performed. Chinese theatre under the influence of new models – Ibsen, Stanislavsky – moved from the performative Peking Opera to the realistic plays of Guo Moruo, Cao Yu and Lao She. One striking instance of the transition is Lao She's *Teahouse*, ironically not performed in a traditional teahouse theatre, but in the new proscenium theatres that were built in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Shanghai and Beijing. One is tempted to consider in such a case Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and mockery of colonial imitation by the colonised (86). In the case of Sri Lanka theatre leaped in one fell swoop from ritualistic and folk forms performed in the open countryside to the urban spaces that housed British and Parsi theatre in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Spectators are largely conditioned by the spaces in which they operate. Visitors to a museum or art gallery move around at their own pace, readers of novels turn pages as a solitary and private activity; in the cinema, it is only the fellow spectators who are aware of one another. However, in the theatre, the audience is also watched by the performer. Counsell shrewdly observes this special characteristic of theatre spaces and the relations they produce.

The watchers are also watched and social pressure to sit silently, or laugh and applaud at the appropriate points, is very great. Theatre therefore provides a mechanism for group discipline and unified interpretation whose efficacy outstrips that of any art form. Theatre may not lend itself to detailed consideration – one cannot turn back the page – but it excels at prompting audiences to adopt its viewpoint, because its behavioural decorum brings with it a decorum of interpretation ( Counsell 22).

As the theatre changes, corresponding changes are bound to take place in social processes and relations. And these, in turn, affect the direction of change in theatre.

The changing spaces between actors and spectators have modified the relationship between them, and they have redefined the literary text itself. As theatre director and scholar Anuradha Kapur points out:

The proscenium arch is the reorganization of space in certain very distinct ways; and these ways also in fact reorganize the knowledge that comes to the spectator via that stage. The way in which the audience and the spectators are arranged makes sure that the audience-actor relationship works at a different register altogether from that of premodern forms. The new mimetic capacities of the proscenium, which are connected, as we know, to the picture frame, and to the possibilities of reproducing perspectival space, manufactured new ways of telling a story, new ways of making a character who enacted the story, and created a new observing subject (46).

These modifications in the conception and use of space far transcended physical theatre spaces and, as Anuradha Kapur reflects, designated differences between interior and exterior space. The theatre person now ventures into metaphysical space, not just the space within a room, rather, the space within oneself.

The entire craft of characterization undergoes a sea-change. Characters are drawn with motivations, often complex and conflicting, which drive their actions. A few instances of such characterization in the plays under study will illustrate this trend. In *The Bearer of Woes*

Prasanna Abeyseriya, the playwright, seeks to delve into the mind and soul of the Man who is intent on saving the Woman from her life as a prostitute. He cries out in frustration,

MAN. All you people are like rice seedlings growing in a small field. From the time I was young I saw how fences and hedges meant to protect the grain swallowed it up instead. It happened before my eyes and I didn't know whom to tell or what to do. Everyone shut their eyes consciously or unconsciously, and allowed it to happen. Must it always happen so, I asked myself? I sought everywhere for an answer. This woman is one rice plant in that field among a hundred thousand others. They are all trapped between the fence and the hedge and so don't understand me. Won't try to understand. Even when they do understand they do nothing. What is left for us when the fence and hedge eat up the paddy plants in this way? Can I too look on as if I were deaf and dumb? This is a terrible crime, an injustice (191).

Here is an attempt to capture something of the inner forces that drive individuals. Though *Evam Indrajit* is not written in the realistic tradition, Badal Sircar follows his characters' changing motivations as the years roll by. Lao She in *Teahouse* depicts his central character, Wang Lifa, turning from a young and well-meaning, if self-centered, proprietor of a prosperous teahouse, to a disillusioned soul driven to despair and suicide. The problematics of outer and inner space, and not infrequently the conflict between the two, engage the attention of the modern playwright.

### **Outer and Inner Spaces**

Playwrights and directors in Asia, as elsewhere, are acutely aware of theatre spaces and experiments in theatre are often an attempt to redefine the nature or power structure implied in the construction of these space. Badal Sircar, the Bengali playwright, increasingly preferred writing plays that sought to stretch such boundaries. His theatre group, Shatabdi, consciously



strives, for the last three decades, to practice Sircar's 'Third Theatre' or 'Free Theatre'. Sircar's impulse was to work in a mode of portable theatre, synthesizing rural and urban elements and to cater to a wide cross-section of rural and urban audiences. Ipsita Chanda records Sircar's insistence on redefining theatre spaces and dynamics.

The concept of the *angan* (courtyard) *mancha*, as opposed to the proscenium or the open *jatra* space, began in 1971, with Badal Sircar's determination to evolve a theatre of direct interaction with the audience— physical, direct, accessible, critical, addressing social and political issues which were of immediate concern to the people participating in the performance, both as audience and performers. The term 'third theatre' designated a theatre different in aim, function and style from the 'first' or 'second' theatres – from both the elite commercial urban professional or semi-professional theatre and the mass folk or *jatra* performances. [...] As Badal Sircar points out, the availability of a circuit in which productions can be presented, coupled with the extreme flexibility and mobility of the productions can be presented, coupled with the extreme flexibility and mobility of the productions themselves (he often talks of a 'theatre mounted on our shoulders') have encouraged more groups to join this wave ( 69).

Shatabdi and a ring of such groups are part of a movement that seeks out its audience, in the office *para* or neighbourhood, at city parks on a Saturday afternoon, in a room (*angan manch*) or in the open (*mukta manch*) or in a *parikrama*, a tour of villages. "The venue ceases to be simply that which contains the performance (as is frequently the case with performances occurring in traditional theatre buildings), but is involved in complex ways in the genesis of the work and even in its subject matter" (McAuley 599). The rejection of the popular proscenium space by performers like Sircar's Shatabdi may be seen as engaging in a critique of the constraints such spaces impose on performers and audiences, and an attempt to fashion different relationships and ways of seeing.

Asian theatre practitioners have been quick to explore alternative spaces. The IPTA theatre troupes in India and the *yangge* troupes in the People's Republic of China have always

known that flexible use of spaces would enhance their popularity and broaden their reach. Mention must be made of the innovative use of spaces by Street Theatre performers across the length and breadth of India. Deeply political in character, Street Theatre has functioned most energetically in an oppositional mode: for instance, in the 1940s, within the confines of jails; in the 1970s in colleges and picnic spots as an organized theatre form led by Mukti – regarded as the first organized Street Theatre group in India; in the Punjab in the 1980s by candle-light, late at night ( Shirin 14-16).

An interesting instance is recorded by Shamsul, of the group named Nishant. The National Emergency proclaimed in India in 1975 banned all Street Theatre activity. However, performers quickly devised new tactics:

Our actors used to pose as buyers and sellers in the Sabzi Mandi or vegetable market of Delhi. The strategy was that these actors would suddenly burst into heated arguments, for example, over the price of vegetable or fruit. The argument would then turn into a huge discussion on issues ranging from inflation to the freedom of speech and expression. Everyone around, including the police, unaware that this was actually a street theatre performance, would immediately get involved. It looked like a big public debate in progress. The idea was to raise issues of common concern by involving the people into these arguments ( Shirin 15).

This account captures something of the resourcefulness of theatre, as well as the capacity of spaces to shape interaction. Such theatre is sometimes referred to as 'Invisible Theatre' and is favoured by Augusto Boal. It witnesses to the fact that modern Asian theatre practitioners have not confined themselves to the typical Western proscenium location.

An important characteristic of modern theatre has been an interest in the inner spaces: this led to psychological realism and gave birth to characters of nuanced motivation; the space within their minds and hearts engulfed the modern stage. Anuradha Kapur analyses this new and very alluring path to characterization:

Psychological realism, for indeed this is what this is, sees a separate and radically distinguishable inner world, hidden or half-revealed when compared to the outer world; the outer world – within the terms of psychological realism – is of less importance than the inner world, as that is the locus where truth resides.

This truth is to be uncovered often with a struggle: a struggle between private and public realities and between contesting roles. [...] (I)nnner life, psychological detail, interiority, become not just descriptive terms but evaluative ones (47).

A survey of the modern Asian theatre indicates that such psychological realism was eagerly embraced by twentieth century playwrights. In consequence, the director and actor, in the footsteps of Stanislavsky swore by the realistic style of acting. One reason for this new torrent of realism is probably that it offered great potential to dramatise the social and individual tensions prevailing in these troubled times.

However, conceptions of space have also been modified when playwrights like Gao Xingjian broke away from realistic representation to explore other experimental forms. Xingjian's play *Bus Stop* depicts characters waiting for more than ten years at a bus stop for a bus that never comes. Reminiscent of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *Bus Stop* indicates the playwright's engagement with new techniques of symbolism, use of language as recitation, and generally a search for the writer's own voice. *Nocturnal Wanderer*, set in a train, meanders in and out of conscious reality and the shadowy spaces of nightmare. Here space takes on new significance. In their essay "The Impossible Representation of Wonder: Space Summons Memory" Alfred Nordman and Hartmut Wickert take a look at the staging of *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*, a play by Peter Handke, an eminent second generation postwar writer.

The stage thus appears as the main character of the play, it is the centre of gravity, if not narrator of the performance: it summons actors to deliver their characters and it produces their stories. Entrusted to the trajectories which are inscribed in this space, characters will enter into relations with other characters, but these relations among passers-by consist only in passing by. As they pursue each their own paths, their

trajectories will brush or graze, they almost or nearly meet, and this 'almost' is full of unrealized possibility ( Nordman and Wickert 38-48).

Though not precisely applicable to *Nocturnal Wanderer*, this critique evokes the quality of space playwright Gao Xingjian works with. Gao's *Nocturnal Wanderer* seems to endow space with just such a character, a pregnant void that calls forth and sets in motion persons and processes. The Traveller dozing in the train visits the violent worlds of nightmare, and of his own psyche. Gao, a playwright in exile, makes a break with conventional spatial horizons. He finds theatre space fecund with possibilities to explore outer-inner spaces.

Changes in the concept and use of space indicate some of the problematics of modern theatre in Asia. The next section goes on to explore how new experiments stretch the very concept of space, as for instance, the notion of language itself as space for explorations of self, interpersonal interaction and questions of power.

### **Language as performance space**

Spoken language is generally one of the significant elements of a theatre performance. Some forms of theatre, like mime, do, of course, totally eschew verbal communication; nevertheless, in the vast majority of theatrical genres verbal language makes an appearance via the lyrics of song or the spoken word of dialogue; mime uses gesture, posture and facial expression as language. In pre-modern Asian theatre the spoken word was one, but not the major, constituent of theatre. In India, though the classical Sanskrit theatre did pay close attention to the literary text, it also underscored the aspects of theatre that mark it as a powerful performative text; and though playwrights' names, like Kalidasa (mid fifth century A.D.) and Bhasa (*circa* fourth or fifth centuries A.D.) have been carefully recorded, the significance of the actor was also highlighted. Indian folk theatre in its myriad folk manifestations rarely foregrounds the playwright or the literary text. Each performance makes plenty of room for improvisation in dialogue. In ancient China, the spoken word was entirely subordinated to song, and pre-modern

Chinese theatre did not really have a form of 'spoken play'. '*Huaju*', the modern 'spoken play' is of recent origin, and evolved as Western models of theatre came to be adopted and adapted as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. In Sri Lanka, traditional folk forms also subordinated speech to song, and it is with the influence of the Portuguese 'passion play' or the traditional *Nadagama* that the spoken word came to be increasingly valorized (Goonetilleka, *Nadagama* 5). It would not be off the mark to say that pre-modern Asian theatre was essentially performative, rather than representative, and that it accorded language a role not exalted above the other elements of good theatre.

The encounter with Western drama, both in print and performance, had an incalculable impact on theatre in Asia. Reading the work of Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen and Chekhov, as well as the Greek classics, opened new vistas to Asian writers. Almost every single playwright selected as a sample for study from China, India and Sri Lanka was directly exposed to Western drama through foreign travel, exposure to European traditions of performance, and the reading of drama as literature. The possibilities of the sophisticated use of language in theatre came to be increasingly explored, and the play grew to be much more centred on the person of the playwright, as much as, or more than, those of the director and the actor. The 'play-wright' came to be regarded as a highly skilled craftsman, deftly using language as a sign to re-present and re-create reality.

Language is one of the oldest and most fundamental of sign systems used by human beings in the formation of meaning. The study of language has recently engaged the attention, not only of linguists, philologists, anthropologists and sociologists, it has fascinated students of culture in general, like J.L. Austin (*How to Do Things with Words* 1962) and performance in particular. Culture analyst Mikko Lehtonen does not view language as a tool or an instrument used when people wish to communicate in words; he sees it rather as a faculty that enables them not only to communicate and relate to one another, but to be actually conscious.

Thus, language is an *active* element of human interaction. It is not some kind of transparent and passive medium which transmits meanings of entities that exist outside

language to people using language. On the contrary, language has an active role in the formation of meanings: it sets its own restrictions to meanings, determines human life through its own ways of sorting out what can be said of reality. [...] We compose our expressions to function interactively with the information, presumptions, attitudes and other such things of relevance we expect our audience to have (23-25).

This observation certainly applies to the nature of interaction in theatre through language with a live audience.

Dramatic dialogue is distinctive: it is written for the stage, listened to by an audience that does not usually, however, participate directly by replying or interrupting. It is remarkable, as Andrew Kennedy points out, that "The governing concept for all dramatic dialogue is verbal interaction" (Kennedy 2). This critic emphasises that 'dia-logue' (*dia* = through, and *logos* = one of the key words of Western culture connecting word and meaning, language and reality) can be seen "as a search for significance and as a flexible state of being-with-others through speech.[...] Dramatic dialogue then becomes the most significant vehicle of the interpersonal world" (Kennedy 3). He goes on to stress that the interpersonal concept of dialogue illuminates the essential link between *the relational* and *stylistic* features of all dialogue. Indeed, the dramatic performance is underscored by the interactive concept.

Language in theatre can be an instrument of power, a means to reinforce the dominant discourse. But language can also be an instrument of resistance, as when linguistic norms are broken. Changes in language can be an important sign of social change. Language is an intrinsic part of discourse and as people produce meanings in discourse, texts come into being. The politics of language can be observed at work in the context of the emergence of nation states. Language and national identity forge a tenacious link and raise their heads in various fields like literature, administration and education.

In the present study, almost every play selected has been written in the vernacular (Chinese i.e. Mandarin, Bengali and Sinhala) and is being analysed in English translation. Thus, linguistic analysis of the original work of the playwrights is beyond the scope of this study.

However, every one of the playwrights is located in a context where language is highly politicised and problematised. Each of these cultural contexts is here briefly sketched.

**China:** When China loosened the bonds of feudalism and imperial rule, it found itself with a small but highly literate class of administrative officials who had taken the civil examinations, and vast millions who were illiterate mainly because they lacked the leisure to master the intricacies of the Chinese script. By the end of the twentieth century, almost everyone in China can read, but in 1949, the illiteracy rate was around 85% (Coye et al. 325). The Chinese language has no alphabet and written Chinese used ideographs or characters. To be able to read a newspaper one needs to learn a minimum of one thousand to fifteen hundred characters, whereas if a scholar is to master the language he has to learn between forty to fifty thousand characters (Green 326 -7). However, the ancient Chinese were extremely prolific writers. John K. Fairbank records that "In spite of its cumbersomeness, the Chinese written language was used to produce a greater volume of recorded literature than any other language before modern times. One sober estimate is that until 1750 there had been more books published in Chinese than in all other languages in the world put together" (11). This language of scholars effectively debarred millions from social advancement. When the Communist government came to power language reform was vigorously set in motion. An efficient system called *pinyin* was perfected and given currency in 1979. It simplified and standardized the characters and reduced them to about 2000. This has made learning the language far easier. The Wade-Giles system of indicating Chinese sounds was found unreliable. The *pinyin* was extended to represent Chinese sounds in Roman script. Communication with foreigners became increasingly important in the twentieth century and students at the University sought to learn European languages. Translation of Western classics was enthusiastically undertaken, except for the years of the Cultural Revolution when the mere possession of a 'forbidden' book was tantamount to treason.

