

**REALITY AS CONSTRUCT:
REPRESENTATION AND MEANING IN
POST-MODERNIST THEATRE WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THE WORKS OF SAMUEL BECKETT
AND BERTOLT BRECHT**

**Thesis submitted to the
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT
in fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
THEATRE ARTS
(Under the Faculty of Fine Arts)**

by

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Certificate of the Supervisor

This is certified that the dissertation entitled "**Reality as Construct: Representation and Meaning in Post-Modernist Theatre with Special Reference to the Works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht**" submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Calicut is a bona fide record of the research carried out by C. S. Francies under my supervision during the period 1993-2003, at the School of Drama and Fine Arts, Aranattukara, Trichur.

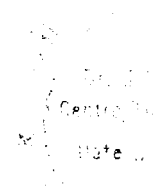
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Declaration

I, C. S. Francis, do hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "**Reality as Construct: Representation and Meaning in Post-Modernist Theatre with Special Reference to the Works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht**" is the authentic record of the research work carried out by me under the supervision of Dr. Vayala Vasudevan Pillai, Director and Head of School of Drama and Fine Arts, Trichur, Kerala. It is also stated that no part of this dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree or diploma or any other associate fellowship or title.



C.S. Francis

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*To
My Mother*

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Photos and a copy of the Thesis**

Acknowledgement

It has been a long and protracted affair and it needed stoic patience. But for the tolerance shown by Dr. Vayala Vasudevan Pillai this work would not have been accomplished. I am deeply indebted to him for his graciousness to spare unquantifiable time for discussions and guidance. His quiet listening, incisive questions and quips were of immeasurable value to my pursuit. Place on record my profound sense of gratitude to him. I also thank Mrs. Vayala for her quiet support all along.

I thank Mr. Ahilash Pillai and Prof. Chandradasan, the directors of the plays discussed in the thesis for the personal conversation they permitted, and Mrs. Anuradha Kapoor for the assistance she offered in NSD.

My thanks are due to Rev. Fr. John Therezhath, former principal of Sacred Heart College, Thevara, the present principal Rev. Fr. Joseph Poonely and my colleagues, Prof. M. P. Jose, T.T. Joseph, Thomaskutty M., K.M. Johnson and Shinu Alex for the support and encouragement they extended to me in this venture.

I thank the faculty and staff of the School of Drama for their support and assistance throughout the years of my work there. I cherish the friendship and love my young friends in the School of Drama offered me and I take this opportunity to thank them all.

My special thanks are due to Mr. Jose Joseph, and Mr. Mathew Joseph who helped me collect materials from abroad. I am grateful to the librarians of School of Drama, Trichur, National School of Drama, New Delhi, University of Calicut, M.G. University, Kottayam, University of Kerala, British Counsel Library, Trivandrum, CIEFL, Hyderabad, and above all to the librarian of S. H. College, Thevara.

I am especially grateful to Ms. Reshmi U. of NSD and Sankar C. V. of School of Drama, Trichur, for helping me collect materials and Vinu for his assistance in preparing the final manuscript of the thesis.

Above all, I thank my wife for the countless sacrifices she has made for the success of this venture.

Introduction

C.S. Francies “Reality as construct: representation and meaning in post-modernist theatre with special reference to the works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht ” Thesis. Department of School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, 2003

Introduction

Introduction

The twentieth century theatre has been a cauldron of artistic experiments. It was witness to the unprecedented use of technology, the rise of the directors' theatre and an explosion of theories. Perhaps, never in its history since Aristotle, has there been so much of a reworking of the canons of the art of theatre. The experiments on the stage that the early twentieth century witnessed have been sufficiently accounted for by the theories of modernism. However, there has been a failure on the part of theory to account for the revolution that has taken place in the field of theatrical production in the post-modernist era.

Cultural critics often refer to the latter half of the twentieth century as postmodern. What does this term refer to? Is it a reference to a historical period? Or is it a reference to a cultural condition? If this refers to a historical period can we call all the works produced during this period postmodern? On the other hand if it represents a cultural condition what informs this cultural condition? What is the place of theatre in the postmodern condition?

Curiously, on the side of postmodern theory, theatre hardly figures. Linda Hutcheon refers to 'little' figuring of theatre in the postmodern debates in her book, The Poetics of Postmodernism. One fine case in point is the recently published work, The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism (2001), edited by Stuart Sim. This work takes a fairly comprehensive view of postmodern tendencies in the various fields of contemporary art and culture. However, one conspicuous omission is a discussion on the relationship between postmodernism and theatre. The issue is



this: if postmodernity is a cultural condition that informs contemporary life and if 'postmodernism' is the aesthetics that is characteristic of the condition of postmodernity, one has to talk about how this condition is reflected in the cultural practices, including theatre. Sim's silence on theatre is significant. Is he also of the opinion that theatre, as an art form has become less significant in the postmodern scenario, as suggested by Baudrillard? Even those theoreticians of postmodernism who have included theatre in their discussions, like Jacques Derrida, Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh, have been sparing in their references to theatre.

This is paradoxical in some sense because both the postmodern theories and theatre share a common platform as far as their interest in culture is concerned. Theatre has always been a handy medium for discussing cultural issues. Yet there is a conspicuous omission. Why is it so? Is it because theatre is too complex a medium to make a proper account of its practices?

The objective of this study is to draw a cartographer's map of the ramifications of the practices in theatre after the heyday of modernism. Concomitantly, it is an analysis of how the cultural condition, generally known as postmodernity, has wrought a new aesthetics for theatrical production and reception all over the world.

This study is significant as it attempts to take a comprehensive view of the apparently disparate modes that the post-modernist theatre has taken to. This divergence has occurred not only in terms of the styles of performance but also in the aesthetic theories related to the practices in contemporary theatre. However, in spite of the unaccountable and often bizarre manifestations that the form theatre has taken since World War II, the critics have been more interested in reading these tendencies as individual styles or as mere idiosyncrasies. Thus one finds

how the works of Beckett were labeled as 'Absurd', Brecht's practices as 'theatre of alienation', Artaud's work as 'theatre of cruelty', Pinter's works as 'theatre of menace', and so on. Other categories like feminist theatre, black theatre, theatre of roots, etc., have also been classifications of this ilk.

The question is this. Can we remain satisfied with such disparate ways of representing the artistic as well as cultural tendencies of an age? Or is there an aesthetics that can subsume under it such divergent modes of artistic expressions? Who were the map-makers of the new aesthetics in theatre? What was the role of Beckett and Brecht in the re-writing of the canons of theatre in the twentieth century? What are the areas problematized by these practitioners? The study pays special attention to the pivotal role played by these two great practitioners of the twentieth century theatre.

Review of earlier research:

There have been several attempts at reviewing practices in contemporary theatre in the context 'theories'. Theory/Theatre: An Introduction (1997) by Mark Fortier discusses the various contemporary theories and the author makes an attempt at establishing the connections between the various theories and the practices in theatre. However, the author's work is more discrete than comprehensive. James Roose-Evans's Experimental Theatre (1970) also is of a similar vein. He discusses the works of playwrights and directors individually. Patrice Pavis's Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture (1992) is a study in the direction of postmodern mise-en-scene rather than a comprehensive study of the impact of the postmodern condition on theatre.

Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama (1990) edited by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn, Analysing Performance (1996) edited by Patrick Campbell and Critical Theory and Performance edited by Reinelt and Roach contain critical essays on the various issues related to contemporary theories and performance. Although the essays contained in these anthologies deal with the various theoretical aspects, they lack a sustained and inclusive view of the context that has rendered theatrical performance problematic.

Perhaps the one significant work that has made a serious attempt at incorporating contemporary theoretical positions is Colin Counsell's Signs of Performance (1996). However his attempt is essentially to trace the signifying process employed by the major practitioners of the 20th century western theatre. Hence he adopts different approaches in analyzing the works of these practitioners.

Of the numerous studies on Beckett, most are thematic approaches. Since Martin Esslin's groundbreaking The Theatre of the Absurd, there has not been a significant reevaluation of Beckett's dramatic practices. There have been a few works like Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text (1988) by Steven Connor; Beckett and Poststructuralism (1999) by Anthony Uhlmann; and Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism (2000) edited by Peter Boxall, which have dealt with his works from the context of contemporary theories. However, these studies also are focused on certain features of his works.

Similarly, studies on Brecht also have been mostly either on the ideological aspects or on the formal aspects of his works. Elizebeth Wright's Postmodern Brecht: A Re-presentation (1989) makes a serious attempt at reading Brecht in the context

of postmodern theories. However, her attention was more on the formal aspects of Brecht's postmodernist leanings.

Methodology

The first part of the study is an analysis of the notion of theatre in the context of its complex manifestations in the twentieth century. The second chapter makes an attempt at defining the idea of postmodernism and the issues that are raised by the postmodernist theories. The third chapter focuses on the contribution of Brecht in the making of the resistant mode of postmodernism and how he has been an inspiration for the post-colonialist, feminist, neo-historicist discourses. Chapter four takes up for discussion the role of Beckett in the creation of the postmodernist aesthetics in theatre. It discusses in some detail how Beckett has been instrumental in shaping the formal aspects of contemporary theatre. The chapter also contains a brief discussion of how Beckett's dramaturgy informs the works of Robert Wilson. The fifth chapter contains a discussion of how the theory of postmodernism has influenced the theatre practices in the Indian subcontinent. It takes up for special analysis two recent productions made in the south of India.

The Idea of Theatre in the Age of Theories

C.S. Francies “Reality as construct: representation and meaning in post-modernist theatre with special reference to the works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht ” Thesis. Department of School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, 2003

Chapter - 1

Chapter 1

The Idea of Theatre in the Age of Theories

An attempt at tracing a blueprint of the contemporary western theatre is like opening up a Pandora's box of issues. For the protean forms in which contemporary theatre manifests itself raise more questions than answers.

To begin with, the very idea of 'the west' is no more a cultural reference than a political and ideological one in the post-globalised, post-mediatised world of today. The geopolitical developments of the postwar period and the phenomenal growth of the electronic media have virtually caused a cultural implosion. The cultural boundaries separating the continents have collapsed into a composite of inter-culture or multicultural. As a result of this, the Asian and the African experiences have become part of the European psyche, opening up its cultural spheres for experimenting with new styles and motives. Conversely, the cultural producers from the Asian and the African continents have revitalized themselves by assimilating styles and themes from the west. The impact of this convergence of the cultures has been quite pronounced in the case of theatre, for theatre, unlike most human artifacts, holds in its fold a wide spectrum of cultural signs.

A great deal of the experiments in the contemporary theatre has been about the creation of a 'multicultural' theatrical language. The works of the canonical figures of twentieth century theatre in the west like Peter Brook, Antonin Artaud, Ariane Mnouchkine and Eugino Barba among others bear witness to this. Hence it is problematic, if not anachronistic, in some sense, to refer to a 'western theatre' *per se*.

Nevertheless, such a taxonomical reference, however provisional it is, seems necessary. For theatre, like any other art form is more a cultural product than a work of the individual artistic genius of its creator. It springs out of the well of the cultural dominants in a given society. It partakes of and reproduces (also rewrites) the ideas circulating in the immediate society in which it takes shape. Hence, it will be naïve to assume that the way theatre is practiced and understood all over the world is similar. Besides, such a treatment amounts to the overlooking of the distinctness of cultures.

This study focuses on the 'western' theatre for two reasons. In the first place, the west by virtue of its economic, political and technological domination has had a hegemonic role over the rest of the world in cultural production. Secondly, the peculiar cultural phenomenon that is being discussed here is primarily a western experience, and the fall out of which is only beginning to permeate the cultural sphere of the non-western civilizations.

The other term that needs elaboration is 'theatre' itself. For, the variety of forms and styles of the theatrical productions of our time is so varied that it has virtually created an epistemological crisis besides rendering the task of the taxonomer difficult. In his book, Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture, Patrice Pavis comments, " Never before has the western stage contemplated and manipulated the various cultures of the world to such a degree, but never before has it been at such a loss as to what to make of their inexhaustible babble, their explosive mix, the inextricable collage of their languages" (1). This Babel of theatrical languages necessitates a reappraisal of the parameters by which we identify the art form called 'theatre'.

Theatre/ Drama/Performance

One of the distinctions we need to make at this stage is among drama, theatre and performance. In simple terms, the term 'drama' refers to the literary genre meant for performance or reading, while 'performance' is the physicalisation of a text. However, the relationship between a dramatic text and its performance is not that of a simple hierarchy in which the text is placed above the performance. Often the text is perceived as 'a linguistic transcription of a stage potentiality'. (Paola Gulli Pugliatti, as quoted by Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama 209). Performance here is no longer a translation of a dramatic text into the language of the stage but the very cause of it. Besides these connotations, 'performance' is used as a general term holding under its umbrella a wide range of human activities, from religious rituals to political demonstrations and exhibitions. The rise of the

relatively new art form called 'performance art' typifies this quality of performance. The key difference between drama and performance is that the latter does not rely on any verbal text.

While talking about the relationship between the three, Mark Fortier remarks, "One way of thinking of the relationship is to see drama as a part of theatre and theatre as a part of performance" (Theory/Theatre 13). His prioritizing of 'performance', as a more encompassing category over drama and theatre is not without problems. For, his taxonomy does not account for the hardware involved in theatre. As a generic term 'theatre' subsumes under it, not only the complex relations among the hardware involved in the theatrical production such as actors, audience, space, sounds, props etc., but also its formalistic and communicative aspects. The etymological implication of 'theatre' also refers to the communicational and critical aspects of it. For the word 'theatre' comes from a verb meaning 'to see'. This implies the presence of the audience as a participant in the 'act' ('drama' –from *dran* meaning 'to do'). Moreover, 'seeing' is synonymous with perceiving – which is an analytical pursuit. In other words a study of theatre has to take into account the dramatic text, the performance and the communicative aspects of it.

In theatre, there are primarily two types of texts: the playwright's text and the performance text. If the playwright's text contains quotations from the literary system, and particularly that of the dramatic genre, the performance text borrows from the

various styles or writings of performance. They remain intertextual. Thus one cannot claim authorship for any kind of theatrical writing. It is applicable not only in the case of the writers but also in the case of directors and actors.

The Nature of Theatrical Communication

Before entering into the complex issues of sorting out the contemporary practices it is essential to make a look into the process of theatrical communication. Theatre is essentially a field of communication. Hence in order to understand the practices there we need a theory of communication. One of the theories that can account for the language of theatre is the theory of signs.