The language reform coupled with the encounter with the Western written dramatic text, revolutionised Chinese theatre. The focus began to shift in emphasis from the actor to the

playwright; and from pageantry and performance to representation and characterization. *Huaju* or the new form of 'spoken drama' gained currency. Ding Luonan, Professor of Theatre, looks upon this new development as a landmark. He remarks that this " evolution did not only alter the form, it affected the very philosophy of Chinese theatre" (69). Certainly, the introduction of the realistic theatre opened new horizons to playwrights and intellectuals who now felt they should reflect social reality on stage and influence public opinion on the burning issues of the day. Though the traditional musical drama continues to have enormous appeal to the masses, the *huaju* has gained a considerable following, especially in the urban centres. Vigorous translation activities were initiated, with major writers in the 1950s and 1960s involved in the effort to make available world literature in Chinese translation ( Feuerwerker, A. 179). As the literary text came to be foregrounded in Chinese theatre, the playwrights looked to the West for models for their new drama. The stage began to feature characters portrayed as individuals rather than mytho-poetic stereotypes, and realism became the preferred style of writing.

**India:** In India language issues are currently highly politicized. The impulse towards preserving and enriching the regional culture finds a fertile field in the advocacy of the local language. The principle that guided the political leadership in demarcating administrative districts or states after Independence was linguistic. In a country that is the home of numerous regional languages, language has been a tool to assert cultural identity and political power. Enormous heat is generated when one cultural group resents what it sees as the imposition of an 'alien' language. The attempt to impose Hindi, a northern language, on the southern states of India was bitterly resented and violently opposed by the speakers of Dravidian languages like Tamil and Malayalam. Equally, there is great ambivalence about the use of the English language: even as it is often denigrated as the language of the colonial oppressor, it is also widely used as a link language across the nation, and is indeed, according to the Constitution, a national language.

In West Bengal, too, the English vs. Bengali language debate has inevitably surfaced, with the educated urban minority using English with fluency. Hence, English is often viewed as



the language of the privileged Westernised elite. Many decades before Independence the drive was towards equating language with national culture and the use of the English language was deplored as a sign of loss of 'Indianness'. Such sentiments were expressed, for instance, with reference to women's education. An article in the Bengali press in 1878 reads, "Women should, of course, receive some education [...]. However, we are against the kind of education now being given to women. [...]The books the women are asked to read are either translations from English or are English influenced. Consequently, our women become de-nationalised" (*Tattvabodhini Patrika*. Nov-Dec. 1878).

As the economic pressures in a globalized world mount, fluency in English is becoming an aptitude much sought-after in India. Also, a whole new body of Indian literature in English has emerged over the decades. The novel, the short story and poetry have found numerous adepts, but drama in English has been less prolific. However, playwrights sometimes translate their own work into English, as in the case of Mahasweta Devi and Girish Karnad, or it is later translated by others for wider access.

**Sri Lanka:** A similar ambivalence and discomfort with language issues plagues Sri Lanka too. In his article entitled "Sri Lanka's 'Ethnic' Conflict in Its Literature in English" D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, author and professor of English at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, observes:

Much of the world is unaware that there exists a sharp division of Sri Lanka into two sections not on grounds of religion or race or even of Sinhalese speakers and Tamil speakers. There are both Sinhalese and Tamils who are Christians. We have both Sinhalese and Tamils who embrace Islam, sometimes through conviction and sometimes frivolously in order to avail themselves of the convenience of a multiplicity of wives. Some Sinhalese, particularly those of Negombo on the West Coast, speak Tamil as fluently as many Tamils speak Sinhala. There are no absolute differences of attitude and perception between these people such as often exist between the bilingual ( i.e. Sinhala or Tamil and English ) and monolingual of both communities ( 450-51).

Sri Lankan playwright Ruwanthie de Chickera also comments on the unequal status of languages in Sri Lanka and regrets the fact that there is little or no funding for English language theatre with the consequence that this theatre seems to lack courage. Theatre persons who struggle to barely make ends meet tend to cater to popular tastes and may shy away from controversial themes. Language, then, has been - in its presence as literature, performance sign, or politics - a major player in modern times in the social scenarios of China, India and Sri Lanka, and of their theatres.

As theatre stretched itself, adapting, accommodating, amalgamating, styles of performance invariably also came under scrutiny and revision.

### **5.3.2. Styles of Performance.**

Ancient theatre in India, as well as most of Chinese theatre and Asian theatre, by and large, were highly stylized in terms of the actor's voice, movement, costume, et cetera. The performers in the classical theatre underwent rigorous training in voice and movement, so that they could master the long-established codes and conventions. From the codified eye movements to the intricate gestures of hands and feet, the actor performed within a highly ritualized framework. The costumes were prescribed, as were stage properties. The performer and the audience shared an artistic universe rich in symbols and codes well understood and accepted.

Such a theatre offered little scope for innovation, and novelty was not in demand. In his theory of the "aesthetics of reception" the German critic Hans Robert Jauss writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s maintained that the historical essence of an art work cannot be elucidated by merely examining its production, but must be understood as a dialectical process of production and reception. Elaborating on this 'reception theory' Robert C. Holub comments:

The emphasis on novelty seems to be part of a modern prejudice, probably related to the penetration of market mechanisms into the aesthetic realm. Originality and genius were late comers to the roster of favoured evaluative categories, and it is quite possible

that the sweeping change in the system of production – from feudalism, with its emphasis on hierarchy, regularities and repetition, to capitalism with its ideology of ingenuity and its demand for constantly revolutionizing production – played a large part in the creation and reception of art as well (63).

Though Holub's comments refer basically to European art in the nineteenth century, they ring true as well in the context of Asian theatre, when Western literature and performance came to impact India in the early nineteenth century, China in the early twentieth, and Sri Lanka in the mid twentieth century. The new theatre carried with it new styles of writing and staging and the acceptance of the value of continued experimentation and change.

The structure of the written play began to be modified. In China the plot construction, the traditional episodic structure with an emphasis on an over-arching harmony gave way to the Greek concept of conflict, the *agon*, shaping the course of the dramatic action. These Aristotelian precepts rose, of course, from the soil of Greek culture, which some social scientists would argue to be quite distinct from the culture of the Asian people in general and Chinese culture in particular. Psychologist Richard E. Nisbett claims that Asian and Western patterns of thought and behaviour exhibit basic differences. The Greeks, he believes, lived by spirited contest:

The Greeks, more than any other ancient peoples, and in fact more than most people on the planet today, had a remarkable sense of personal *agency* – the sense that they were in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose. One definition of happiness for the Greeks was that it consisted of being able to exercise their powers in pursuit of excellence in a life free from constraints.

A strong sense of individual identity accompanied the Greek sense of personal agency. [...] The Greek sense of agency fueled a tradition of debate. Homer makes it clear that a man is defined almost as much by his ability to debate as by his prowess as a warrior. A commoner could challenge even a king and not only live to tell the tale, but occasionally sway an audience to his side. Debates occurred in the marketplace, the political assembly, and even in military settings. Uniquely among ancient civilizations,

great matters of state, as well as the most ordinary questions, were often decided by public, rhetorical combat rather than by authoritarian fiat (2-3).

The Chinese, however, had a quite different view of how life ought to be lived:

The Chinese counterpart to Greek agency was harmony. Every Chinese was first and foremost a member of a collective, or rather of several collectives – the clan, the village, and especially the family. The individual was not, as for the Greeks, an encapsulated unit who maintained a unique identity across social settings. Instead, as philosopher Henry Rosemont has written: "... For the early Confucians, there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others. [...] The Chinese were less concerned with issues of control of others or the environment than with self-control, so as to minimize friction with others in the family and village and to make it easier to obey the requirements of the state, administered by magistrates. The ideal of happiness was not, as for the Greeks, a life allowing the free exercise of distinctive talents, but the satisfactions of a plain country life shared within a harmonious social network ( Nisbett 5-6).

These perceptive remarks are quoted here at length because they indicate distinctive cultural patterns: these may help one to understand some of the reasons why traditional Asian theatre too, was originally distinct from theatre derived from the Greek tradition.

As 'modernisation' captured the imagination of Chinese artists, and modern drama began to pattern itself on Western models, can one presuppose that the Chinese world-view itself had undergone a total change? Not necessarily. Certainly, the breach of isolation, the encounter of cultures, was bound to problematise questions of identity, power and prestige. However, in the process, Chinese society was also able to appreciate and appropriate elements of Western theatre which rang true to their Asian ears. Richard Nisbett relates the reception of an American play by a Chinese audience.

I was in China in 1982 at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. The country seemed extremely exotic- in both its traditional aspects and its Communist-imposed aspects. [...]

The first Western play to be performed in Beijing since the revolution was mounted while I was there. It was Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The choice seemed very strange. I regarded the play as being not merely highly Western in character but distinctly American. Its central figure is a salesman, "a man way out there in the blue riding on smile and a shoeshine." To my astonishment, the play was a tremendous success. But Arthur Miller, who had come to China to collaborate on production of the play, provided a satisfactory reason for its reception. "The play is about family", he said, "and the Chinese invented family." He might have added that the play is also about *face*, or the need to have the respect of the community, and the Chinese also invented face (71).

Apparently, some elements of what they saw in the 'foreign' theatre resonated with the Chinese. In the process of appropriated Western models, the Chinese theatre adapted them; for one, they adopted the form of the *huaju*, or spoken play, which they began to explore most enthusiastically, giving hitherto unknown breadth and depth to the use of the spoken language in theatre: but they also introduced native traditional elements like music and song, which had always held immense appeal for Chinese audiences.

Under the pervasive influence of the culture of the dominant West, Asian theatre began to modify its performance style in the twentieth century. As Bertolt Brecht noted, the theatre in China, for instance, had been primarily symbolic.

It is well known that the Chinese theatre uses a lot of symbols. Thus a general will carry little pennants on his shoulder, corresponding to the number of regiments under his command. Poverty is shown by patching the silken costumes with irregular shapes of different colours, likewise silken, to indicate that they have been mended. Characters are distinguished by particular masks, i.e. simply by painting. [...] A young woman, a fisherman's wife, is shown paddling a boat. She stands steering a non-existent boat with a paddle that barely reaches to her knees. Now the current is swifter, and she is finding it harder to keep her balance; now she is in a pool and paddling more easily. [...] Among

all the possible signs, certain particular ones are picked out, with careful and visible consideration (492-3).

Similar conventions of highly stylized and symbolic movement, gesture and costume, and by a complex integration of music, singing, dance and acrobatics characterized most of Asian theatre. Now, as the Asian cultures entered the twentieth century various factors contributed to a process of gradual change. Modern theatre came into existence with the growth of cities, the European presence in the cities, the spread of Western education and the English language, and the perceived need by the new educated middle class to modernize.

The new emerging theatre developed a style generally realistic, with touches of melodrama. In India the melodramatic strains of nineteenth century European theatre, coupled with elements of melodrama in the traditional Indian folk theatre shaped much of the early twentieth century style of acting, whether in the Parsi theatre, the Marathi, Bengali or Gujarati theatre (Dhir 15). By the mid twentieth century, the start of the period under study here, the influence of writers like Ibsen and directors like Stanislavsky was powerfully felt, in China as well as in India and Sri Lanka. Throughout Asia, waves of nationalism occasioned a change in what people expected of culture. The urgent demand to modernize led to openness to Western cultural and literary patterns and a rejection of the traditional 'reactionary' past. In India, playwrights like Arun Mukherjee and Mahasweta Devi found realistic and naturalistic conventions convenient to highlight social problems and contemporary issues. In China, Lao She, Cao Yu and Guo Moruo fell in with the socialist demands that the arts in general and theatre in particular should serve the state as a vehicle of propaganda. Realistic 'spoken drama' was used as a vehicle to question the Confucian past and indicate a progressive future. This new form of drama appears to have come to stay. Theatre critic Richmond Farley indicates its lasting impact:

The spoken drama has played a highly political role in China throughout the twentieth century. One authority aptly calls it 'the most assertive form of innovative literature in modern Chinese society', with writers mostly regarding it as an iconoclastic statement,

designed to convey broader views for social reform and revolution ("South Asian Theatres" 476).

This development is broadly true also of Sri Lanka where the new theatre, beginning with the *Nurti* form, highly influenced by the Parsi theatre, moved away from its religious and ritual forms to turn into a space for the construction of a national identity.

As theatre in the West launched energetically into an exploration of modes other than realism under enormous influences like those of Brecht and Epic Theatre, Grotowsky and Poor Theatre, Meyerhold and Biomechanics, Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty, Beckett and Absurdist Theatre, Asian theatre too was deeply tinted by these influences. The new insights and innovations offered possibilities to Asian playwrights to perform new and troubling realities that they found themselves facing in the tensions of their modernising worlds. Some instances of playwrights in Asia who ventured into experimental modes, very probably influenced by new Western trends, are Badal Sircar (*Evam Indrajit*) in India, Ernest MacIntyre (*A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy*) in Sri Lanka, and Gao Xingjian (*Nocturnal Wanderer*) in China. In Sircar and MacIntyre's work one can discern clear traces of Brechtian Alienation and of the Absurdist techniques, and Gao Xingjian, writing in exile from China, reminds one of the Artaudian methods of 'Cruelty'.

An interesting fact, worthy of note, in the work of some of the European innovators who were most influential is the attraction that oriental theatre held for them. The liberating impact of Chinese theatre on Bertolt Brecht and of Balinese theatre on Artaud, are, of course, well known. Brecht's intense commitment to a theatre that acts as an agent of social change, led him to reject the Aristotelian concept of katharsis. He had no use for a theatre that appeals to the emotions of the audience only to purge them of these emotions and reduce the spectators to a state of passivity. Brecht's search was for a redefinition of the paradigm of spectator, theatre and society. In 1935, on a visit to Moscow he watched a Peking opera and began to understand that he had found the alternative he was looking for. Brecht was fascinated with the performance of the great Chinese actor Mei Lan-Fang.

Brecht used the German word *Verfremdung* (making strange or distancing, or 'alienation') and now sought, even more than before, to demystify the mechanics of a performance. The theatre of his day, a theatre of illusion, sucking the spectator into a dream world where problems are all resolved, was anathema for Brecht. Inspired by the acting of Mei Lan-Fang he wrote an article entitled "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" in which he commented upon the actor's ability to 'stand aside from his part'. "The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are hereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic" (Brecht 492).

It is worth remembering that Brecht too lived at an extremely turbulent time in history (1898–1956) which encompassed two world wars and exposed him to sights of suffering and death, as also to persecution by the Nazis. He grew increasingly committed to changing society and changing theatre in the West, in fact, to changing society through theatre. He announced:

In setting up new artistic principles and working out new methods of representation we must start with the compelling demands of a changing epoch; the necessity and possibility of remodeling society loom ahead. [...] Among other effects that a new theatre will need for its social criticism and its historical reporting of completed transformations is the A-effect (497).

Brecht found in Chinese theatre a confirmation that his ideas were on the right track. Brecht had become, by the end of his life, a world figure in theatre, and continues to influence directors today. Peter Brook remarks, "Brecht is the key figure of our time, and all theatre work today at some point starts or returns to his statements or achievement" (80). Completing full circle, then, Brecht's work, influenced by Asian theatre, in turns forms part of the influence of Western theatre today on its Asian counterpart.