Fundamentally, according to sign theory, a sign consists of two parts: the 'signifier' or the material object or phenomenon that carries the message (for instance, a word, the red of the traffic light, a wave of hand etc.), and the 'signified' or the concept invoked by the signifier (the meaning of the word, that we must stop the vehicle etc.). One of the pioneers of the sign theory, Charles S. Peirce distinguishes three kinds of signs. They are 'icon' which is a sign that resembles the referent; the 'index' which has a contiguous relationship to the referent; and the 'symbol' in which meaning is determined purely by conventions and it relies on the agreement of all parties involved. In all these cases, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is one of parity. Indeed, as in the Peircean system, the stage reproduces the objects of the world. But these objects acquire a special significance in the

performance space, and each member of the audience construes the meaning of them in his own different way. Besides, Peirce treats signs in isolation. But theatrical signs form one whole. In theatre different kinds of signs operate in combination. Hence the Peircean version of semiotics seems to be inadequate in explaining theatrical signs.

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure offers an alternative model. For Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not one of similarity or contiguity. It is one of social agreement. Hence it is a totally arbitrary relationship. This is somewhat similar to the Peircean 'symbol'. Yet, contrary to the Peircean view, Saussure considers signs as part of a closed system. And, a sign system is a way of dividing up the world into knowable units and granting them meaning. A sign system does not reflect reality but only signifies it; and the relationship between a signifier and its signified is not absolute but relative. For example, the signifier "tree" does not actually represent a real tree in the world but merely the idea of a tree and it depends for its meaning on the fact that the sign 'tree' is different from a sign like 'free' (in terms of similarity) and the sign 'grass' (in terms of contiguity). By the same token, a word/sign does not take its meaning from its relationship to things or the world, but from its difference from other words/signs. In theatre, this difference is the difference between theatrical signs and the world of

ordinary behavior – the world of ordinary voice, movement, gesture and so on. This is what Colin Counsell calls 'dis-parity'.

However, in theatre signs do not function in isolation but together, systematically. Hence the signs of theatre have to be treated differently. In his analysis of mime, the French theatre semiotician Patris Pavis takes up the Saussurean model of sign and argues that central to the art of mime is the establishment of a 'key' or a principle of the regime of movement by which the entire work can be understood. For instance if a mime artist is presenting a dog, his first task is to establish the dog's 'gestural universe'. This will provide the spectators the logic by which they can read the entire sequence of gestures. The principle here is not that of 'imitation', says Pavis. Signs work 'musically'. In other words, signs in theatre function as a language, as a system and their organizing principle is coherence. The 'key' that Pavis talks about, is called in common parlance 'style', such as realistic, expressionistic, avant-garde and so on.

The Theatrical Sign

As mentioned above, signs are not autonomous entities. They can exist and act only as part of a system. The system here consists of the whole set of inter-relationships among the signs. It is the system that validates as well as generates the individual signs. The sign-system is like a grid that divides up the world in to knowable units. In the Saussurean view, human beings make sense of the world by perceiving each object or each experience in terms of the grid provided by the

system. To him the relationship between the signifier and the signified is one of social agreement. Thus what the sign offers is the socially agreed meaning. Therefore, inevitably, each sign enters the perceiver's consciousness culturally shaped and mediated. Besides, in the Saussurean conception, meaning is not something out there. On the contrary, it is a social construct.

'Theatre' being a cultural sign, its elements draw their meanings from the general pool of culture. Colin Counsell says, "In 'recognizing' theatre we perform what is essentially an 'interpretative' act. We read its elements as 'signs', taking them to first signify the event's general cultural identity. The category 'theatre', then, depends on notions which we as spectators bring to the event, cultural 'frames' that tell us how it is to be addressed" (Signs of Performance 5). In other words, our notion of 'theatre' is based on certain socially derived expectations or 'frames'. These frames are supplied to us by culture.

Theatre and Cultural Frames

Our perception of cultural artifacts or phenomena in general, is drawn against the frames provided by culture. Thus our notion of 'theatre' as well as how to view it is based on an understanding of the frames of theatre supplied by our culture.

Keir Elam defines 'frames' as 'conceptual or cognitive structures', (The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama 87). Elsewhere he refers to it as a means of foregrounding. In other words, we can say that 'frames' are certain conceptual

structures that act as the basis for distinguishing phenomena. It is a way of marking a sign as sign. What comes within the frame assumes special significance by being framed. To take a simple example, if we hang an empty picture-frame on a wall, the space inside it acquires a particular significance by virtue of the fact that the space has been framed, urging the viewer to read it as a sign. In order to define 'theatre' we may make use of the frames supplied by our culture.

The primary frame with which we recognize 'theatre' is the space itself. Conventionally, theatre buildings are architecturally designed in such a way that there is a clear separation between the spectator and the performer in terms of the physical space they occupy. This in itself gives a hint to the spectator to adopt a certain attitude towards what happens on the stage. Hence the moment someone enters the performer's space his/her actions bear dramatic significance to the spectator.

However, this is not the only type of performance space we have. Ever since the classical period it has been a practice to stage plays on spaces that had none of the paraphernalia of a proscenium stage. During the renaissance, it was a common practice to stage plays on platforms in marketplaces. This practice was later adopted by the *commedia dell'arte* during the later centuries. Contemporary directors such as Peter Brook and Ingmar Bergman have made it a part of their style to stage the plays on bare stages or 'empty spaces'. Nonetheless, in such cases the spectators

are sufficiently informed of the nature of the event that is going to take place through various means like publicity materials.

Whereas in the case of what is called 'Underground Theatre' there is neither a stable performance space nor a permanent audience. A theatrical piece presented on a running train will evoke a totally different response. This is because in theatre there are definite conventions about the role of the actor and the role of the audience while on the running train there is no separation between the two. An unsuspecting traveler may even interfere with the action.

The physical separation between the stage and the audience in the conventional theatres entails a distancing of the audience from the action. However, some of the performance practices in contemporary theatre have rewritten the role of the audience from passive spectators to active participants in the action. The practices of the Environmental Theatre and the experiments of Richard Schechner's Performance Group are a case in point. This relationship is even more problematised by the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski through his 'para'theatrical experiments. The Grotowskian theatre's attempt at building up a psychological tension between the actor and the audience places the latter right in the center of the action.

Another important frame with which we distinguish a theatrical event from other types of performances is that theatre presents us with a narrative or a series of actions or events presented in a temporal sequence or according to a developmental logic.

This is what Aristotle refers to by the term, 'plot'. Unlike in other art forms, the narrative in theatre is communicated to the audience by live performers who use their expressive resources such as voice, gestures, movements etc., for the purpose. Here, the actor/performer becomes the notional author of the play. In this communicative process, the auxiliary resources of the performance space namely, music, stage painting, lights etc., also come to the aid of the performer.

Yet, the indispensability of these elements is being challenged by some of the major theatre practitioners of the century. For instance, the idea of 'plot', in its familiar sense, is clearly absent in the works of one of the most celebrated theatre practitioners of the century, Samuel Beckett. Even the most conventional of Beckett's plays Waiting for Godot does not have a narrative in the usual sense. Some of the other dramatists like Richard Foreman or Heiner Muller and director Robert Wilson have almost entirely discarded the idea of a 'plot'. Heiner Muller's most noted work Hamletmachine is a collection of disjunct scenes. The works of Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre are mostly experiments with collages. Robert Wilson's spatial technique radically subverts the centrality of temporality and logic in theatre. For these theatricians, logical progression or temporal development is no longer the backbone of a theatrical work. Besides these deviations by experimental theatre practitioners, one must note that the works of improvisational theatre are, by nature, devoid of any plot in the accepted sense.