Other noted theatre personalities, world-wide, have looked to Asian theatre for inspiration or insight. Among these we count Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook. In France director Ariane Mnouchkine introduced since the 1960s, in the



performances of her group, Le Theatre du Soleil, a physicality and musicality that she discovered during her extensive travels in Asia. She is credited with founding a neo-folk-theatre: her actors are members of society at large who stage plays for fellow members (Brown 512). The actors are highly skilled performers: speakers, mimers, dancers, singers, puppeteers. Mnouchkine re-interpreted the Greek and European classics in novel ways. Her work combined a blend of Asiatic and European dance and declamation with moments of intense feeling directly expressed, in a non-Asiatic way.

In a variety of ways these directors have studied Asian models of theatre, generally in their classical or folk forms. This interest has provoked accusations of cultural appropriation and superficial adaptation without a grasp on the local cultural and social context. In *Theatre and the World*, Rustom Barucha presents a bitter critique of these attitudes:

Our history is simply of no concern to Euro-American interculturalists. It is our "tradition," our much glorified "past," to which they have turned to find revelations (if they happen to be mystical), or to extract material (like the *Bhagavad Gita*, which served as the libretto for Glass's *Satyagraha*, not to mention the *Mahabharata*, which provided Brook with a "story"). Last but not least, India has provided interculturalists with a wide range of techniques including Yoga, the mudras; and eye-exercises of Kathakali, and more recently, the martial arts techniques of Kalaripayattu.[...] Nothing could be more disrespectful to theatre than to reduce its act of celebration to a repository of techniques and theories (5-6).

This critique, though passionate, seems to disregard the enormous hybridity that characterizes theatre today, world-wide. Granting that interculturalists may not, at times, delve deep enough into the cultural context of a particular theatre, it is equally apparent that some of them, like Eugenio Barba, are moving away from the mainstream Western tradition and seeking other, non-naturalistic and non-psychological styles of doing theatre. The interest in exploring other theatre traditions seems not only inevitable, but at times highly creative, in a migratory and diasporic world, and in the climate of global communication.

In Asian traditions of performance directors like Artaud have discovered a clue to a 'new language', a 'bodily language', not based on words but on signs. Having watched Balinese dancers performing at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931, Artaud was hugely excited and began to move steadily towards a formulation of his Theatre of Cruelty. In his manifesto *The Theatre and its Double* (1938) Artaud expressed his statement of intent:

I am well aware that a language of gestures and postures, dance and music is less able to define a character, to narrate man's thoughts, to explain conscious states clearly and exactly, than spoken language. But whoever said theatre was made to define a character, to resolve conflicts of a human, emotional order, of a present-day psychological nature such as those which monopolise current theatre? (267)

Directors like Artaud discovered that Chinese actors and Indian dancers have utilized visual codes for centuries and have fully explored the actor's body as a language. Artaud co-opted these for Western theatre. " In Europe no one knows how to scream any more, particularly actors in a trance no longer know how to cry out, since they do nothing but talk, having forgotten they have a body on stage, they have also lost the use of their throats" (263). All these experiments went on to become part of theatre practice, not only in the West but also once again, in Asia.

By the mid-twentieth century the primacy of the literary text as an 'artefact' had been questioned and the element of performativity was reclaimed by Western theatre. The actor's body takes on intense significance. In "Performance Art and Ritual: Bodies in Performance", theatre critic Erika Fischer-Lichte highlights the function of the performer's body:

Since the 1980s, performers increasingly use the body in violent ways, both in dance and theatre groups. Injuries and pains are inflicted on the performer's bodies. [...] Thus, the performance, in a way, turns into a scapegoat ritual. The performer exposes her/his body to risks and injuries against which the spectators aim to protect their bodies; the performer causes her/himself the pains which the spectators seek to avoid. The performer, in this sense, suffers in place of the spectators. [...] Their imagination 'saves' them from the anxieties of violence and pain directed towards their own body by

imagining the performer's pain and by attempting to sympathise with it and to sense it themselves (33-35).

Perhaps it is such 'anxieties of violence and pain', that people in countries like China, India and Sri Lanka encountered in the turbulent decades of the latter half of the twentieth century which surface in theatrical symbolic language. What is otherwise unspeakable finds violent images and symbols on stage to give it voice.

Thus, Chinese playwright Gao Xingjian creates images of violent death in a nightmare street scene in *The Nocturnal Wanderer*.

*(Ruffian enters to inspect the doorway with the gun in his hand. Sleepwalker fishes out Thug's gun from his shirt and whacks the killer's head from behind. Ruffian falls. Sleepwalker bends down to listen, rises.)*

SLEEPWALKER. Thank God you've gotten rid of that swine. You didn't mean to kill anybody, but under the circumstances you were forced to do it, you had no choice. You were driven against the wall, anyone would have done the same if they were in your shoes. *(Grabs Ruffian's feet and drags him in front of the cardboard box.)* That was a real nightmare. At the time, you really wanted to swear at somebody or something. You'd rather kill someone first than waiting for that someone to kill you. Better kill than to be killed. Only now did you realize that there's also pleasure in killing. (...) *(Drags the body and stuffs it into the cardboard box)* (...) Nobody saw you, nobody will tell, so you too can carry on with your evil deeds like the others. If everyone acted the same way, we could all live in peace and harmony, couldn't we? As long as you keep away from disasters, as long as you can overcome your own cowardice, you'll be able to continue with your game, feeling happy about other people's misfortunes (169-70).

The unspeakable gains voice in nightmarish scenes of this type.

In India, Utpal Dutt heaps torture and death-by-trampling by elephants on his central characters in *Hunting the Sun*. The cataclysmic violence that the Bengali people faced during this century can perhaps only be watched masked in this way on stage. In Sri Lanka, the spiralling ethnic violence is in *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* symbolized by the body of Upali whom his brother Ranjit has rammed into the oven and murdered. These gruesome scenes may stand as correlatives, in artistic performance, of the events of pain in the 'social drama' of reality.

The twentieth century brought to theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka sweeping winds of change. These need to be scrutinised to yield an understanding of how the frames or boundaries of performance in Asian theatre were transformed.

#### **5.4. Major Trends of Change**

Through the last century theatre in Asia has been continuously re-shaping itself. Nor could it have been otherwise: were it to remain static, it would have suffered fossilization or annihilation. In actual fact, the social and political turbulence of the times offered the theatre the opportunity to be a site of contestation and argument. As Sri Lankan theatre critic A.J. Gunawardana suggests, the performance context was a major determinant of the transformation of theatre here:

In Asia today, the performance context is the irreducible fact of change – change on a scale unprecedented in the annals of Asian societies and national identities. This change is neither casual nor fortuitous; often, it is methodically planned and implemented from the centre. Necessarily, the pace and the magnitude of change differ from country to country, and from culture to culture. Yet every single Asian society, irrespective of its operative social philosophy and political ideology, is in a state of mutation. [...] Within the Asian framework, the term *modernization* generally glosses the ongoing transformation. [...] At its most basic level, modernization implies a critique of the past. The impulse to modernize stems from the assumption that, in order to meet the challenges of the

emerging world, certain values, attitudes, social structures and other aspects of the inherited culture have either to be discarded or suitably modified. Or else new elements have to be introduced into the existing culture.

Modernization's impact on theatre is potentially multifaceted. First, modernization may negatively affect those cultural formations, socio-economic structures and value schemes that support and sustain pre-modern theatres. Likewise modernization creates new needs, and introduces previously unknown imperatives into the domain of theatre ("Asia's Modern Theatres" 73-74).

In the three cultures under study here, theatre has vigorously launched into the process of modernization: it gains a very urban presence; it comes under constant and vigorous pressures from Western cultures; it often responds with the adoption of nativistic stances; and it may develop an inclination towards the indigenous, the contemporary and the realistic.

#### **5.4.1. Urban Theatre**

The new emerging theatre in all these cultures has come to be an urban commercial theatre. The trend can be seen as part of the increasing urbanization in Asia in response to the pressures of the globalizing Western capitalist economy. This is a trend that favours the educated urban elites but is also seen by various analysts as causing structural inequalities. In their study of finance and modernisation entitled, interestingly, *Theatres of Accumulation: Studies in Asian and Latin American Urbanization* Warwick Armstrong and T.G. McGee see Third World urban systems not only as theatres of accumulation, but also as centres from which are diffused the culture and values of Westernization (41). The analysis may seem apt in the context of the countries being studied here. Thus, modern theatre could be looked at as both a product of urbanization and often a vehicle of further modernization. However, urbanization in the context of Asia is not entirely a replica of this process in the West. Large Asian cities, in India, for instance, have been rich cosmopolitan centres making room for complex "overlapping universes

of culture and of structures of meaning, drawn from language, caste, class and religion; a cultural babble of the means to cope with the world" (Goonatilake 236).

It must be noted that the traditional theatre has not been quite upstaged among the urban poor and the rural populations in Asia. In India the folk forms continue to flourish each in its own region, and in China the musical theatre is hugely popular still. The modern in theatre does not necessarily spell the complete rejection of the traditional. Traditional forms are increasingly being viewed by Asian theatre enthusiasts as a useful resource in terms of performative aspects. Playwrights like Utpal Dutt were able to recognize the value of, and utilise, the *Jatra* format. Elements of the traditional theatre are sometimes used to embellish and "to add cultural identification marks" (Gunawardana, "Asia's Modern Theatres" 79). In Sri Lanka Ediriwira Sarchchandra richly explored the possibilities of the *Nadagama* for adaptation to the modern stage.

However, it is also arguable that the traditional forms with their rigid codes of performance are too restrictive to lend themselves to in-depth characterisation or discussion of complex social, cultural and political issues of interest to modern audiences. Also, some theatre practitioners would reject the traditional forms as being too close to the sacred to be germane to the modern temperament which may be read as more secular.

The modern urban theatre in Asia largely uses the proscenium stage on the lines of Western theatre. It has generally veered from stories of ancient kings and gods to contemporary social issues, with some emphasis on psychological realism. Myth and legend are, however, looked upon as treasure-troves of stories to be reinterpreted so as to throw light on contemporary issues. The written text and the spoken word have tended to be valorized above spectacle or pageantry. And as the modernizing societies began to distinguish between the cultural and the social, the sacred and the profane, "differentiation also brings about a crucial shift from the symbolic to the representational in the arts" (Gunawardana, "Asia's Modern Theatres" 74). Contemporary Asian theatre, is then, like most urban theatre world-wide today, representational in character. And though in some cases, it may serve as a mere provider of

laughs, more often than not, theatre in Asia as elsewhere in the world today, has claimed for itself a space for serious reflection and sublime emotion.

This gradual process of the transformation of Asian theatre has not been free from debate and controversy. As indicated by Martin Esslin, theatre in Asia came to be employed as a method of cultural colonization:

As in the Victorian era, throughout the British Empire touring companies spread the gospel of Shakespeare, whether performing to the expatriate community or ( particularly in India ) to native audiences; and where there were home-grown acting companies, they generally performed popular hits from the West End. From a Eurocentric perspective, nothing else counted as theatre. In countries where the colonized populations remained in the majority, a parallel drama continued to exist. Tamil or Bengali companies performed stories from their own cultures in buildings constructed on the lines of European theatres, which thus corresponded to standard European expectations (439).

This cultural colonization which beset the Asian theatre was an over-arching process which coloured every sphere of life of the colonized cultures and in a special way, the arts. Predictably, a reverse process followed. This process is the focus of the next section.

#### **5.4.2. Cultural de-colonization?**

The relationship of art with culture has come in for intense reflection in developing countries in the postcolonial years. The traditional culture is widely seen as having been challenged. Mikel Dufrenne examines the ensuing confrontation and is of the view that "the basic influence affecting all reflection on art, is, in fact, the confrontation of cultures between the West and everything that is not Western." The national culture is seen as the instrument of an impassioned self-assertion. Dufrenne comments:

If we consider this culture as a value, the West may, all unwittingly, have contributed to it, not simply because it has illustrated the value of its own culture, but because – after the devaluing of the indigenous culture by its conquerors, missionaries and teachers – it has, through its artists and scholars, succeeded in revaluing it. When Picasso becomes an enthusiast for Negro art, when ethnological museums accommodate it and ethnologists pore over it, the African rediscovers his art. He sees it with a stranger's eyes but not as a museum exhibit regarded with lukewarm interest or requiring, if it is to be understood, a special effort of adjustment: he sees it as his own art and that is what he wants it to be (536).

Largely, awareness of art in Asia today is linked to a wider search for national or cultural identity.

As the indigenous traditional culture has been threatened, Western culture is regarded with ambivalence: the 'other' which has been imposed by 'force', yet it clearly possesses prestige and power. In theatre, as in other arts, various responses have arisen. There are those who believe in accepting, and living with, the existing dichotomy. In Japan, for a while actors either specialized in the traditional *Noh*, *Kyogen* and *Kabuki*<sup>2</sup> or in the New Theatre and never performed in each other's theatre. In India, language tended to mark the division, with English theatre catering to the Westernized elites, and local language theatres, e.g. Marathi and Gujarati, being patronized largely by an audience more resistant to Westernization. A similar divide was also visible in Sri Lanka, with language as the line of division. Ruwanthie de Chidkera, playwright and actress, laments the escapism of English theatre in Sri Lanka, unlike its more courageous cousin, the Sinhala theatre, and attempts to account for it:

English-language theatre has been out of sync with the volatile backdrop that the country represents today. There has been apparent apathy on its part to the contemporary political and social realities of Sri Lanka. [...] The stage-fright that directors seem to have developed with regard to staging political drama is tied up with the bleak funding prospects available for this type of theatre. English theatre is low priority and receives no financial support from the state. Producers depend either on their own funds



or on corporate sponsorship, which is of course driven by the box-office (" Aspects of the English Theatre" 4 ).

Such tension is woven into the ambivalence with which the colonial legacy is viewed.

In China, the conflict between local and Western languages does not seem to hold the same kind of purchase as in India and Sri Lanka, since the official language is Mandarin and Western languages have not yet taken deep root. The driving impulse in China has recently been economic in character, and here too we see the face of ambivalence, as the country deploys all its resources to compete with the capitalist economy, yet is unwilling to discard its communist political ideology.

In India, there is a realization on the part of playwrights like Mahasweta Devi that the challenge to the present inequalities in the modernizing economy must grow from within each society. Alternatives will only emerge when the internal conflicts of interest are squarely faced: the interest of the minority which gains from the surplus produced in society, and the majority which loses. In plays like *Water*, Devi dramatises the need for those who suffer from the present forms of development to break free from the structures of exploitation and powerlessness which cripple them at present. Modern urban theatre can thus also take on the role of challenger of the *status quo*.

Underneath all their distinctive tensions, what the people in all these cultures do seem to share is the intense preoccupation with identity, sometimes manifested in a conscious reclaiming of their older traditions. This is discernible in the nativistic stance taken by a number of writers.

### **5.4.3. Nativism**

An important trend in theatre in Asia has been 'nativism' or a return to one's traditional roots. An eminent practitioner of theatre in India, Girish Karnad, has brilliantly fused indigenous myth and symbol with elements of modern theatre. More and more playwrights and directors all over Asia are finding a comfort zone as they bridge traditional and modern theatre traditions. Many of the theatre scripts written in local languages are also available in translation or some

form of new hybrid language that creates cross-connections. Girish Karnad has translated his work into English, and most of the texts being studied here are analysed in English translation. It appears inevitable that the local artist must, in the view of Jean Paul Sartre, sing in an 'international' language if his voice is to carry across frontiers (358). Still, lingering resentment often runs deep, leading to accusations that such a voice is not truly the artist's own and that all that is not written in a Western tongue is still ignored.

Through the conflicting pressures and sentiments, theatre has turned to its immediate environs and consciously seeks to draw contemporary maps of meaning.