The physical presence of the actor who delineates the characters of the play is another frame with which we used to recognize theatrical events. Although characterization has been considered a key element in theatrical representations ever since Aristotle and Bharata, it was only by the end of the nineteenth century that a definite notion of characterization had been evolved with the psychological identity its basis. Such a detailed delineation of characters is particular to theatrical presentations among various types of performances. Other types of performances may have narratives and may be presented in the theatre hall itself, but it is hard to call them theatrical performance.

However, such established notions of characterization was exploded as early as in the 1930s by Artaud who populated his stage with figures representing primeval drives. On the other end, one finds a tendency to do away with the abstract register of the stage as a whole by eliminating the distinction between the actor and the character. An instance of this is the works of the Living Theatre, which in the 1960s worked towards a form of ritual performance in which the actors themselves were the *dramatis personae*. 'Performance art' is another form that has effaced the distinction between actor and the character.

The presence of the live actor is yet another frame with which we recognize a theatrical event. Yet this has also been dispensed with by some of the practitioners of twentieth century theatre. In Samuel Beckett's play Breath there does not appear any

live actor on stage. There is only 'miscellaneous rubbish' on the stage. The 'action' of the play consists of the taped sound of breathing and the cry of a newborn baby. The only visual movement on stage is the rising and falling of the stage light. If this play presents an extreme case, there are other works in which the expressive resources of the actor are limited to a great degree. In Beckett's Happy days the protagonist Winnie is buried up to her neck. The only expressive resources that come into play are the facial ones of the actress. In Meyerhold's production of Maeterlinck's Pelleas et Melisande, the place of the actors are taken over by marionettes. In the works of Robert Wilson with the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds one often finds him restraining the expressive potential of the actors. He even casts disabled people in his plays, rejecting the richness of the communicative resources of the actor. In Beckett's Not I the only presence on stage is a mouth. The mouth is the only 'character' as well as expressive source on stage.

Besides these, there are the extrinsic devices such as the title of the theatrical piece and the generic descriptions such as 'the tragedy of (Hamlet) prince of Denmark', 'a Roman tragedy', 'Greek' etc., the advertisements, the program brochures, reviews and so on, which act as frames setting the tenor of the audience expectations. In short, as Keir Elam says, "The theatrical frame is in effect the product of a set of transactional conventions governing the participants' expectations

and their understanding of the kinds of reality involved in the performance” (Semiotics of Theatre and Drama 88).

As discussed above, the twentieth century bears witness to radical departures from the canons of theatrical practice that have been bequeathed to us down centuries. The conditions today are so complex that it raises certain fundamental questions about the ontological status of theatre *per se*, such as what are the parameters of theatre and how do we distinguish between a theatrical event and other types of performances? Curiously, however, despite these deviations, the contemporary audience does not find it difficult to interpret works like that of Robert Wilson or Heiner Muller or Richard Foreman as theatrical. This is because our cultural and aesthetic perceptions get modified from time to time in accordance with the changes in the social perceptions. Besides, aesthetic taste is a fluid phenomenon. The fundamental dynamics of dialectics works in the case of aesthetics as well. Once an aesthetic frame is established, there arises, within itself, a force that interrogates those established frames. This is very much true in the case of theatre. Thus, the notion of theatre remains an ever-changing and ever slippery phenomenon. As Martin Esslin remarks, “The conditions under which drama is presented have been radically transformed in the last hundred years by a veritable flood of technological innovation: on the stage itself, and later by the introduction of mechanical and electronic diffusion.... Rigid definitions of highly variable and constantly developing organically growing and

decaying, human activities of this nature are dangerous.... Definitions of concepts like 'drama' should, therefore, never be treated as normative, but as merely outlining the somewhat fluid boundaries of a given field." (Field of Drama 22-23)

Theatre is a public medium. It is most sensitive to the social processes. Therefore it is in the vanguard of social movements. Whatever ideological or cultural processes that a society is going through will be first reflected on the stage. By the same token, it is in the forefront of creating aesthetic tastes. If the contemporary audience is able to absorb representations of complex and often paradoxical realities it is because the social and cultural conditions have tuned their perceptions to subsume such contradictory realities.

Culture and Discourse

Generally speaking, the term 'culture' refers to any signifying system that is shared by the members of a community. As Clifford Geertz puts it: "A culture is a system of symbols by which man confers significance upon his own experience. Symbol systems, man-created, shared, conventional, ordered, and indeed learned, provide human beings with a meaningful framework for orienting themselves to one another, to the world around them and to themselves" (The Interpretation of Cultures 250).

In other words, 'culture' refers to the whole gamut of 'artifacts and activities' that characterize a society. This includes the lifestyle, the belief systems, the art forms, language and literature, fashion, codes of behavior and so on. What makes them

'cultural' is the fact that they encode meaning. Our everyday transactions are based on the reading of the signs and the employment of the transactional codes supplied to us by the society. What seems to be 'natural' or 'functional' behavior actually involves a process of reading the meaning of the surrounding phenomena and the encoding of meaning for others to read. For instance, in a classroom situation there are specific conventions regarding the relationship between the teacher and the students - like their respective positions, tone of voice, eye contact, mobility, etc. These are not rules to be obeyed but conventions to be followed. These conventions are supplied by the society. These conventions ultimately help us recognize the teacher as teacher and the student as student. The sum total of all conventions that inform a society can be called its culture.

As stated above, all cultural objects are bearers of the social meaning. Such encoding of the social meaning in contemporary critical parlance is referred to by the term, 'discourse'. The sense in which the term 'discourse' is used today, originates from the structuralist - poststructuralist debate on language. Breaking away from all previous views of language that it is a transparent expressive medium, or a vehicle for communication, or a form of representation, the structuralists and the post-structuralists view language as a system with its own rules and constraints. For them, it is language that determines how individuals think and speak. For them language is a kind of 'discourse'. In one of his definitions, Michael Foucault describes

it as 'a regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements' (Archeology of Knowledge 80). That is, they are groups of utterances that are coherent and are regulated in some way.

The Foucauldian idea of discourse has a number of implications as far as perception of reality is concerned. In the first place, it questions or destabilizes the notion of truth. For Foucault, truth is not something intrinsic to an utterance nor is it a transcendental ideal for which we aspire. What we hold as truth is something that is regulated and held as truth by the agencies which possess power. "Truth is of the world; it is produced there by virtue of multiple constraints.... Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth; that is the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true: the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth: the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, "Truth and Power: an interview with Alessandro Fontano and Pasquale Pasquino", Morris and Patton 46).

These social elites who possess the power to validate a 'truth' are those who claim to have knowledge of it. Thus the idea of knowledge also becomes problematic. Although knowledge is considered as a way of defining and classifying things, in the Foucauldian version, it is not such a simple and transparent procedure. Contrary to the common belief, knowledge does not derive from the real world nor has it got

any access to reality. For Foucault, knowledge is a product of a certain discourse, which has enabled it to be formulated and has no validity outside it. Thus what we accept as scientific knowledge is an effect of discourses or language and has no validity outside those discourses. For instance, we read certain behavioral peculiarities in an individual as the sign of some mental disorder. Such a judgment is based on the ideas of 'mental disorders' supplied to us by the 'science' of psychiatry. However, the same phenomenon can be perceived as the possession of spirits in the discourse of spiritualism. Thus the notion of discourse is a questioning of the fundamentals of our perceptual tools.

If discourses do not reflect reality why should one accept them? The fact is that one does not adopt discourses consciously. They are merely what appear to be 'commonsensical' or 'natural'. For instance, our acceptance of modern medicine is not because it is a discourse, rather it seems to us commonsensical. In other words, discourse is not something that is imposed upon the individual. It is something that one adopts voluntarily because each individual requires a set of concepts to make sense of the world. We merely choose a position. But the issue here is, how much of freedom an individual has in choosing his position or his subjectivity?

Like other poststructuralists, Foucault also rejects the liberal humanist position of the individual as self with agency and control over itself. It is a dismissal of the notion of the Cartesian subject, which is unique, self-contained and distinct from

others because of its ability to think and reason. The critical term 'subject' can be illustrated with the use of the grammatical term 'subject'. In the context of grammar, subject is the active agent of an action as in the sentence, ' The girl entered the room'. There is a second sense in which we use the term in grammar - as a topic, as in 'the subject of discussion'. Here the subject is a passive storehouse of ideas supplied by external agencies. The critical term 'subject' combines both these senses. "The human subject is simultaneously the pad and the pen of discourse, the passive recipient of concepts contained in it and their active reproducer in his /her actions and utterances" (Counsell 8).

This notion of the subject as a site of discourses has affinities with Jaques Lacan's notion of the 'mirror stage'. For Lacan, a child recognizes itself from the image it finds reflected by the others. This image, as in the case of the real mirror is a distorted one leading to a 'misrecognition' of its own self. However, that misrecognition becomes the basis of its identity. In the same way our 'subjectivity' is construed in the interaction with the discourses around us. Thus discourses structure our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity, shaping our thoughts and behaviour, our way of making sense of the world as well as creating it.

Thus discourse becomes the site of ideology - the medium through which power operates. Although it is generally thought that ideology is something that we consciously adopt, it is not always true. Discourses control the mental tools with which human beings

make sense of the world—their subjectivity – thereby they control the individual's ability to act upon the world. In this aspect, discourse becomes associated with ideology and power.

The very fact that there are different ideologies necessitates the presence of different and contradictory discourses. This is because human societies are inherently pluralistic. Each society is characterized by the presence of different social groups on the basis of religion, class, sexual preference, language etc., each group having its own worldview. Therefore we cannot actually talk about 'a discourse', we can only talk about 'discourses'. Every society incorporates multiple and conflicting views of reality. One discourse is always in dialogue and in conflict with other positions. In this process, however, with the support of the social elites, some discourses become dominant over the others. Culture provides the platform for the play of these conflicting discourses at the individual and social levels. In the opinion of the French theorist Louis Althusser, human subjectivity is constructed upon a matrix of conflicting discourses.

In the view of Colin Counsell 'a discourse' is both a *type* of language and a *practice* of language. As a type of language, it deals with a recognized subject area and it also incorporates a view of the subject regarding what it is and how to perceive it by the creation of an array of words, tropes and concepts. Thus we have the discourse of psychology, of feminism, of colonialism etc. In the words of Counsell,

“Discourse does not describe the world but manufactures it, encodes a view of reality in the very concepts out of which it is made”(7). Different discourses may form different views on the same phenomenon. For instance, the medicinal systems of allopathy, ayurveda, and homeopathy have different conceptions of ailments.

As a ‘practice’ of language discourse is an activity or a process of making meaning, by using the material components of language. It is not something that is happening on an abstract register of human existence. These acts of sense-making are taking place in the specific social and historical contexts. That is they occur in specific cultural spaces – in universities, theatres, political gatherings.

Thus discourse is a key idea in the analysis of theatre, for theatre is a site of representation. On the stage, one finds the physical manifestation of ideologies and discourses. New discourses become new aesthetics: new genres of theatre, techniques, new forms of actor-audience relationship, styles of acting, designs of sets, costumes, characterization etc.

The idea of theatre is as malleable as our cultural perceptions. Therefore, once our expectations become the norm, they allow themselves to be subverted, leading to the redefinition of the expectations. It implies that a definition of theatre is not possible with a checklist of characteristics, for the notion of theatre is constantly redefined by the varying nature of the expectations raised by cultural attitudes. Therefore if the present-day audience has received certain atypical versions as

theatre, in spite of their 'deviations', it is because the contemporary culture provides the frames for recognizing them as such.

The Aesthetic Logic

Stage is an extraordinary site of signs. Every sight and sound on the stage, including the unintended signs or what is known as 'noises' is read as signs in theatre. What is special about the meaning in theatre is that it is the handiwork of multiple authors such as the playwright, the scenic designer, the music director, the light designer, the costume designer, and the actors besides the director. It is also common knowledge that each sign can produce multiple meanings. Yet, what the spectator reads in a theatrical performance is not a disparate collection of meanings but a semic unity. He is able to read it as a single theatrical text. What is the mechanism that enables the audience to read a theatrical text as a semic unity?

A theatrical text is fabricated out of multiple strands of signs. Therefore in order to read the text as a single whole, the spectator has to employ a logic that can account for all the codes of the text. It can be called the aesthetic logic of it. Thus for understanding a Shakespearian drama we apply a certain aesthetic logic and for appreciating a symbolist play we apply a different aesthetic logic. However, there arises the question of how the spectator arrives at the appropriate kind of aesthetic logic. The aesthetic logic is neither supplied by the playwright nor is it decided arbitrarily by the spectator. It is supplied by the culture. In fact, what a text represents

is the extant social and cultural meanings – the discourses, sign systems, ideologies, iconographies etc., of a society, and since both the spectator and the playwright have access to the same cultural pool, the theatrical text meets with the culturally derived subjectivity of the spectator. Just as a subject is wrought by discourses that enable him/her to read the world, so a particular form of theatre with its characteristic modes of representation prompts the spectator to draw from his/her experience to find the appropriate discourse and its aesthetic logic to read it.

This does not mean that every spectator will read all the signs in the same manner. They may differ as far as individual signs are concerned. But the general scheme of decoding the text remains the same. Thus for example, the aesthetic logic of realism focuses on the individual. The aesthetic logic of expressionism, is informed by features such as complex sets, lighting with deep shadows, absence of color emotionally charged acting, exaggerated expressions, revolt against the authorities as the common theme and a fragmentary narrative. Different spectators may read different meanings from the individual signs of such a performance. But when they are read as a whole, they produce the idea of how a tortured consciousness would perceive the world. This was the view of the expressionists.

Incidentally, although we belong to the modern or postmodern age, we find plays which represent the aesthetic ideas of previous eras being produced in our times. If we, as spectators, are able to appreciate them, it implies that the ideas that are

characteristic of that kind of a theatre are still prevalent in our society. Likewise, if we are not able to understand and decode a certain performance text with the available 'aesthetic logics', it means that those ideas are no longer available with us.

Theatre is an evolving genre. It is dialogic in the sense that it keeps changing according to the discourses that hold currency in the immediate society. Thus we find many of the contemporary practitioners of theatre breaking the conventional frames of theatre.