#### **5.4.4. The Indigenous, the Contemporary and the Realistic**

Modern theatre in Asia, then, has steadily been transforming itself. Nor is this malleability an exclusive feature of Asian theatre. As Raymond Williams points out in *The Politics of Modernism*, European theatre underwent persistent change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He indicates some directions taken by it:

We can identify five factors of an immensely influential kind in all subsequent drama. First, there was the radical admission of the *contemporary* as the legitimate material for drama. [...] Second, there was an admission of the *indigenous* as part of the same movement; the widespread convention of an at least nominally exotic site for drama began to be loosened, and the ground for the now equally widespread convention of the *contemporary indigenous* began to be prepared. Third, there was an increasing emphasis on *everyday speech forms* as the basis for dramatic language. [...] Fourth, there was also an emphasis on social extension: a deliberate breach of convention that at least the principal personages of drama should be of elevated social rank. [...] Fifth, there was the completion of a decisive secularism: not, in its early stages, necessarily a rejection of, or indifference to, religious belief, but a steady exclusion from the dramatic action of all

supernatural or metaphysical agencies. Drama was, now, explicitly, to be a human action, played in exclusively human terms (83-84).

In a general way, Williams' observations apply to Asian theatre as well, as it proceeded to interface with Western theatre; and equally as it responded to social needs in a milieu transformed by the processes of modernization and globalization. Commenting on the fact that "the modern theatres of Asia have firmly adopted the 'realistic' aesthetic of verbal meaning and formal signification that is integral to the modern dramaturgy of the West", A.J. Gunawardana observes:

From an Artaudian perspective, this is practically, a total reversal of the unique forms of articulation found in Asia in pre-modern theatres... What should strike us is the fundamental manner in which Asia's modern theatres have moved away from the pre-modern and the traditional. This must not be regarded as a mere act of imitating the West. It is, on the contrary, a response to a felt and palpable need. Incantation and chant did not, and probably cannot, meet the demands of a theatre which sets out to explain the world in dialectical terms rather than to portray it symbolically ("Asia's Modern Theatres" 77).

Indeed, in each of the three Asian cultures being considered here, theatre has in various ways moved away from the pre-modern in both thematic concerns and in aesthetic and formal territory. In China, the hugely popular new 'spoken drama' such as Lao She's *Teahouse* or Guo Moruo's *Cai Wenji* are instances of the modernization of theatre. Gao Xingjian's *The Nocturnal Wanderer* could perhaps be mistaken, some might say, as the work of a modern French playwright rather than a Chinese playwright in exile in France. Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* is clearly a departure in form and content from traditional Bengali theatre, as are plays from Sri Lanka such as *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* by Ernest MacIntyre and *The Bearer of Woes* by Prasannajit Abeysuriya. Each of these last three plays bears marks of more recent

Western influence, in some cases of Brecht, or the Absurdist theatre or Artaud. This extensive borrowing across cultures may prompt some critics to conclude that Asian theatre is a mere clone of Western models. This question comes in for discussion next.

### **5.5. Is Asian theatre a clone of Western models?**

Symptomatic of the growing resistance to globalization of culture, is the fact that many playwrights all over Asia have been 'returning to the roots' and adopting nativistic stances. For instance, in Japan we encounter a distinctive 'return to the Gods', a theatre that consciously reacts against excessive dependence on Western forms of 'new drama' (Goodman 418). Theatre directors began experimenting with concepts and practices of traditional Japanese theatre like *Noh* and *Kabuki*, so as to creatively test and accommodate Western theatre notions within a Japanese framework ( Farley "South Asian Theatres" 480).

A similar trend can be discerned in the theatre of China, India and Sri Lanka. In Chinese theatre, we discover that even as playwrights and directors did modernize, they firmly retained certain widely accepted elements of traditional culture: One of these is the centrality of song and dance, which one does not usually find in Western theatre, except, of course, the full blooded 'musical'. In Chinese plays such as *Teahouse*, as well as *The White-haired Girl* and *Cai Wenji*, each act is punctuated with songs that reaffirm the theme. Without the introduction of song and dance into the 'spoken drama', the new theatrical form may probably never have caught on, or gained popular acclaim. Song is equally central in Mahasweta Devi's *Water* and Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend*, with musical elements being borrowed from the popular *Jatra* format. Even as the *Jatra* itself sought to modernize with the use of popular film music, the use of raised platforms, theatrical lighting and sound effects, and even performance inside a playhouse, the urban theatre in turn borrowed *Jatra* theatrical traditions like the song and the character of the Sutradhar or the Ustad or stage manager-cum-narrator. Ancient myths and folk lore has found creative space on the stage, as in the plays of Girish Karnad.

Another instance of the resistance to the typical 'globalized' proscenium theatre production, is the attempt by certain playwrights and directors to perform away from the playhouse and close to the masses. As noted earlier, such a trend is predominant in the work of Badal Sircar's 'Third Theatre' or 'Free Theatre', staged by the theatre group Shatabdi for the last three decades, without charging tickets, in spaces called '*angan manch*' (courtyard) as opposed to the proscenium or the open *Jatra* space. The discomfort with an elitist, urban middle-class theatre has prompted theatre persons to seek alternatives and to give voice to the concerns of marginal sections of the population.

In contemporary Asian societies, the theatre is a clear site of negotiation between the pre-modern and the modern. It is the location of confrontation between the old and the new, a confrontation that takes varied avatars: it may come as a rivalry between languages for cultural space and public funding – such as English, Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka; or English and local Indian languages like Bengali or Marathi; it may be a confrontation revealed in the choice of theme and characters as, for instance, when questions of 'national identity' are explored, as in the plays of Ediriwira Sarachchandra; it can include the politics of the geographical location of the performance, as in the case of Badal Sircar's Shatabdi. Since these negotiations on stage flow from similar negotiations within society at large, they are fraught with emotion, even passion, with distrust smoldering between stern guardians of tradition and equally obstinate advocates of modernity.

Various writers for the theatre in Asia seem to have taken less intransigent positions, somewhere midway in the range of arguments. These positions may take the shape of a well-considered hybridity as in the work of an illustrious earlier Bengali playwright Rabindranath Tagore, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had warmly welcomed various new Western genres of writing like the novel, the journalistic essay and new forms of drama, and deftly explored their potential to serve contemporary needs. Or the position may be in the nature of an accommodation as when Mahasweta Devi, the staunch advocate of tribal traditions

weaves tribal stories and lore with naturalistic writing, and translates her plays into English in the hope of reaching a larger and more diverse public in the cause of social justice.

One instance from each culture among the plays analyzed here, will serve to briefly illustrate and reiterate the myriad ways in which the theatre has offered scope for complex and creative readjustment: *The White-haired Girl*, from China, *Mareech, the Legend*, from India and *The Golden Swan* from Sri Lanka.

***The White-haired Girl*** : At the height of the Communist revolution in China, the Party, under the leadership of Chairman Mao, discovered the potential of theatre to propagate revolutionary values. These values were shaped by a passionate rejection of Confucianism and the traditional feudal system and an equally passionate antagonism to Western culture. Theatre was seized upon by the Politburo to propagate Party values. In line with the ideology of the participation of the masses in cultural affairs, thousands of peasants and army cadets were organized into theatre troupes and performed all over the country. A new form of drama emerged, the *geju*, which combined elements of a traditional harvesting song and dance with the form of the new 'spoken drama', including a conflict-centered plot. The story was borrowed from a local 'ghost story' or legend, and is shaped by the writers in consultation with members of the public to fit within the dominant discourse; the decadent old society must be rejuvenated with the assistance of the Red Army – "the old society changed men into ghosts, the new society changes ghosts into men" – legend turned to the service of contemporary reality. Thousands upon thousands of performances were staged in every possible location, in factory yards and large theatre halls, and whatever judgement critics from elsewhere may be tempted to pass, in China, *The White-haired Girl* voiced for many years the ground-swell of the sentiment of the people, and did so with considerable artistry: a hybrid theatre form rising to the occasion.

***Mareech, the Legend*** : In India, Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech, the Legend* can also be viewed as theatre in the process of self-renewal. As a member of the Indian People's Theatre

Association the playwright is part of a mass-based theatre movement. Whatever his later differences with the Communist Party and its theatre arm, the IPTA, Arun Mukherjee veered towards the folk tradition of the *Jatra* for inspiration. *Mareech, the Legend*, however, juxtaposes traditional mythology with contemporary world news headlines and stories of next-door social injustice to put together a play of a distinctly 'folksy' nature – including drums, cymbals and song – but with self-conscious artistry and a combination of the realistic style with a Brechtian 'alienation' effect, and in theme, a telescoping of the local with the global. A mythological story of demons, a tale of exploited peasants and a news-clip about an American reporter, all coalesce. Resistance against exploitation, which the playwright takes as his central theme, finds on the stage a congenial space to target a heterogeneous audience.

***The Golden Swan.*** The Sri Lankan playwright Ediriwira Sarachchandra is held in very high esteem by the Sinhala theatre public, probably because his theatre incarnates the process by which the Sinhala defined their identity in a newly established nation. In *The Golden Swan* the playwright delves for material into traditional Buddhist lore and a *Jataka* tale. The play incorporates legend and song to present a critique of contemporary Sinhalese society in the race towards modern commercialism. Here we find a version of the story of the goose that lay the golden eggs, but there is a difference. Significantly, the Sinhala tale achieves greater effect because it introduces the element of religion and myth on the one hand, and, on the other, the crime of the murder of the father of the family, symbolizing the violence against traditional values. The play articulates important moral and ethical issues in a modernizing society. Sarachchandra's work received immense acclaim in the country. However, after the initial unconditional applause, some dissenting voices were heard and doubts were raised as to the suitability of the traditional tale to respond to contemporary needs. Such critics "took up the position that the modern stage required less formalized, less codified and more 'realistic' forms which could deal with characters and situations from daily life, employing an appropriate

language" (Gunawardena, "Latest Play" 79). Here, then, is a theatre fully immersed in the dialectics and tensions of the process of modernization.

### **5.6. Continuing Metamorphosis of Asian Theatre**

To conclude this analysis of the changing frames of Asian theatre, one must emphasise that the process of transformation is ongoing and far from complete, simply because theatre is a cultural text. And the transformation is seen as inevitable when we recognize that culture "is a process of constant adaptation of people to historical circumstances which require them, as a condition of their own survival, to engage sympathetically with new ways of understanding the world and responding to it." (Watson 109) However, it would be erroneous to come to a facile conclusion that modern Asian culture in general and theatre in particular are in the process of turning into clones of Western models. Francis Fukuyama in his influential essay "The End of History" (1989) proclaimed fatalistically:

The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the exhaustion of all viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism. In the past decade there have been unmistakable changes in the intellectual climate of the world's two largest communist countries and the beginnings of significant reform movements in both. But this phenomenon extends beyond high politics and it can be seen also in the ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture in such diverse contexts as the peasants' markets and color television sets now omnipresent throughout China, the cooperative restaurants and the clothing stores opened in the past year in Moscow, the Beethoven piped into the Japanese department stores, and the rock music enjoyed alike in Prague, Rangoon and Tehran. What we may be witnessing may not be the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history, as such: that is the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (11).



Reacting to such views, Samuel P. Huntington put forth in *The Clash of Civilizations?* (1993) his equally influential and equally pessimistic theory that "the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (22-49). Whether history will bear out such dire prognosis for 'non-Western' culture in general and theatre in particular, only time will tell.

However, one finds reason for hope in the knowledge that culture in China, India and Sri Lanka has never been monolithic, and it has been porous for millennia – on the one hand, choosing and absorbing the valuable from the cultures it encounters: on the other, influencing other cultures. The Chinese are a rich amalgam of the Han, Manchu and many minority cultures and have widely impacted cultures as far as Korea and Vietnam. The Indian subcontinent has accommodated Aryans, Dravidians, Arabs, Greeks and other European peoples and elements of their cultures. Indian culture has, in turn, deeply shaped the ethos and art of regions like Malaysia, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Bali, Thailand and Laos (Chopra & Chopra 316-323 and Rubin 483). The Sri Lankans have encountered wave upon wave of cultural influence from North and South India, as well as Europe. As author D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke indicates, "Sri Lankan drama in English is a product of metamorphosis through migration" (*Migration* 493) Writers have also regularly migrated beyond the shores of their own island and Sri Lankan-born novelists like Michael Ondaatje in Canada, and playwrights like Ernest MacIntyre in Australia, have enriched the arts in their lands of adoption. In such a scenario, it is easy to understand that Asians have always had to redefine and revalorize their complex multiple identities. As an illustrious Bengali and world-renowned economist, Amartya Sen, cogently argues in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, acknowledging our multiple identities and choosing the importance we attach to each is of the essence. The modern stage in Asia has been, and continues to be, the site for just such a choice – with a greater or lesser degree of self-awareness by individual playwrights.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The art of Kutiyattam emerged on the Kerala stage between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. It did not create a literature of its own, but took Sanskrit plays and adapted them for performance. Though it broadly follows the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it leaves the actor a wider margin for improvisation. See Paulose, K.G. *Improvisations in Ancient Theatre*. 17-36.

<sup>2</sup> In Japan's medieval period (1185-1600) the theatre form *Noh* and its companion comic form *Kyogen* grew immensely popular with the samurai generals who captured power from the imperial court and ruled under the title of Shogun. *Noh* is characterized by sonorous singing, restrained movements, refined painted masks; it dramatizes stories from history and legend. *Kabuki* emerged in the seventeenth century from popular urban dances and sketches of contemporary life. See Brandon 145-147.

## CHAPTER 6

---

### PERFORMING CHANGE

## Chapter 6

### Performing Change

Call it human contact, risk or fallibility. It is what makes theatre theatre. It is also what makes theatre necessary. [...] Dramatists do, after all, tend to be questioners, dissenters, and there will be plenty to question in the twenty-first century.

- Benedict Nightingale, *The Future of Theatre*

#### 6.1. Theatre in a Changing World

A society in transformation is inevitably in a state of emergency – and “always a state of *emergence*” (Bhabha, “Remembering Fanon” xi) The societies of China, India and Sri Lanka in the twentieth century, struggling over colonial rule or political upheaval became sites of contestation. What took front-stage was a hegemonic tussle, revolutionary language, new constructions of gender, ethnic or religious identity and space, in the arena of political manoeuvring. Such a volatile state contains the seeds of many possible directions: it may free individuals and communities from traditional restraint and allow them agency in socio-political movements; it may break open the dams of protest; it may draw new maps of relationships and mobility. On the other hand, states of emergency have shaped new ways of repression and

oppression; they have stoked fundamentalism; they have countenanced violence and injustice. Here art assumes increased significance. Playwright Tom Stoppard concurs: "Briefly, art [...] is important because it provides the moral matrix, the moral sensibility, from which we make our judgements about the world" (13-14). The power of theatre to mirror and midwife what is being born cannot be underestimated. This has been the thrust of the present investigation. This concluding chapter offers a brief general overview of the dissertation and a re-statement of its findings.

## **6. 2. Revisiting the Hypothesis**

This study was motivated by a conviction that the interpenetration of text and context is of fundamental significance, given the performative nature of theatre. The basic hypothesis adopted was that theatre as a cultural text would be involved in complex ways in the questioning and recreation of meaning in times of social turbulence. Such a process would, of necessity, lead to changes in theatre itself as it negotiated social and aesthetic tensions and new paradigms.

The context of Asian theatre and Asian society in the twentieth century has been one of pervasive and irreducible change. It was of immense interest to investigate the complex ways in which text and context interfaced, with a focus on the transformation of theatre. Hopefully, such an analysis would open the curtain just a little wider on the nature of theatre, specifically its nature as a cultural text in turbulent times.

The particular aims of the study have been to contextualize the study of theatre evolution in three specific locations in Asia; to examine ways in which theatre re-invented itself in Asia in the context of major social transformation; and to analyze the significance of theatre as a cultural text within such a turbulent context.

Though the social context in all of Asia was fraught with revolutionary tensions through the century, their social, political and economic manifestations in each of the selected cultures were never a duplication of any other. Inevitably, the amount of space for manoeuvre, and the

perception of agency by each individual playwright were also different. Thus, a detailed survey of each instance was called for. Consequently, a few representative plays from each culture were selected for analysis.