As mentioned earlier, certain discourses acquire hegemonic significance at certain periods in the history of human culture. A mapping of the contemporary theatre in the west should, therefore, necessarily include a survey of the cultural perceptions of the contemporary western society. For theatre in the west today is, above all, an immediate response to the exclusively late 20th century western experience. What are the major discourses of our times? What are their implications on the practices in contemporary theatre? How do they inform the 'aesthetic logic' of the contemporary theatrical productions? Is it a continuation of a tradition? Or is it a breaking away from the past? These are some of the questions that have been taken up in the following chapter.

Theatre and the Post-war Discourses

C.S. Francies “Reality as construct: representation and meaning in post-modernist theatre with special reference to the works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht ” Thesis. Department of School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, 2003

Chapter - 2

Chapter 2

Theatre and the Post-war Discourses

The post-war period marks the culmination of a growing distrust in the metaphysical systems of the west that was built over centuries. This questioning of the metaphysical systems started in the late nineteenth century when cultural critics started raising objections to the basic assumptions of the ideological or discursive structures of what is known as liberal humanism - its ideas concerning the human subject, notions of culture, the role of history etc.

The history of liberal humanism goes back as far as the sixteenth century western society. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the rise of the landed gentry in the west, which had God presiding over the affairs of the world. This social system had the blessings of the church and it perceived society as an organic whole, graded according to the design of God. It had an economic logic that corresponded to the social organization and it came to be known as feudalism. The following two centuries witnessed the rise of new forms of inquiry such as Empirical sciences and Rationalist philosophy. Besides them, Protestantism, which encouraged the notions of free will and rational inquiry, also acted as a catalyst in the development of a new view of the human subject. This world-view, which placed

man at the centre of the universe, came to be known as liberal humanism. Liberal humanism perceived man as autonomous and as the possessor of free will and its economic logic “saw people as independent vendors in the ‘free market’, owning and selling property, or if they possessed nothing else, their labour” (Counsell 46). This perception turned out to be the foundation of an economic mode called capitalism.

The foundations of the liberal humanist notion of the individual can be traced back to the Cartesian model of the human subject. Through the formulation of his famous argument, *cogito ergo sum*, (‘I think therefore I am’) Descartes (1596-1650) asserted the existence of the mind through its awareness of itself. And since, according to Descartes, the existence of the mind is independent of the body and of the physical universe, its identity is consistent over time and place. The human perception of the world can be erratic, for we perceive the world through our senses that are fallible. But man’s perception of his own mind is direct and hence certain. Thus the human mind acts as a reliable vantage point for scrutinizing the world in order to determine its underlying principles. In other words, the Cartesian model renders reality fully knowable to the humanist individual.

This view of the ‘I’ was further refined by the eighteenth century philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) through his notion of ‘categorical imperatives’. In the Kantian view, rationality is the central defining feature of being human and it is

reason that acts as the basis of emancipation and the means of discovering the supreme principle of morality, which he calls categorical imperatives. To him, we as individuals have a choice of what we deem worthy of moral law. There is no written set of rules or laws that all people follow, but a given set of personal laws contained within our own persona that dictates what we consider to be universal law. These laws are a product of our individual reason and the personal decision making process. Thus Kant puts faith in the human reason as an agency that is capable of making proper judgments.

Though the personal experiences of the individual have a significant role in the creation of one's subjectivity, he is considered to be capable of standing outside those experiences. So we have the autonomous subject taking its place over the inert object.

This conception of the rational individual lies at the basis of the liberal humanist notion of culture too. For the humanists, culture is trans-historical; and there is little connection between culture and the immediate social surroundings. Matthew Arnold, the arch defender of humanist ideology in the nineteenth century, defines culture as that which is constituted of 'the best that has been thought and said'. To him, culture consisted of universally valid ideals; they originated from their individual creators for the individual was thought to be endowed with the knowledge of what was valuable.

In fact, this idea of the autonomous, thinking individual bequeathed to the twentieth century acts as the foundation of our social system, including the principles of modern democracy and legal system.

This notion of the self-contained, self-determining, stable, rational human self, which is the possessor of free will and which has the capacity for objective knowledge became the unintended casualty of a series of developments that accompanied the dawn of the twentieth century. Referring to this momentous development Herbert Read noted in Art Now, “The aim of five centuries of European effort is openly abandoned” (as quoted by M. Bradbury 20).

Virginia Woolf wrote in 1924, “...on or about December 1910 human character changed.... All human relations shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.”(320). D.H. Lawrence differed only marginally from Mrs. Woolf when he stated in *Kangaroo*, ‘It was in 1915 the old world ended’. Although there is gross exaggeration in identifying the *annus mirabilis* of this ‘enormous cultural change’ (Bradbury 33), there appears to be a degree of consensus regarding the early twentieth century culture’s awareness and participation in a cultural change.

These developments were indeed characterized by a certain scientific coloring. The empirical rationalism of the previous centuries gave way to a more

scientific attitude, which came to be known as critical rationalism. The western project of scientific reason which was inaugurated during the renaissance took a new object of enquiry – mankind.

In the field of physical sciences, the twenty years of experiments, starting with Rontgen's discovery of X-ray in 1895, and culminating in Einstein's General Principles of Relativity (1915) posited a non-Euclidian model of a four-dimensional space-time continuum. This toppled the notions of the physical universe prevalent then. Einstein's general theory of relativity taught man to see the relationship between the observer and the observed from a new perspective. In the new worldview the position of the viewer became crucial in deciding what one saw. Thus the reliability of the viewing subject became dubious.

In Social Sciences also the target was the humanist notion of the self. The Marxist ideology perceived the socio-economic forces or ideologies as the determining factor in the construction of the human self. While other seminal thinkers of what was to become sociology such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim placed the individual in the social context. They argued that human identity was molded by one's assumptions of ones social roles.

The emergence of a new field of inquiry called psychology was another crucial development. Freud's theorization of the internality of the human self opened up a hitherto unknown view of mankind. In the Freudian framework, factors that are

outside the realm of human consciousness such as the unconscious, the childhood experiences that either lead to the repression or the sublimation of desires, are found to be capable of shaping the human self. Moreover, his interpretation of symbols demonstrated how multiple meanings could be read from an image or a symbol. His disciple Carl Jung, on his part, left aside the personal unconscious and posited collective unconsciousness as the chief repository of human behavior.

In philosophy, Henri Bergson's problematization of the concept of time complemented the work of early psychologists. Bergson, propounded two conceptions of time: one that was external and quantifiable, and the other internal, fluid and heterogeneous. His notion of *duree* or durational time challenged the surface reality of life and treated interior time as more natural one. Arguably, Bergson's conception of time was the most significant philosophical notion that contributed to the modernist aesthetics. The surrealist notion of melting time and the narrative technique known as stream of consciousness have direct appeal to Bergson's ideas.

The path-breaking studies of James Frazer in the field of anthropology helped the rewriting of the earlier notion of religion. What had been hitherto discussed in metaphysical terms such as Soul, God, faith etc., came to be discussed in anthropological terms.

The quintessential aspect of these key developments in the early twentieth century in the scientific, philosophical and social discourses was a shift from exteriority to interiority. This shift from the natural world to mankind and its creations turned out to be a renaissance of reason, a new form of rationalism with its attempts at a scientific understanding of human artifacts – literature, history, society etc. This attempt was given apogee by the new technology. Thus we find that most of the modernist movements had their focus either on the human internality or on technology. To translate these tendencies into aesthetic terms, it was a shift from realism to an explosion of trends and styles in art and literature such as impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, symbolism, imagism, futurism, constructivism etc., that came to be known by the generic name modernism.