### **6.3. General Findings**

The study of the plays selected, viewed within the biographical context of the playwright and situated in the socio-political scenario, suggests that theatre did indeed play a meaningful role as a cultural text. Three angles are here indicated, in which theatre in the selected cultures may have creatively explored the possibilities offered by the period of turbulence: as an agent that helped shape and transmit social memory; as a ritual performance that re-presented social conflict and sought a passage from chaos to cosmos; and theatre as a trial of ideology and social practice. These are merely viewing standpoints or outposts, indicating sometimes overlapping zones, but hopefully revealing something of the special nature of theatre and its assumed character in a particular location.

All the three cultures selected for study reveal theatres that negotiated major issues of modernity versus tradition. In all three, the theatre undertook experiments in form that are fairly similar. The themes they dramatised, however, took their colour and texture from each local situation. Nonetheless, inferences can be drawn which may apply generally to all three.

#### **6.3.1. Theatre Re-presents and Transmits Social Memory**

Social convolutions such as China, India and Sri Lanka experienced in the twentieth century signify in many ways a rejection of specific ideologies, norms, relationships and practices, a break with the immediate past, and a forward movement towards some preferred future. However, it is apparent that a total and completely new beginning is an impossibility, specially when it is a matter of a social movement or even a social revolution.

Indeed, neither the establishment of the People's Republic of China, nor the Partition of Bengal in the wake of Independence, nor the ethnic struggle for a Tamil state in Sri Lanka, can be understood without a grasp of the prior realities of the people within these cultures, and the body of their expectations based on recollection. Collective or social memory goes beyond individual memories to include the shared memory that underlies any social order. A reading of the selected plays indicates attempts by playwrights to sift through the disturbing events and clashing ideologies of their own times and to construct a modified map of meaning. In *Teahouse* Lao She looks back at the preceding fifty years of Chinese history: the degeneration of the age-old imperial rule, the unnerving encounter with Western powers, the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, the heavy economic depression, and the pervasive corruption of social values. All these are seen within the complex Chinese worldview that highly values historicity, that insists on balance and harmony, and subordinates the individual to the family as a basic social unit. It is as if the playwright were unrolling all the ills of the old society to present the dire need for change. The bankruptcy of the near past is offered as the basis for the onward march of Communist reform, and the hope for China comes from the fact that "the East is Red." *Teahouse* dramatizes the despondency of the Chinese in the 1940s and their yearning for a more stable future. Guo Moruo's *Cai Wenji* equally harks back to history: the playwright re-interprets the character of the tyrant Cao Cao as a forceful administrator; he confers a higher status to women than traditional Chinese society did; and above all he urgently posits the necessity of subordinating the family to the demands of the State. The authors of *The White-haired Girl* address the mass of Chinese society with the specific aim of empowering the Chinese peasantry. In all these plays we find questions of choice and emphasis of what social memory will be passed on to the future.

Social memory needs to be transmitted to new generations, and Paul Connerton convincingly argues, through an analysis of the French Revolution and other political upheavals, that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past "are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances" (4). Social memory itself becomes the location of a power

struggle. In *Teahouse*, *Cai Wenji* and *The White-haired Girl* the playwrights follow the Party line. However, the move by Gao Xingjian to divert from this State-monitored paradigm led to reprisals. *Nocturnal Wanderer*, as a rejection of the collectivist mentality could, predictably, not find acceptance in China even in the late twentieth century. As noted in earlier chapters in this study, the State often attempts to determine what should be remembered and what must be forgotten. In this pursuit, the Chinese authorities proscribed writers and artists, and of the playwrights studied here, one was driven to suicide (Lao She), one was reduced to silence (Guo Moruo), others accepted the new norms (He Jingzhi and Ding Yi) and one was pushed to self-imposed exile (Gao Xingjian).

In Sri Lanka, too, the murder of the noted playwright Richard Soyza can be seen as an elimination of at least one 'trouble-maker' who does not conform to what must be remembered and what must be forgotten. The Sinhala plays studied here choose to define and emphasize Sinhala identity. *The Golden Swan* does this through recourse to the ancient Buddhist Jataka tales, and critiques recent mercenary values. *The Bearer of Woes* skillfully weaves legend, myth and contemporary social issues to ask questions about the role of theatre in society. And *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* harks back to a Biblical prototype to underscore the loss of traditional values and to expose fratricide.

In Bengal one does not find repressive measures of such virulence. But economic measures like State funding and patronage or the withholding of these, have certainly determined which playwrights have "succeeded" or managed to be performed or published. In the selected plays questions of social memory inevitably surface. Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun* reviews history in the light of equations of power and superstition; Arun Mukherjee, like the Sri Lankan playwright Prasannajit Abey Suriya, interpolates the past into the present to develop the theme of ever-present coercive forces crushing the individual. And Mahasweta Devi's *Water* demands that the tribal subaltern communities must not be forgotten or consigned to the margins of our awareness.



It is in such an endeavour of setting themselves up as recorders to future generations that we can situate Mahasweta Devi, Badal Sircar, Ediriwira Sarachchandra, Ernest MacIntyre and Gao Xingjian. Playwrights such as these inscribe and perform through their plays something of their perception of social reality, thus enriching social memory with pages that might otherwise be lost in oblivion.

The selected plays also act as ritual performance in the troubled social context of China, India and Sri Lanka.

### **6.3.2. Theatre as Ritual Performance**

The performative character of theatre has drawn attention to its ritualistic nature. Theatre critics have specifically noted the connections of early Asian theatre with ritual. Leon Rubin notes:

The earliest origins of theatre in every country of this region seem to have parallel roots in religious ritual and ceremony, related to the world of spirits in animistic practices; [...] performance was the bridge between the human world and the spirit world. [...] Court traditions of performance probably grew up from these animistic rituals, carefully nurtured by rulers to remind the people of their own divine link (483-484).

Writing about South Asian Theatres, Farley Richmond refers to Indian theatre and the fact that theatre architecture in ancient India was a branch of temple architecture. He notes, "Rituals accompanied virtually every step of the construction process, including the re-consecration of the acting area before every show in order to protect the space and the performers from malevolent forces" (451). Though not identical with religious ritual, ancient theatre does reveal a quasi-ritualistic dimension.

The ritual origin of theatre is not an uncontested notion (Eli Rozik 107). Nor is such a notion really essential here. What is emphasized in this study is the proposition that theatre contains ritual elements which define its relationship with an audience, even in contemporary

times, especially in periods of intense social upheaval. A definition of ritual offered by S. Lukes suggests that we use the term ritual to refer to "rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance" (289-308). Theatre seems to fall within the range of quasi-ritual commemorative ceremonies, in that it contains elements of formalism and performativity. Though it may not be possible to claim for contemporary theatre that it enters the realm of the sacred, one could suggest that theatre does, in a sense, possess a transformative quality, that it works to present or 're-present', in Connerton's phrase, a "passage from chaos to cosmos" (65). Like other quasi-ritual ceremonies, theatre represents and transmits versions of the past through words and images. These re-enactments are stylistically performed, in large part, by the bodily behaviour of the actor (Schechner, "Magnitudes" 31). These are postures and gestures that are culturally loaded, and carry immense weight in the reinforcement of communal memory.

**Actor-training:** It is through the transmission of performance skills to actors, singers, dancers and acrobats, - usually very laborious and carefully codified - that theatre accepts its quasi-ritual nature. This has been so in China where traditionally actor training was long-drawn and specialized. Acting involved a "highly complex set of formal, symbolic gestures and portable objects. Although a foreigner might find them confusing, the Chinese audiences knew them from childhood and understood the nuances of the symbolism" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 23). The actors' training began when they were merely children and lasted a minimum of seven years. With the arrival of realistic techniques, Constantin Stanislavsky's so-called 'Method training' caught the imagination of Chinese directors, but the actor's body continued to be charged with meaning.

In India the performer received rigorous training, and every eye, hand or foot movement was culturally loaded with shared meaning. In Indian classical theatre, *Abhinaya* or 'acting' is meticulously regulated, as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* indicates. "The histrionic representation covers all human activity and is divided into the physical, the verbal and the mental" (Tarlekar 75). In the nineteenth century, the great Bengali actress Binodini Dasi records in her biography the years of

training and practice that shaped her into a consummate actress who played over eighty roles during her twelve year career (Dasi 67).

In Sri Lanka what little traditional drama existed was highly ritualized and related to religious practices. In the twentieth century the acting styles underwent change under the influence of realism and other new 'isms', but the actor's body, his or her voice and language continued to be given enormous attention by directors. By the time realistic theatre caught on in the nineteenth century, and actresses like Annie Boteju entered the theatre, actor training was honed to a fine skill through arduous practice (de Mel 92).

The actor's body has always been recognized as a powerful theatrical 'sign', and body training engenders, through habit, "a knowledge and a remembering in the hands and in the body; and in the cultivation of habit, it is our body which 'understands' (Connerton 95). This symbolic, stylized and repetitive store of body movement lends the play some of its quasi-ritual character.

**The performance as a scapegoat ritual:** In the plays analysed in this study, the physical person of the actor has not lost its centrality, though the written and spoken word take on a new emphasis not to be found in traditional drama. The physicality of performance retains its ritual character, as we notice for instance, in Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun*, Gao Xingjian's *Nocturnal Wanderer* and in MacIntyre's *A Grotesque and Somewhat Mad Comedy*, where issues like violence surface in the work of playwrights who have lived through violent times. The plays re-present in quasi-ritual form, the tensions of societies stretched to breaking point by social, cultural, political and economic conflict.

Critic Erika Fischer-Lichte's insights support this view. She declares, "the performance in a way, turns into a scapegoat ritual. [...] The performer in this sense, suffers in place of the spectators" ("Performance Art" 35). The writer goes on to indicate, in the footsteps of anthropologist van Gennep, that "rituals work in a community in order to secure a safe passage from a given status to a new one at moments of life or social crisis in an individual (such as birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, illness, change in professional positions, death)" (35). She makes

the connection between theatre and ritual when she remarks that "the performances, thus, operate as the signature of a time of transition" (Fishcer-Lichte, "Performance Art" 36) These remarks ring true in the case of Asian theatre being studied here, situated in cultures grappling with social transformation.

Asian theatre in the twentieth century can be seen to play such a ritual role. Performance scholar Victor Turner throws light on the relation between theatrical performance and ritual. Turner argues that socio-economic formations have their own cultural-aesthetic "mirrors" in which they achieve self-reflectivity. Periods of social turbulence or what he calls 'social drama' often proceeds through distinct stages which may end in resolution of some kind, or rejection of the traditional resulting in revolution. Theatre offers a much needed public space for reflection. Borrowing van Gennep's concept of 'liminality' or 'threshold', Turner writes of periods of social conflict as "a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures" (12). In the plays taken up for study we repeatedly encounter themes concerning fundamental issues like social relationships, changing values and norms, questions of gender and national identity and so on; and these go hand in hand with an exploration of new theatrical forms – theatre and society mirroring each other as a "storehouse of possibilities."

**Theatre as Ritual Formulates Values:** In many cases the plays studied here utilize, consciously or otherwise, ritual elements to create social theatre. For one, rituals feed on, and formulate culturally accepted values. Theatre also draws on the substratum of the culture, formulating values and indicating outcomes. Time and again we see this happening. *The White-haired Girl* underscores the issue of social justice and retribution, as when the lecherous landlord is severely punished for his exploitation of the peasants and the White-haired 'ghost' is returned to a normal and happy existence. *Cai Wenji*, too stresses the need to prioritize responsibility and loyalty to the State higher than that to the family. In *A Somewhat Grotesque and Mad Comedy* the brotherhood of human beings is proclaimed in a State torn by fratricide. *The Golden Swan* critiques the emerging commercialization and acquisitiveness of the modern Sri Lankan society.

*Hunting the Sun* makes a strong case for reason and rational thinking and against superstition and blind belief. And *Water* exposes the corruption of the bureaucracy and petty officials who crush the poor tribal peasant, and dares to dream of the growing empowerment of the tribal communities.

When schisms in the community become irreparable, the outcome may turn out to be revolution. In such instances old values are rejected and cast aside and a new social order based on a new belief system is ushered in. The need is felt for rites of passage. Rituals can create models for a new social reality. Such a movement of turning away from, and turning towards, is detected in plays like *Cai Wenji*, *Mareech*, *the Legend*, *Water* and *Hunting the Sun*. Each of the playwrights consciously departs from a set of beliefs that he or she finds outmoded and destructive and points towards a new horizon.

New culturally created symbols are sometimes offered for particular social struggles. In Gao Xingjian's play *Nocturnal Wanderer* the cardboard box stands out as an apt, if disconcerting symbol for the shelter that contemporary humanity finds, as it avoids grappling with urgent questions of evil within the self and in the environs; the need, the play seems to suggest, is to live 'out of the box.' In Mahasweta Devi's play, river water knocking down the walls of the dam and consuming the water-diviner, water as the life-giver and life-taker, wife and whore, grows into a fertile symbol of the relation of humans and nature, and of social relations of unequal power. In the play by Lao She, the teahouse, once the centre of social space in the city, now a decrepit old relic of the past, acquires the sad character of chronicler and narrator of the passing of an age.

**Ritual creates a sense of community:** In other ways, too, the ritual element surfaces. One senses the playwrights' concern with revitalization, with the building of new identities. Or one feels, in isolated moments, the play's attempt to establish a mood of celebration and hope, as in *Cai Wenji* and *The White-haired Girl*. And certainly one can imagine the sense of *communitas* that these plays must have engendered in a live performance. In the beginning years of the Maoist regime, *The White-haired Girl* resonated with Chinese audiences

who were still chafing from feudal exploitation, came to be enormously popular, and was produced as a spoken play, a Peking Opera and a film. An observer remarks about the audience response, "Emotionally they were completely one with the play, and during tense moments, roared their disapproval of the landlord, shouted advice to the heroine and cheered the arrival of the Eighth Route Army" (Bodde 305- 06). By the 1980s the mood of the masses seems to have turned into something very different. And the theatre, though always subject to the censor's dictates, could turn out to be a space for covert criticism and ridicule of the Party line. In "Audience, Applause and Counter-theatre: Border Crossing in 'Social Problem' Plays in Post-Mao China" theatre scholar Xiaomei Chen writes:

China's "theatre of liberation" entails a unique form of subtext, which requires an insider's knowledge and experience to detect and extract from sometimes seemingly very official plays. [...] Theatre has given the Chinese people the opportunity to react subversively to the dominant culture in order to position themselves against the official "other", and their laughter, tears and sorrow have made early post-Mao theatre a meaningful cultural and political experience (Chen 102).

Here, then, we have laughter and tears in the theatre space creating a strong sense of shared destiny, a feeling of *communitas*.

Ritualistic elements are to be found in the plays of all three cultures studied here. The plays, ritually, draw from culturally accepted values (as in *The Golden Swan*) and formulate modified ones (as in *Nocturnal Wanderer*). They offer new models for a new social reality (as in *The White-haired Girl*). They construct symbols for social struggles (as in *Water*). The actor in performance often takes on a ritual 'scapegoat' role. In the nature of ritual commemoration, the plays seek to create a sense of community, however transient, among the audience. These Chinese, Indian and Sinhala plays abundantly stand witness to the ritual role of theatrical performance.

With reference to Asian theatre in the twentieth century, it would not be difficult to agree with Turner's contention that "Theatre is one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted

system of pre-industrial ritual which embraces ideas and images of cosmos and chaos, interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and their solemnity, and uses all the sensory codes, to produce symphonies in more than music" (12). Asian societies have struggled across the twentieth century through turbulent 'social drama' and aesthetic drama to wade through chaos and create a new cosmos of meaning.