Modernism/ Modernity

While modernism refers to the literary and artistic tendency that accompanied critical rationalism, modernity remains a term of much critical debate as to whether it represents the cultural condition of the *fin-de-siecle*. Many thinkers view modernity as the continuation of the enlightenment project inaugurated by Kant. Central to the enlightenment project is a belief in the centrality of human reason in the process of human liberation. Habermas in his essay “Modernity: an Unfinished project” remarks:

The project of modernity as it was formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century consists in the relentless

development of the objectivating sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic (Moplas 44).

Modernity had great trust in the liberative potential of science in particular. It believed that science was the means to achieve the ultimate goals of mankind. However, what the dawn of the twentieth century witnessed was the ugly face of it. The expansion of the imperial world reached bounds. The exploitative nature of capitalism led to an increasing tension between capital and labor, leading to fears of social unrest. Another development was a change in human relations as well as in man's relation to the physical world. The result was a suspicion towards the liberative potential of the values of modernity. What followed was the withdrawal of the artists from the outside to the inside. This withdrawal of the artists and writers from the exterior to the interior was marked by a search of new forms of artistic representation, which led to the creation of series of movements and counter-movements known by the blanket term modernism. For these artists, consciousness was a more reliable point of reference than the phenomenal world. Patricia Waugh remarks:

Whereas the nineteenth-century realism, for example, blended public and private experience through the formal presentation of authorial omniscience and limited point of view to produce the impression of a commonly experienced

and ultimately epistemologically stable world, modernist texts tend to be seen as emphasising internal self-referring coherence which foregrounds a loss of established moral connection between what is inside the work of art and what is outside (Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism104).

Thus, if modernity represents a cultural condition, modernism stands for the aesthetics that is consequent to the condition of modernity. The modernist aesthetics was marked by an attempt to unify the disintegrating worldviews. Hence we find the symbol taking the center-stage in modernist art and literature and myth being identified as one of the unifying forces of culture. One of the tasks of the modernists was the creation of a unified human society. Therefore, one can discern a conscious attempt at absorbing the marginalized communities into the mainstream culture.

The World Wars

However, the wars brought to the fore the darker sides of modernity. The new rationality turned out to be a disguised manifestation of the will to power, working through insidious exclusionary tactics. Desire, sexuality, femininity, art, madness, criminality, non-Caucasian races, particular ethnicities were all seen as non-rational. Instead of recognizing the differences the impulse was towards the unification of these particularities. Reason was thus used as an instrument to control and subjugate. This led to the violent forms of oppression in the modernist era in the form of imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism and the automatisations of the human

being for the purpose of efficiency. Knowledge industry and technology were tools for exploitative capitalist interests. Pavlov's theory of Behaviorism is only a case in point.

The World War II was the inevitable anti-climax of the modernist endeavor. The sublime level to which man's brutality against man shook the foundations of the liberal humanist faith in the essential goodness of man. Auschwitz, Vilna, Hiroshima and Nagasaki symbolized the inhumanity of the 'civilized' man. These events underlined the Darwinian contention that man is essentially a glorified brute. The result was that all notions of progress were undone at one stroke. The greatest achievements of science turned out to be those of war machines. The Nazi project of eugenics is another instance of it. Under the totalitarian regimes the notion of the self-determining free subject had no place. In other words it spelt doom for the rationalist projects of the previous era.

In literature, modernism was the culmination of the project of modernity. Its desire for grand narratives, its desire for uniformity, its desire for power, its tendency for exclusion and its glorification of high culture point up to it. The modernist focus on the coherence of the work of art and artistic individualism were expressions of the overarching worldview of modernity. Martin Esslin attests it while referring to the works of the expressionist dramatists:

The violence of these plays is overwhelming; and yet it is allied with a radical – one is tempted to say – ultra-violent pacifism. It has been said that the extremism of the Expressionists foreshadowed the extreme violence of the Nazi regime and its concentration camps and mass murders. And there is certainly a grain of truth in this observation (M. Esslin, “Modernist Drama: Wedekind to Brecht” Bradbury 539).

The World War II was followed by another wave of a cataclysmic upheaval of culture. Quintessentially, they were critiques of the enlightenment reason of the previous era which consisted in the “relentless development of the objectivating sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic” (Habermas, ‘Modernity: an Unfinished Project’, Moplas 44) and at the core of these critical and cultural discourses was the consciousness that reality is a construct. This wave of new perception found itself reflected in all the aspects of culture – in art and literature, in cultural, philosophical and socio-political discourses.

Although this trend had been inaugurated by the artists and the writers as early as in the 1930s, it was organized as a body of ideas informed by certain common characteristics only in the late 50s and 60s as a series of discourses such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, deconstruction, cultural materialism etc. Hence the easier approach would be to discuss the central tenets

of these theories before looking into how they inform the works of the postwar theatre practitioners.

Saussurean Semiotics

If we can point to the one theory that sparked off the new world-changing discourses, it is arguably the semiotic theory of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). The features of Saussurean linguistics are the following:

Synchronic Vs Diachronic:

Contrary to the extant till then, Saussure approached language studies from a non-historical perspective. That is, language as it exists at a given moment of time. He called it the synchronic approach as opposed to the diachronic or historical or diachronic approach. Instead of studying the historical changes in language Saussure's approach attempted to see how language works as a system.

Langue and Parole:

Instead of studying the particular instances of the use of language Saussure took the system that controlled and regulated the individual utterances. In other words, he preferred the *langue* to *paroles*.

Non-referentiality:

In our everyday use, language might appear to be referential, but Saussure argues that it is not so. To him, the relationship between a word and its meaning is

arbitrary. That is, meaning is a matter of convention. This recognition of the non-referential nature of language has implications on our traditional notions of the speaker as the originator of meaning. The Saussurean model replaces this notion with the vision that all acts of communication are based on choices made from within a system which pre-exists the speaker.

Difference:

In the Saussurean vision meaning works according to the principle of difference. This implies that a sign or a word does not carry the meaning in itself. Instead it establishes its meaning out of its difference from other signs/words. Therefore the reliability of the meaning of a certain word/sign or a set of words/signs is problematic. By extension, this argument also implies that language precedes thought and constitutes a framework and it is within this framework that individual instances of language works. This notion of the role of language is sometimes called linguistic determinism.

Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic:

The creation of a meaningful sentence involves a process of permutation and combination. For example, in the sentence, "The tree is green." the speaker/writer has to choose each word out of a series of words that are related to those in the sentence. He chooses 'tree' from a series of similar-sounding words like bee, free, knee, etc. and bush, grass, oak etc. this is the paradigmatic axis of language.

On the other hand, the placing of the words in the required order is called the syntagmatic axis of language. This idea underlines his argument that the speaker is not the originator of meaning.

Thus the synchronic system of language consists of signs that are non-unitary, relational and are connected to a vast network of relations of similarity and difference. In his *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure suggests that this model can be the basis of a new science, which he calls Semiotics.

This vision of Saussure became the seminal point for the series of literary and cultural theories that revolutionized the twentieth century intellectual landscape of the world. It is interesting to note that while these theories agreed to the basic premises of Saussure, there were departures on certain details. The first of these theories was in the form of a philosophical and cultural movement of the 1950s, known as structuralism, which sought to construct the system within which human culture works.