### 6.3.3. Theatre as Trial

Theatre often dares put existence on trial. Public events during periods of upheaval are duly recorded in history books; however, more personal agonies rarely find voice, except in art, in literature, specifically in theatre, through its performative faculty. Like a trial, essentially urgent and immediate, the theatre is imbued with a powerful sense of the 'here and now'. Such a sense of urgency and immediacy is clearly apparent in plays like *The White-haired Girl* and *Hunting the Sun*. Rather more subtly, it surfaces in other more self-consciously balanced plays like *Mareech*, *the Legend* and it does not fail to filter through, even in the more inward-looking and less *engagé* play by Gao Xingjian, *Nocturnal Wanderer*. 'Dramatic' seems to become synonymous with intimate and urgent.

Theatre as trial of ideology and social practice can dramatize, as no other literary art can, a multiplicity of voices, divergent and opposing points of view and the impact of their collision. In diverse plays we witness narratives being set free and the repressed being given a voice. In *The Bearer of Woes* the attempt is elaborately made to create an interplay of conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable points of view. The idealistic Writer, anxious to expose the ills of society, clashes with the Woman, whose primary and immediate need is to provide for her children, even at the cost of plying her sex-trade. The theatre artistes debate their responsibility to society, but are quite unsure how they can influence the course of events. In *Nocturnal Wanderer* it is subterranean voices from the Traveller's sub-conscious that vie with one another: desire, violence, fear, self-knowledge. These creatures from the recesses of the mind are freed to

surface and reveal themselves and openly engage with one another. In *Hunting the Sun* powerful factions clash: the ruling classes and the oppressed slaves; the scientifically-inclined Buddhist monk Kalhan and the priestly hierarchy that encourages superstition so as to maintain a stronghold; the debauchery of the powerful and the power of innocence. In *Mareech, the Legend*, the oppressed of the ages respond to coercion in divergent ways. In *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* the crime of fratricide is viewed from multiple and absurdly contrasting standpoints: from familiar contempt, to profound mourning, to anxiety and hysteria. The trial may not be resolved on stage, but the theatre has certainly opened the proceedings.

Playwrights witness to this feeling of urgency in the process of writing and producing a play. In an interview with Bernadette Fort, renowned contemporary French novelist, playwright, and feminist critic Hélène Cixous (1937- ) divulges her sentiments about writing for the theatre:

Particularly today, in quite an exceptional manner which distinguishes it from all other literary acts or practices, the theatre structurally carries a *responsibility in the instant*. [...] Why do we go to the theatre, what is it we expect from the theatre, and from no other space, and which only this space can provide? A feeling of urgency and responsibility. [...] It is a question of writing today's pain and making it heard without betraying it, which is very difficult (428).

This is a telling remark by a person intimately involved with theatre work today.

Asian theatre, as witnessed in the selected plays from China, India and Sri Lanka, has seized the opportunity to become a forum for conflicting voices, a trial of contemporary and intensely felt opinions. It has given credence to the view that "the theatre is the ideal, the heavenly tribunal, if I can say so – or the hellish tribunal – Hades – but where everybody has his or her own say and everything can be said. Nothing is forbidden. This is one of the reasons why people go to the theatre" (Cixous 441). Can "everything" be said in the theatre? Given the potential of the subtext, the symbolism and ambivalence that the playwright can wield, the capacity of performance to nuance the written text, one may agree that much can be said. The moot question, of course, is how much will be said. What will be said is a matter of the individual



playwright's and director's choice, based on personal ideology, political correctness, the socio-political climate and the leeway accorded to the artist.

In the case of Communist China, censorship effectively gagged many voices; in Sri Lanka the ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic divide seems to have determined what would be performed and published; and in West Bengal the pain of the trauma experienced, or the anxiety to forget, or the sheer lack of courage seem to have entirely curtailed off certain issues like Partition and the communal feud.

#### **6.4. Conclusion**

The relevance of theatre in the contemporary world has been contested. Johannes Birringer claims that "many of us would argue that theatre no longer has any cultural significance and is too marginal or exhausted to intervene in contemporary cultural-political debates" (x). As we have noted in Chapter 1, Philip Auslander debunks the 'unreflective assumptions' made about the 'liveness' of theatre, "and the 'community' that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators" (2). Auslander examines ways in which live performances incorporate the technology of reproduction such as television and sound recording. He contends that modern technology has invaded theatre and robbed it of any possible 'liveness' and that live performances are now basically no different from the mediatized forms. Auslander's attack does, of course, have some basis, when one considers the mega-musicals that run for years in the world capitals and produce their fantastic effects with the help of revolving stages, giant screens and wired music. Though they may make for fascinating spectacle, one is tempted to think that such theatricality in the mediatized world moves away from the essential 'live' nature of theatre. But this is a moot question. Modern technology has inevitably been borrowed, for instance in terms of sound and light, by most forms of theatre, even folk forms like the Bengali *Jatra*; under these circumstances, one is never quite certain where to draw the boundaries beyond which the co-opting of technology by theatre turns into corruption.

On the other hand, theatre practitioners like H  l  ne Cixous believe that theatre is attractive and useful because it goes against the grain of our technological and simulated culture, and because it offers an encounter with real time, lived experience and death (Siach 106-9). This is a valid sentiment, and possibly shared by those who keep frequenting the theatre. Moreover, it probably voices the lure of theatre for theatre practitioners – writers, actors, directors – given the fact that the stage offers only modest monetary benefits.

Another argument used to dismiss theatre as outmoded is, not that theatre has changed, but that societies have changed radically and a mismatch is now inevitable. Birringer elaborates this view: "(I)n facing the future of theatre we are already facing conditions in which the very notion of a dominant or unified culture, a traditional notion traceable to historical idealizations of the theatre of the Athenian polis, will become obsolete by the changing realities of our fundamentally multicultural, multilingual, and socially polarized societies" (xi). A study of societies in Asia, caught in a flux of change, assuages such apprehensions. These societies, deeply multicultural, have not been estranged from theatre, they have found the theatre flexible enough to deal with complex realities. In India, the unprecedented cross-language translation of playscripts is a point in fact. The simultaneity of traditional and modern styles, the interconnections between myth, history and contemporary themes, the parallel existence of both urban commercial theatre and grass-roots activist theatre, the acceptance-cum-rejection of cultural 'colonization', the emergence of experimental hybrid forms – all these speak of the vitality of theatre even in a globalized society.

To Birringer's lament that theatre has been marginalized in the context of "the erasure of specific histories, traditions and cultural differences promoted by the globalizing spectacles of postmodern capitalism" (xii) we could respond with a conviction gained from a study of Asian theatre: that theatre makes space for us to re-consider and re-imagine the world we live in. Hence, it is in times of turbulence that it regains vitality. In the context of a world emptied of a "dominant or unified culture", the theatre is best suited to stage micro-narratives. It is in the margins that theatre discovers its creative potential. Underlying the selected modern plays, one

senses a passionate engagement with contemporary struggles and a constant exploration of new or hybrid forms of the old and the new. Modern theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka can be seen as a cultural text which has consistently sought, for over five decades, to be an expression of, and an inspiration for, the struggles of the people for freedom and for identity, however these may be interpreted.

Theatre is a cultural text deeply interpenetrated with its social context. As one maps the course of Asian theatre in the face of the uncertain moment of turbulence, one recognizes that theatre has played its part creatively and often honourably. It has done so in myriad ways, according to varying circumstances. One comes across plays like Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* or Girish Karnad's *Nagmandala* that dramatize fascinating ideas and concepts, which one may perhaps call concept theatre; one encounters many playwrights who, based on political ideologies, prefer a theatre of commitment; and one may discover a Gao Xingjian who is resolute about theatre as the voice of the individual.

Theatre always has an eye on the gallery. The context, the audience, these matter in a live performance. Theatre is often the clown, delighting crowds with light buffoonery, telling stories for an evening's entertainment. Traditional theatre in Asia has performed this pleasant task with vitality and verve and offered much relaxation and some food for the mind and the heart. But then, at times, the storm clouds gather in the sky, and theatre offers some refuge.

Responding to the need of the hour, theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka has often exchanged the hat of the slapstick clown for that of the witty and satirical 'fool', or that of the committed writer, dramatizing social problems and suggesting solutions. At times like these, the theatre comes in for a great deal of opprobrium from some literary critics who dismiss it as political theatre and question its aesthetics. But this is often an unjust claim, since theatre is, in a sense, always political, since it "can enter into resonance in an extremely intimate manner with the citizen's ethico-political situation of today" (Cixous 428). In turbulent days theatre discovers a responsibility to the present times and the ages to come, and enjoys the possibility of embodying these questions on stage.

As social upheaval grows more intense, theatre seems to deepen its self-questioning. It may re-discover the power of play, for play can lend new perspectives. Amartya Sen correctly points out: "(R)esisting injustice is only one of the uses of voice in play. Another is to express a fuller picture of people which can take us beyond the one-dimensional characterization of human beings that bigots – religious or political or whatever – try to peddle" (5). Playful and serious are then no longer seen as opposites.

However, there come also those terrible times when theatre loses its voice altogether. In the wake of Partition in India and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in China, the horror of the experiences has produced only unnerving silence. Theatre is human, after all. And in its occasional silence in the face of trauma, it faces its limitations. The comments made by Sri Lankan critic D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke tellingly support this view:

Conflict and crisis in history do not necessarily produce good or plentiful literature: World War II was the biggest conflict in modern history; but it begat little literature in English and nothing of outstanding quality. On the other hand, conflict and crisis are not always portrayed well in art out of the immediacy of the experience: it was only many years after the Vietnam War had ended that remarkable films about it began to appear in the United States. This may or may not apply to Sri Lankan literature in English about our "ethnic" conflict. To date, generally speaking, Wilfred Owen's words hold true: "The Poetry is in the pity" ("Ethnic Conflict" 453).

Despite its failures and limitations, theatre has created for communities in Asia a rich space to perform their complex realities and to perform change. These Asian cultures are important "new centres of consciousness" (King 7) in the twentieth century and have been the location of intense self-reflectivity. Theatre has shared and fostered the climate of self-reflectivity and has actively participated in the creation of a vision and re-vision of 'the nation' and a "reactive cultural identity" (Dharwadker 2). It has offered to the public gaze significant dialectics of modernity and tradition, Western and indigenous, urban and rural. It has often turned with eager interest to cultural legacies and has sought to integrate them with contemporary concerns and exigencies.

On the stage, a "living past" (Smith 9) has been recovered, re-imagined and re-integrated in the present in the shape of history, myth, legend and symbol. Theatre space which had been a 'colonized space' in terms of the exclusion of subaltern voices like that of the woman and the tribal, has begun to be contested. Playwrights have preferred the satiric mode, which mocks and ridicules, to the heroic mode, which idealises and celebrates. Plays have focussed on spaces as public as emperors' courts and teahouses, as private as the home and as hidden as the recesses of the mind. In this process, the interpenetration of the public world of social and political action with the private world of the family as a psychological unit, and with the inner world of the mind, have led to experimentation in form. Where some playwrights have valorized the historico-mythical past, others have opted to engage with the historical present and perform it in a realistic style. The predominantly urban contemporary Asian theatre has not been unchallenged and rural folk forms have sometimes been co-opted into the mainstream theatre. The text has been greatly valorized, as has been the role of the playwright and the director.

One must conclude that theatre has offered itself as one of the most accessible media, perhaps the most adaptable to specific contexts. A text-in-context reading of plays from China, India and Sri Lanka convinces us that Asian theatre has indeed been Theatre Agonistes valiantly performing change and assisting the passage of these cultures from chaos to cosmos. It may well be possible that the transforming societies draw strength, inspiration, release or new perspectives from the deep experience of theatre.

\*\*\*

### Works cited

#### PRIMARY SOURCES:

- Abey Suriya, Prasanna Jit. Qtd. in *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space*. Ranjini Obeyesekere. New Delhi: Sage, 1999.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Five Plays*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997.
- Dutt, Utpal. *Hunting the Sun*. Delhi: ENACT, Aug.-Sept. 1971.
- Gao Xingjian. *Nocturnal Wanderer. The Other Shore*. Trans. Gilbert C.F.Fong, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000.
- Guan Hanqing. *Selected Plays of Guan Hanqing*. Trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1979.
- Guo Moruo. *Cai Wenji*. Trans. Peng Fumin and Bonnie S. McDougall. *Five Historical Plays*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984.
- Guo Moruo. *Chu Yuan*. Trans. Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1978.
- He Jingzhi and Ding Yi. *The White-haired Girl: An Opera in Five Acts*. Trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1987.
- Lao She. *Teahouse*. Trans. John Howard-Gibson. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984.
- Liu Jung-en, trans. *Six Yuan Plays*. London: Penguin, 1972.
- MacIntyre, Ernest. *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy. Modern Sri Lankan Drama*. Ed. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991.
- Mukherjee, Arun. *Mareech, the Legend. Modern Indian Drama*. Ed. G.P. Deshpande. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2000.
- Sarachchandra, Ediriwira. *The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain. Modern Sri Lankan Drama*. Ed. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991.
- Sircar, Badal. *Evam Indrajit. Three Modern Indian Plays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

**SECONDARY SOURCES:****BOOKS:**

- Abraham, Taisha. *Feminist Theory and Modern Drama*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 1998.
- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: New Left Books, 1971.
- Annual Report: The All India People's Theatre Association*. Bombay: Vakil and Sons, 1946.
- Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and its Double*. Quoted in *Theatre Studies*. Simon Gooper and Sally Mackey. Chestenham: Stanley Thornes Ltd., 1995.
- Auslander, P. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Bai Fengxi. *The Women Trilogy*. Trans: Gua Yuehua. Beijing: Chinese Literature Press, 1991.
- Balsham, A. L. *The Wonder That Was India*. Calcutta: Rupa, 1996.
- Bandyopadhyay, Samik. Introduction. *Five Plays*. Mahasweta Devi. Trans. and ed. Samik Bandyopadhyay. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997.
- Banerjee, Utpal K. *Bengali Theatre: 200 Years*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting 1999.
- Banerji, Himani. Introduction. *Mareech, the Legend and Jagannath*, Arun Mukherjee. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1999.
- Banham, Martin. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Barucha, Rustom. *Rehearsals of Revolution*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1983. Qtd. in *Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage 1905 – 1947*. Minoti Chatterjee. New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2004.
- . *Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of Culture*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1990.
- Basham, A.L., ed. *A Cultural History of India*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

- Bhattacharya, Malini. Introduction. *Talking of Power: Early Writings of Bengali Women from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Battacharya, Malini and Abhijit Sen. Kolkata: Stree, 2003.
- Battacharya, Rimli, ed. *My Story and My Life as an Actress*. Binodini Dasi. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Remembering Fanon." Introduction. *Black Skin White Masks*. Frantz Fanon. London: Pluto Press, 1986.
- Bhatia, Nandi. *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Bentley, Eric, ed. *The Theory of the Modern Stage*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1969.
- Birringer, Johannes. *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Bishop, Donald H. "The Chinese Contribution to World Thought." *Chinese Thought: An Introduction*. Ed. Donald H. Bishop. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995.
- Blunden, Caroline and Mark Elvin. *Cultural Atlas of China*. Oxford: Equinox, 1983.
- Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Bodde, Derk. "Peking Diary, 1948–1949, A Year of Revolution." New York: Abelard, 1950, Fawcett, 1967. Qtd. in *China Yesterday and Today*. Ed. Molly Coye et al. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
- Bond, Edward. *Lear*. 1971. London: Methuen, 2003.
- Boon, Richard, and Jane Plastow, eds. *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Bradby, David. "Beckett, Samuel." *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Brandon, James R. *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993.



- Brecht, Bertolt. "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting." *The Dramatic Moment*. Ed. Eugene M. Waith, Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1967.
- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin, 1968.
- Brown, John Russell. "Theatre Since 1970." *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997.
- Cao Yu. *Thunderstorm*. Trans. Wang Tso-Liang and A.C. Barnes. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1990.
- Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Chai, Ch'ü and Winberg Chai. *The Changing Society of China*. New York: Mentor Books, 1962.
- Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. London: Harper-Collins, 1991.
- Chatterjee, Minoti. *Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage 1905 – 1947*. New Delhi: Indialog Publications 2004.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Present History of Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Cheng, Nien. *Life and Death in Shanghai*. London: Flamingo, 1995.
- Chopra, P. N. and Prabha Chopra, eds. *Encyclopaedia of Asian Culture*. New Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad: Vision Books, 1999.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Coye, Joel, Jon Livingston and Jean Highland, eds. *China Yesterday, and Today*. New York: Bantam, 1989.
- Counsell, Colin. *Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth Century Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Dalmia, Vasudha. *Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Daniel, E. Valentine. *Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

- Dasi, Binodini. *My Story and My Life as an Actress*. Ed. and trans. Rimli Bhattacharya. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
- de Chardin, Theillard. *The Phenomenon of Man*. London: Collins, 1959.
- de Mel, Neloufer. *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001.
- de Silva, D.M. *Ediriwira Sarachchandra, 1988*. Qtd. in *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space*. Ranjini Obeyesekere. New Delhi: Sage, 1999.
- de Silva, K.M. *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005.
- Dharwadkar, Aparna Bhargava. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Dhir, Sunita. *Styles of Theatre Acting*. New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1991.
- Dion, Gregg. "From No Man's Land to No Man's Theater: The Theatre of the 8<sup>th</sup> Day Returns to Capitalist Poland." *Crucibles of Crisis*. Ed. Reinelt, Janelle. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 185-206.
- Dollimore, J. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- . "Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism." *Political Shakespeare*. Ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. Madras: T.R. Publications, 1995.
- Dubey, Satyadev, Introduction. *Three Modern Indian Plays*. Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, and Vijay Tendulkar . New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Dufrenne, M. "In the Non-Western Countries." *Main Trends of Research in the Social and Human Sciences*. Ed. Jacquet Havet. Paris: Mouton Publishers-UNESCO, 1978.
- Dun Li. "Marriage." *China Yesterday and Today*. Ed. Molly Joel Coye et al. New York: Bantam, 1989. 83-87.
- Dutt, Utpal. "Innovation and Experimentation in Theatre." *Bengali Theatre: 200 years*. Ed. Utpal K. Banerjee. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1999. 85-91.

- . *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*. Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons, 1982.
- Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Esslin, Martin. "Modern Theatre: 1890-1920." *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 341-379.
- Etherton, Michael. "Soyinka, Wole." *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Updated ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Evans, Richard. *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China*. London: Penguin, 1997.
- Fairbank, John K. "The Language of Scholars." *China Yesterday and Today*. Ed. Joel Coye, Jon Livingston and Jean Highland. New York: Bantam, 1989. 10-11.
- Farley, Richmond. "South Asian Theatres." *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. 447-465
- Feuerwerker, Albert, ed. *Modern China*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964.
- Feuerwerker, Yi-Tsi Mei. *Ideology, Power, Text*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Fei, Faye Chungang, ed. and trans. *Chinese Theories of Theatre and Performance from Confucius to the Present*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- Fernando, Fr. Mervyn. *This Piece of Planet Earth: Sri Lanka*. Piliyandala: Subodhi, 1994.
- Fernando, Mihindukulasuriya Susantha. *Rituals, Folk Beliefs and Magical Arts of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2000.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Semiotics of Theater*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Fong, Gilbert C.F. trans. *The Other Shore*. By Gao Xingjian. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000.
- Fornas, Johan. *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. London: Sage, 1995.
- Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Trans. and ed. C. Gordon. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980.

- Gao Xingjian. "Another Kind of Drama." Qtd. in Introduction. *The Other Shore*. By Gao Xingjian. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000.
- Gargi, Balwant. *Folk Theatre of India*. Calcutta: Rupa, 1991.
- Ghatak, Maitreya. *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000.
- Ghosh, Girish. *Siraj-ud-doula: Girish Rachanabali*. Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad, 1969.
- Goonatilake, Susantha. "The Self Wandering Between Cultural Localization and Globalization." *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. Ed. Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997. 225-239.
- Goonetilleka, M.H. "Masks of Sri Lanka." *Encyclopaedia of Asian Culture*. New Delhi: Vision Books, 1999.
- Goonetilleka, M. H. *Nadagama*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1984.
- Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. *Between Cultures: Essays on Literature, Language and Education*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1987.
- . *Modern Sri Lankan Drama: An Anthology*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991.
- Goldmann, Lucien. *Method in the Sociology of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Goldman, Robert P. "The Ramayana of Valmiki." *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective*. Ed. Barbara Stoler Miller. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1996. 133-148.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
- Green, Felix. "Language Reform." *China Yesterday and Today*. Ed. Joel Coye, Jon Livingston and Jean Highland. New York: Bantam, 1989. 326-327.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Power of Forms." *The English Renaissance*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1982.
- Gregg, Dion. "From No Man's Land to No Man's Theatre: The Theatre of the 8<sup>th</sup> Day Returns to Capitalist Poland." Janelle Reinelt, ed. *Crucibles of Crisis*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 185-206.

- Heidegger, M. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- Hettiaratchi, S. B. *Social and Cultural History of Sri Lanka*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1988.
- Hingley, Ronald. *Russian Writers and Soviet Society ( 1917-1978 )*. London: Methuen, 1979.
- Holub, Robert C. *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Hsu, Immanuel C.Y. *The Rise of Modern China*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Innes, Christopher. "Theatre after two World Wars." *Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 380-444.
- Indian People's Theatre Association Bulletin* 1, July 1943. Qtd. in "Indian People's Theatre Association." *Nukkad Janam Samvad: People's Art in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice*. Delhi: Jana Natya Manch, July 1999-Sept. 2000. 373-74.
- Jain, Nemichandra. *Indian Theatre: Tradition, Continuity and Change*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1992.
- Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Jayawardena, Kumari, ed. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986.
- . "Some Aspects of Religious and Cultural Identity and the Construction of Sinhala Buddhist Womanhood." *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia: India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*. Ed. Douglas Allen. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004. 161-180.
- Katyal, Anjum. "The Metamorphosis of *Rudali*." Introduction. *Rudali: From Fiction to Performance*. By Devi, Mahasweta and Usha Ganguli. Calcutta: Seagull, 1999.
- Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Kellogg, David. *In Search of China*. London: Hilary Shipman, 1989.

- Kemal, Salim and Ivan Gaskell. "Contesting the arts: politics and aesthetics." *Politics and Aesthetics in the Arts*. Ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 1-10.
- Kennedy, Andrew K. *Dramatic Dialogue: The Duologue of Personal Encounter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Kernodle, George and Portia Kernodle. *Invitation to Theatre*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
- Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre*. N.Y.: Grove Press Inc., 1985.
- King, Bruce, ed. *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Kleinman, Arthur, Veena Das, Margaret Lock, eds. *Social Suffering*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Kumar, Aishwarj. "Visions of Cultural Transformation: The IPTA in Bengal, 1940-44." *Turbulent Times: India 1940-44*. Ed. Biswamoy Pati, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1998. 167-184.
- Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *China*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964.
- Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *The Chinese, Their History and Culture*. New York: Macmillan, 1964.
- Lehtonen, Mikko. *The Cultural Analysis of Texts*. New Delhi: Sage, 2002.
- Lidova, Natalia. *Drama and Ritual of Early Hinduism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994.
- Li, Liweng. "Li Liweng on Theater." *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance*. Ed. and trans. Faye Chunfang Fei. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 77-87.
- Li Xiao-Jian. "Xingbie or Gender." *Keywords: Gender – For a Different Kind of Globalization*. Ed. Nadia Tazi. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 2004. 87-102.
- Liu Jung-en, trans. Introduction. *Six Yuan Plays*. London: Penguin, 1972.
- Louis, Wm. Roger. "The Great Leap Forward." *Oxford History of the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Michael Howard and Wm.
- Lukes, S. "Political Ritual and Social Integration." *Sociology*, 1975. Qtd. in *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

- Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Mackerras, Colin. *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1975.
- Mackerras, Colin and A.C. Scott. "China." *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*. Ed. James R. Brandon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Mah, Adeline Yen. *Falling Leaves*. New York: Broadway Books, 1997.
- Mao Zedong, *Chairman Mao Talks to the People*. Ed. Schram Stuart. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.
- . *Letter to Guo Moruo*. Quoted in Introduction. *Five Historical Plays*. Guo Moruo. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984.
- . *On Literature and Art*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967.
- . *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*. Vol 3. Beijing: *Renmin chubanshe*, 1960.
- Min, Anchee. *Becoming Madame Mao*. London: Allison & Busby Limited, 2000.
- McDougall, Bonnie S. "The Impact of Western Literary Trends." *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*. Ed. Merle Goldman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Miller, Barbara Stoler, ed. *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1996.
- Molloy, Michael. *Experiencing the World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge and Change*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999.
- Mukherjee, Arun. "Colloquium One: The Directors" in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, 27/28 (2000): 10-125.
- . *Mareech, the Legend and Jagannath*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1999.
- . "Falling in Love with Theatre" in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, 29/30, June 2001.
- . *Mareech, the Legend. Modern Indian Drama*. Ed. G.P. Deshpande. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2000.
- Mukherjee, Tutun. *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

- Mukhia, Banani. *Women's Images, Men's Imagination: Female Characters in Bengali Fiction in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2002.
- Myerhoff, Barbara. "The Transformation of Consciousness in Ritual Performances: Some Thoughts and Questions." *By Means of Performance. Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 245-249.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Nightingale, Benedict. *The Future of Theatre*. London: Phoenix, 1998.
- Nisbett, Richard E. *The Geography of Thought*. New York: Free Press, 2004.
- Obeyesekere, Ranjini. *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space*. New Delhi: Sage, 1999.
- Pal, Bishnupriya. "Theatre of Politics, Protest and Commitment." *Bengali Theatre: 200 Years*. Ed. Utpal K. Bannerjee. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1999. 109-119.
- Panjabi, Kavita. *Old Maps and New: Legacies of the Partition*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005.
- Patel, C.N. "Catharsis and Rasa" in *Some Aspects of the Rasa Theory*. Delhi: Bhogilal Leherchand Institute of Indology, 1986.
- Pati, Biswamoy, ed. *Turbulent Times in India 1940-44*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1998.
- Peebles, Patrick. *Social Change in Nineteenth Century Ceylon*. New Delhi: Navrang, 1995.
- Perrot, Michelle. "Women, Power and History." *Writing Women's History*. Ed. Michelle Perrot. Trans. Felicia Phesant, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992.
- Pickowicz, Paul G. *Marxist Literary Thought in China: The Influence of Ch'u Ch'u-pai*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
- Plastow, Jane. Introduction. *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*. Ed. Richard Boon and Jane Plastow. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.



- Pruit, Ida. *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1967.
- Raha, Kironmoy. *Bengali Theatre*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1978.
- Ravikant and Saint, Tarun K. eds. *Translating Partition*. New Delhi: Katha, 2001.
- Rayan, Krishna. "Bharata Today: An Analysis of a Sinhala Play." *Theory and Interpretation of Literature*. Ed. Charu Sheel Singh. New Delhi: Anmol Publishers, 1996.
- Reinelt, Janelle, ed. *Crucibles of Crisis*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- Richmond, Farley P., Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993.
- Roose-Evans, R. *Experimental Theatre: From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Rosenberg, Donna. *World Mythology*. London: Harrap, 1986.
- Rubin, Leon. "South-East Asian Theatres." *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Said, Edward W. *The World, The Text and the Critic*. London: Vintage, 1991.
- . *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Sarachchandra, E. R. *The Folk Drama of Ceylon*. Colombo: Cultural Affairs Department. [1952] 1966.
- . "Development and Traditional Values: Moral and Aesthetic." The Punitham Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture 1989: Sri Lanka Tamil Women's Union.
- Sarcar, Tanika. Foreword. *Talking of Power: Early Writings of Bengali Women from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Battacharya, Malin and Abhijit Sen. Kolkata: Stree, 2003.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Orphee noir" in *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et nalgache de langue francaise*, ed. Leopold S. Senghor, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972 (1948) (English trans: "Black Orpheus", trans. S.W. Allen, Paris, Presence Africaine, 1976).Qt.in

*Main Trends of Research in the Social and Human Sciences.* Jacquet Havet, The Hague, Paris and New York: Mouton Publishers, UNESCO, 1978.

Satyanarayana, E. *The Plays of Mahsweta Devi.* New Delhi: Prestige, 2000.

Schechner, Richard. "Magnitudes of Performance." *By Means of Performance: Intercultural studies of theatre and ritual.* Ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 19-49.

---. *Performance Theory.* Revised edition. New York: Methuen 1988.

---. "The Street is the Stage." *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance.* London: Routledge, 1993.

Sen, Amartya. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny.* London: Penguin, 2006.

Shirin. *Beyond the Stage: Street Theatre Against Communalism.* Delhi: Media House, 2002.

Shiach, M. *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing.* London: Routledge, 1991.

Singer, Milton, ed. *Traditional India: Structure and Change.* Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1959.

Smart, Ninian. *World Philosophies.* London: Routledge, 1999.

Spivak, Gayatri. Foreword. *Breast Stories.* By Mahasweta Devi. Calcutta: Seagull, 2002.

Swann, Darius L. "The Folk-Popular Traditions." *Indian Theatre: Traditions of performance.* Ed. Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993. 249-274.

Talwar, Urmil and Bandana Chakrabarty, eds. *Contemporary Indian Drama Astride Two Traditions.* Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005.

Takaya, Ted T. ed. and trans. *Modern Japanese Drama: An Anthology.* Columbia University Press: New York. 1979.

Tang Xianzu. "Epigraph for the Theatre God Master Qingyuan in the Yihuang County Temple." *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present.* Ed. and trans. Faye Chunfang Fei. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002. 54-57.

- Tankard Reist, Melinda. "The Sacrifice of Sovereignty: China's Fertility Control Policy." *The Other Revolution: NGO and Feminist Perspectives from South Asia*. Ed. Dr. Renuka Sharma. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1999. 358-364.
- Tarlekar, G.H. *Studies in the Natyasastra*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.
- Taylor, Diana. "Theatre and Terrorism: Griselda Gambaro's Information for Foreigners." *Crucibles of Crisis*. Ed. Janelle Reinelt. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 207-230.
- Toynbee, Arnold. *A Study of History*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. "Space and Context." *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Turner, Victor. "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama?" *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 8-18.
- . Unpublished statement quoted by Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Introduction. *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- van Buitenen, J. A. B. *The Literatures of India: An Introduction*. Ed. Edward C. Dimrock, Jr. et al. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Wang Jisi. *Selected Plays of Guan Hanqing*. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, trans. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1979.
- Wang, Meng-sheng. "Stories on the Theatre." Shanghai, 1915. Qtd. in *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times from 1840 to the Present Day*. By Colin Mackerras. London: Thames & Hudson, 1975.
- Warder, A.K. *The Science of Criticism in India*. Madras: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1978.
- Watson, C.W. *Multiculturalism*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2002.

- Wegner, Phillip E. "Critical Geography, Space, Place and Textuality." *Introducing Criticism at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Wolfrey, Julian. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.
- Wells, Henry W. *The Classical Drama of the Orient*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965.
- Williams, Raymond. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*. Ed. Kierman Ryan. London: Arnold, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- . *Drama in Performance*. London: Watts, 1954.
- . *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- . *The Politics of Modernism*. London & New York: Verso, 1989.
- Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam. *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Introducing Criticism at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd. 2002.
- Woodyard, George. "Making America or making revolution: the theatre of Ricardo Halac in Argentina." *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*. Ed. Richard Boon and Jane Plastow. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Yang, Gladys ed. *Seven Contemporary Women Writers*. Beijing: Panda Books, 1985.
- Yu, Pauline and Theodore Hutters. *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1994.
- Xinran. *The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices*. Ed. Esther Tyldesley. London: Chatto & Windus, 2002.

#### **INTERVIEWS:**

- Cixous, Hélène. Interview with Bernadette Fort. "Theatre, History, Ethics: An Interview with Hélène Cixous on *The Perjured City or the Awakening of the Furies*." *New Literary History* 28. 3 (1997): 425-455.
- Devi, Mahasweta. Interview with Ratnottama Sengupta. *The Times of India*. 5 January 2000.

**ARTICLES IN JOURNALS:**

- Amunugama, Sarath. "John de Silva and the Nationalist Theatre." *The Ceylon Historical Journal*, 25 October 1978.
- Bandyopadhyay, Samik. "In Tribute: The Theatre Poems of Utpal Dutt." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 1 (1994): 35-39.
- . "Theatrescapes." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 12 (1996): 70-71.
- Banerjee, Sudeshna. "Tracing It Back to the Sixties: A Round Table with Playwrights and Directors." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 12 (1996): 64-68.
- Butalia, Urvashi. "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition." *Economic and Political Weekly of India* 28.17 (1993): 12-24.
- Chakraborty, Bibash. "Colloquium One: The Directors". *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*. 27/28 (2000): 10-125.
- Chanda, Ipsita. "Twenty-five years of Alternative Theatre." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 1 (1994): 69.
- Chen, Xiaomei. "Audience, Applause and Counter-theatre: Border Crossing in 'Social Problem' Plays in Post-Mao China." *New Literary History* 29.1 (1998): 101-120.
- Ding Luonan. "At the Intersection of Eastern and Western Theatre: Forms and Concepts of Chinese Theatre in the 1980s." *Theatre Research International* 22. 1 (1997): 69-72.
- Dutt, Utpal. "The Street Play: The Theatre Poems of Utpal Dutt." Samik Bandyopadhyay. Calcutta: *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*. January 1994, 35-39.
- Egginton, William. "An Epistemology of the Stage." *New Literary History*. 27.3 (1996): 391-413.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "Performance Art and Ritual: Bodies in Performance." *Theatre Research International* 22. 1 (1997): 23-35.
- Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History." *The National Interest*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989.

- Gao Xingjian. "The Case for Literature: The 2001 Nobel Lecture." *World Literature Today*. 75.1 (2001): 4-11.
- Ganguli, Usha. "Colloquium Two: Women in Group Theatre." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 27/28 (2000): 126-259.
- Ganguly, Sanjoy. "Group Building is very Important." *Theatre for Change. The Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 20/21 (1998 – 1999): 56-68.
- Goodman, David G. "The Return of the Gods: Theatre in Japan Today." *World Literature Today* 62.3 (1988): 418-420.
- Goonetilleka, M. H. "Typology and Iconography of Sri Lankan Masks with a Brief Introduction on their contexts." *R.A.S.S.L. Journal*, N.S. Vol. XL, 1995. Qtd. in *Rituals, Folk Beliefs and Magical Arts of Sri Lanka* by Milindukulasuri Susantha Fernando. Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2000.
- Guha, Prabir. "Invisible Theatre." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 12 (1996): 60-63.
- Gunawardana, A.J. "Is it the End of History for Asia's Modern Theatres?" *Theatre Research International* 22.1 (1997): 70-81.
- Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. "Sri Lankan Drama in English: Metamorphosis Through Migration." *World Literature Today* 68.3 (1994): 493-500.
- . "Sri Lanka's 'Ethnic' Conflict in Its Literature in English." *World Theatre Today* 66.3 (1992): 451-456.
- Gunawardana, A. J. "Saratchandra's Latest Play." *The Island*. 15 September 1988.
- Hansen, Kathryn. "Making Women Visible: Female Impersonators and Actresses on the Parsi Stage and in Silent Cinema." *Theatre Journal* 21.2 (1999): 127-147.
- Huntington, Samuel P. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, 72,3 (1993): 22-49.
- Kapur, Anuradha. "On Acting." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 12 (1996): 43-49.
- Knapp, Bettina. "The New Era for Women Writers in China." *World Literature Today*. (1991) 433- 39.

- Lin, Sylvia Li-Chun. "Between the Individual and the Collective." *World Literature Today* 75.1 (2001): 12-19.
- Mao Zedong. "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts." *Chinese Theories of Theatre and Performance from Confucius to the Present*. Ed. and trans. Faye Chungang Fei. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- Marney, John. "PRC Politics and Literature in the Nineties." *World Literature Today* 63.3 (1991): 383-7.
- McAuley, Gay. "Place in the Performance Experience." *Modern Drama* XLVI.4 (2003) 598-613.
- Mitra, Manoj. "Colloquium One: The Directors." *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 27/28 (2000): 10-125.
- Nordman, Alfred and Hartmut Wickert. "The Impossible Representation of Wonder: Space Summons Memory." *Theatre Research International* 22.1 (1997): 38-47.
- Sarachchandra, Eridiwira. "Sarachchandra's Latest Play." A.J. Gunawardena. *The Island*, 15 September 1988. Qtd. in Introduction. *Modern Sri Lankan Drama: An Anthology*. Ed. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991.
- The Seagull Theatre Quarterly*. Ed. Anjum Kayal. Calcutta: Seagull Foundation for the Arts.
- Sharoni, Simona. "Every Woman is an Occupied Territory: The Politics of Militarism and Sexism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." *Journal of Gender Studies*. 1. 4 November 1992. 447-462.
- Stoppard, Tom. "Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas." *Theatre Quarterly*. 4 (1974): 6-7.
- Skloot, Robert. "'Where Does it Hurt?' Genocide, the Theatre and the Human Body." *Theatre Research International*. 23. 1 (1998): 51-58.
- Yan Haiping. "Theatrical Impulse and Posthumanism: Gao Xingjian's 'Another Kind of Drama'." *World Literature Today*. (2001): 20-29.

#### **ARTICLES IN NEWSPAPERS/MAGAZINES:**

- Ahmad, Aijaz. "A century of revolutions." *Frontline*. Delhi: Volume 17, Issue 2, Jan-Feb 2000.

- de Chickera, Ruwanthie. "Aspects of the English Theatre." *Frontline* 16.4. February 13-26, 1999.
- Philipose, Pamela. "Unfinished Journey." *The Indian Express*. 14 August 1994. Qtd. in *Translating Partition*. Ed. Ravikant and Saint, Tarun K. New Delhi: Katha, 2001.
- Ramchandran, Uma. "A Feminist Dilemma." *The Navhind Times*, 2 November 2003.
- "*Streeshiksha O streeswadinata*", *Tattvabodhini Patrika*. Nov-Dec. 1878. Qtd. in *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905*. By Ghulam Murshid, Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, Rajshahi University, 1983. 47.
- Tillich, Paul. "Between Mountain and Plain." *Time*. 20 Oct. 1952.
- Wilcox, Dean. "Ambient Space in Twentieth-Century Theatre: The Space of Silence." *Modern Drama*. Vol.XLVI, No. 4, Winter 2003.

#### WEBSITES:

- Bandaranayake, Dharmasiri. "Sri Lankan artist speaks about death threats by Sinhala extremists".  
Interview with Panini Wijesiriwardana, 12 December 2003, < <http://wsws.org>>
- de Silva, Sugathapala. < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sugathapala\\_de\\_Silva](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sugathapala_de_Silva)>
- Huang, Jisu. "Chinese Theatre between the State, West and Market."  
< <http://chinastudygroup.com>>.
- Ganguli, Usha. Interview with Ranjita Biswas. *The Hindu*. 18 Sept. 2004.  
<<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2004/07/18/stories/2004071800480500.htm>>.
- Lawrence, Patricia. "Work of Oracles: Overcoming Political Silencing in Mattakkalappu."  
Unpublished paper presented at the Fifth Sri Lanka Conference. Durham, New Hampshire.  
10-13 August 1995.  
[www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/data/indiv/area/idsas/LAWRENCE,Patricia.htm](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/data/indiv/area/idsas/LAWRENCE,Patricia.htm) –
- Rosik, Eli. "The Ritual Origin of Theatre – A Scientific Theory or Theatrical Ideology?" *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* 2.1 (2003) < [http://www.rjournal.org/vol\\_2/no\\_1/rozik.html](http://www.rjournal.org/vol_2/no_1/rozik.html)>
- Wong, Ricky. "Enter, Stage Left." <<http://www.asiaweek.com>> 1 January 2001.



### Works consulted

- Allen, Douglas, ed. *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia*. South Asia Edition. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004.
- Arasaratnam, S. *Ceylon*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964.
- Arnott, Peter D. *An Introduction to the Greek Theatre*. London: Macmillan, 1965.
- Baumer, Rachel Van M. and James R. Brandon, ed. *Sanskrit Drama in Performance*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981.
- Bennett, Susan: "New plays and women's voices in the 1950s". *Modern British Women Playwrights*. Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Bertens, Hans. *The Idea of the Postmodern: a history*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Bigsby, C.W.E., ed. *Contemporary English Drama*. London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1981.
- Bloodworth, Dennis. *Chinese Looking Glass*. London: Book Club Associates, 1967.
- Bradby, David, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt, eds. *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Brown, John Russell, ed. *Drama and the Theatre*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Buruma, Ian and Avishai Margalit. *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004.
- Cao Xueqin. *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. London: Penguin, 1973.
- Chaitanya, Krishna. *A Profile of Indian Culture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New Delhi. Clarion Books, 1982.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta, ed. *Calcutta: The Living City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Chaudhury, P.C. Roy. *Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1985.

- Ch'en Jerome. *Mao and the Chinese Revolution*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- China: Literature and the Arts*. China Handbook Editorial Committee, comp. Bonnie S. McDougall and Hu Liuyu, trans. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1983.
- Chopra, Jagmohan. *Folk Tales of China*. New Delhi: Learners' Press, 1996.
- Chenoy, Anuradha M. *Militarism and Women in South Asia*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002.
- Cotterell, Arthur. *East Asia: From Chinese Predominance to the Rise of the Pacific Rim*. Enlarged Edition. London: Pimlico, 2002.
- Dybikowski, Ann *et al.* eds. *In the Feminine: Women and Words*. Vancouver: Longspoon Press, 1983.
- Farmer, Edward L. *et al.* *Comparative History of Civilizations in Asia*. Reading: Addison-Welsey, 1977.
- Farrell, Joseph. *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Harlequins of the Revolution*. London: Methuen, 2001.
- Fernandez, Doreen. "Philippine Theatre in English." *World Literature Today*. Vol. 74, Spring 2000. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma.
- Foley, Kathy. "Theatre in the Philippines". *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Fowler, Roger. *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Gamage, Siri and I.B. Watson, eds. *Conflict or Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka: 'Pearl of the East' or the 'Island of Tears'?* Colombo: Vijita Yapa, 1999.
- Gao Xingjian. *Soul Mountain*. Mabel Lee, trans. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.
- Golstein, Howard. *Social Learning and Change*. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1981.
- Hall, Stuart and Paul du Gay, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996.
- Haslett, Moyra. *Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories*. London: Macmillan Press, 2000.
- Hay, Malcolm, and Philip Roberts. *Bond: A Study of His Plays*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980.
- Hettiaratchi, S.B. *Social and Cultural History of Ancient Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1988.

- Hinton, William. *China: An Unfinished Battle*. Kharagpur: Cornerstone Publications, 2002.
- Huang Shang. *Tales from Peking Opera*. Beijing: New World Press, 1985.
- Kintz, Linda. *The Subject's Tragedy: Political Poetics, Feminist Theory and Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Lao She. *Camel Xiangzi*. Shi Xiaoqing, trans. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988.
- Latsch, Marie-Louise. *Peking Opera as an European Sees it*. Beijing: New World Press, 1980.
- Leslie, Julia. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1992.
- Lu Hsun. *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*. Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, trans. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1982.
- Luzuriaga, Gerardo, ed. *Popular Theatre for Social Change in Latin America*. Los Angeles: University of California, 1978.
- Macgowan, Kenneth and William Melnitz. *The Living Stage*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1955.
- Malasekera, G.P. *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994.
- Mason, Colin. *A Short History of Asia*. Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000.
- Mendis, G.C. *The Early History of Ceylon*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1985.
- Moorhouse, Geoffrey. *Calcutta: The City Revealed*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1993.
- Muller, Carl. *Colombo: A Novel*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1995.
- Nagendra. *Indian Literature*. Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 1988.
- Nubile, Clara. *The Danger of Gender: Caste, Class and Gender in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003.
- On the Docks – A Modern Revolutionary Peking Opera*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1973.
- Panjabi, Kavita. *Old Maps and New: Legacies of the Partition*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005.
- Patel, C.N. "Catharsis and Rasa." *Some Aspects of the Rasa Theory*. Delhi: Bhogilal Leherchand Institute of Indology, 1986.
- Patil, Anand. *Western Influence on Marathi Drama*. Panaji: Rajhauns Vitaran, 1993.

- Paulose, K.G. *Improvisations in Ancient Theatre*. Tripunithura: International Centre for Kutiyattam, 2003.
- Pieterse, Jan Nederveen and Bhiku Parekh, eds. *The Decolonizing of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Pilendran Gnanamuthu. *Tamil Catholic Literary Tradition of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Catholic Students' Union, 1998.
- Rabkin, G. "The Play of Misreading: Text/Theatre/Deconstruction." *Performing Arts Journal*, 1983, 19: 44-60.
- Radhakrishnan. *The Hindu View of Life*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1993.
- Rangacharya, Adya. *Drama in Sanskrit Literature*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1947.
- . *Introduction to Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966.
- Rao, K.S. *The Dramatic History of the World*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1986.
- Redmond, James, ed. *Drama and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- . *Reviews of Selected Chinese Classics*. Beijing: China Reconstructs Press, 1988.
- Schurmann, Franz and Orville Schell, eds. *Imperial China*. New York: Vintage, 1967.
- Seneviratne, H. L. *Indentity, Consciousness and the Past*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Sengupta, Nitish. *History of the Bengali-Speaking People*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 2001.
- Sharma, Renuka, ed. *The Other Revolution: N.G.O. Perspectives from South Asia*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1999.
- Sharma, R.P. *Insights into Literary Theory: Eastern and Western Perspectives*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1996.
- Shachiapang: A Modern Revolutionary Peking Opera*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972.
- Shirin. *Beyond the Stage: Street Theatre Against Communalism*. Delhi: Media House, 2000.
- Singer, Milton. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Antropological Approach to Indian Civilization*. New York: Praeger Publications, 1972.

- Smith, Verity. Ed. *Concise Encyclopaedia of Latin American Literature*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000.
- Snow, Edgar. *Red China Today: The Other Side of the River*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1976.
- Somasundaram, Daya. *Scarred Minds: The Psychological Impact of War on Sri Lankan Tamils*. New Delhi: Sage, 1998.
- Spear, Percival. *The Oxford History of Modern India 1740-1975*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Spencer Jonathan. *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- States, B.O. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1985.
- Stanton, Sarah and Martin Banham. *Cambridge Paperback Guide to Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Stephens, John Russell. *The Censorship of English Drama: 1824-1901*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Stover, Leon E. *The Cultural Ecology of Chinese Civilization*. New York: Mentor, 1974.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Chitra*. London: Macmillan, 1966.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Post Office*. Trans. Devebrata Mukherjee. London: Macmillan, 1965.
- Tambiah, S.J. *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Taylor, Russel John. *A Dictionary of the Theatre*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1970.
- Tsao Yu. *Sunrise*. A.C. Barnes, trans. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1978.
- Tsao Yu. *Thunderstorm*. Wang Tso-Liang and A.C. Barnes, trans. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990.
- Veeser, Aram H., ed. *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Whitaker, Thomas R. *Fields of Play in Modern Drama*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Wijemanne, Adrian. *War and Peace in Post-Colonial Ceylon, 1948-1991*. New Delhi: Orient Longman 1996.

Wolfreys, Julian, ed. *Introducing Literary Theories: A Guide and Glossary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001.