Structuralism

Taking their cue from Saussurean linguistics the structuralists argue that all cultural acts acquire legitimacy from the system to which it belongs. Thus the structural anthropologists attempted at identifying the system that underlies the rituals and taboos of the primitive cultures. It was also an attempt at identifying the

essential unity of all those cultures. Literary structuralism undertook the task of laying bare the principles lying behind the literary system or the *langue* of literature. Their attempt was the creation of a universal grammar (of literature) that validated individual works or the literary *paroles*. One of the areas they focused upon was narratives. Roland Barthes in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" identifies the structure of a sentence as the organizing principle of a narrative. "...a narrative is a long sentence, just as every constative sentence is in a way the rough outline of a short narrative" (Image Music Text 84). Just as the meaning of a sentence is legitimized by the structure of the language or *langue*, the legitimacy of a narrative depends on the literary system.

One of the fundamental assumptions of structuralism is that the structures were there even before we appeared on the scene, and that they speak through us. Therefore what we say does not originate in us. They belong to a pre-existent universal structure. Hence structuralism finds an overarching unity that cuts across cultures.

Despite the impressive analyses of the structuralist school, many critics found them wanting, particularly the poststructuralists. They found the structuralists' work too neat and closed. So much so that it did not allow scope for difference or 'play' (Derrida, Writing and Difference 352). This is one of the reasons why many consider structuralism as oppressive and totalitarian in character.

Bakhtin and the Dialogic

Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) notion of dialogism is, to a great extent, a reappraisal of the Saussurean model of reality. His theorization was part of a tendency in European thought to remodel epistemology in order to match with the new versions of the mind as well as the new models of the world that unfolded in the physical and natural sciences in the nineteenth century.

While Bakhtin approves of the broad outlines of Saussure's notion of language, he sought to replace the latter's 'abstract objectivism' with a socio-ideologically aware linguistic theory which could account for the value-laden nature of language. The core of the polemic between them is on the nature of Saussure's notion of *parole*. To Saussure, *parole* is an infinitely variable phenomenon and therefore it is not to be considered as an object of inquiry. Hence he turns his attention to the *langue* or the system. Bakhtin, on the contrary, argues that the instances of individual utterance are more important as language is in a 'ceaseless flow of becoming'. It is social and cultural in nature and not a given, and therefore, it is not the abstract system but the individual utterance which should be the proper objects of inquiry.

In the Saussurean vision of language the relational nature of the word has its foundation in the abstract system. While agreeing with the relational nature of language, Bakhtin argues that the meaning of an utterance springs from specific

social registers or sites and the specific moments of the utterance and its reception. He calls the process 'dialogism'.

Dialogism is a constitutive aspect of all language. It can be said to be the social and interpersonal dimension of language. Because each instance of utterance is not only a response to previous utterances and to pre-existing patterns of meaning and reception but it also promotes further responses. In other words, all utterances are dialogic in nature, their logic as well as meaning is dependent upon what has previously been said and on how they will be received.

According to Bakhtin, the dialogic aspect of language can be either promoted or repressed. There is always a tendency with the ruling class to make the sign uniaxential. He points out that there is always a struggle between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language: between the official and the carnival or unofficial. Although Bakhtin's idea of dialogism is an aspect of all uses of language, he identifies the genre of novel as the modern inheritor of the subversive or carnivalesque and centrifugal force and therefore the best-suited medium for articulation of dialogism.

He identifies the novels of Dostoevsky as fine instances of dialogism in which one finds the play of multiple voices or 'polyphony' (literally, the simultaneous combination of voices). In a polyphonic novel we do not find an objective authorial voice presenting the relations among the characters. But it presents a world in

which each character (including even the narrator or the author), possesses his/her own discursive consciousness. It is a world in which no individual discourse - interpretation of the world - is given predominance. Like the tradition of the carnival, the polyphonic novel fights against any view of the world that would valorize one official point of view or discursive position above others. Such novels present us a world that is dialogic. Dialogism also works at the level of a character's individual discourse – different discursive positions clashing for dominance.

In Bakhtin's view a work is made not out of the original imagination of the author but are reiterations, parodies, transformations and other kinds of appropriation of existing speech genres, utterances and words associated with particular ideological or cultural positions.

The implications of Bakhtin's theory are manifold. It states that there is no single human subject, and that no interpretation is ever complete because every utterance is a response to previous utterances and elicits further responses. This notion takes us a step closer to the poststructuralists' rejection of the closure of meaning. Bakhtin's notion that language is in a ceaseless flow of becoming, together with his notion of how the subject is created by language leads us to the poststructuralist notion of human subjectivity. His insight into how the dominant discourses are backed by the ruling classes opens up a space for the resistant discourses of the marginalized and minoritarian communities.

Graham Allen remarks, "Bhaktin's dialogic vision of human consciousness, subjectivity and communication is based, then, on a vision in which language embodies an on-going dialogic clash of ideologies, world-views, opinions and interpretations" (Intertextuality 28).

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism refers to a series of discursive positions that are simultaneously a rejection and a reception of the premises of structuralism. While it espouses the anti-humanist legacy of structuralism, as well as the latter's belief that language is the key to understand the world, it questions structuralism's undue faith in language. Prominent among the poststructuralist thinkers is the French philosopher Jaques Derrida, whose methodology called 'deconstruction' not only questions the whole tradition of western philosophy but also undermines structuralism's tendency to stabilize reality.

For Derrida, language is inherently unreliable as there is no correspondence between the words/signs and their meanings/signifieds. To him, the sense-making process of language depends on the principle of difference. Therefore, what we have in the case of language is only 'differences' without positive terms. This phenomenon is termed 'the illusion of presence'. And since words are the products of difference, they rely on other words for their meaning. Thus the meaning of a

word or sign is always contaminated by other words /signs. It also means that every word contains traces of other words.

He argues that words never achieve stability because there is an endless network of words and also because a word is always modified by what precedes as well as succeeds it. Thus the present of a word is modified by spacing (differing) and temporization (deferring). To signify this unstable aspect of the word he introduces the neologism in French, *differance*. Obviously, this word has resemblance to the French word 'diffe`rence' and also to the English word 'difference'. However the 'a' in the new word *differance* is silent in French and hence it sounds very much like 'difference'. Moreover, the difference can be noticed only in writing. Through this neologism Derrida achieves two things. First, it critiques the privileging of the spoken word in the tradition of western philosophy in general and Saussurean linguistics and structuralism in particular. Secondly, it combines the possibility of two concepts, namely 'differing'(spatialisation) and 'deferring'(temporal displacement) thereby demonstrating the instability, consequent upon the relational nature, of language in general. One simple example of this instability is the fact that words acquire new meanings and implications by the passage of time.

For Derrida, everything including speech is a form of 'writing'. This word announces the structured or 'written' condition of all forms of text. (Writing, we must note, is basically an untrustworthy form of language in the western tradition). Since

there is nothing outside the text, we are all susceptible to the basic instability of language. Therefore we never fully control what we say. What we say can generate meanings that we never intended due to *differance*. This is an 'excess' of meaning and therefore we cannot claim authorship for the same. Thus the authority of what we say becomes problematic.

Thus, arguably, a text generates an infinite flow of potential meanings. However, in traditional texts one often does not see the same. This is because these texts conceal the excess meaning by positing a centre. The centre automatically creates a hierarchical structure in which the central is more important than the marginal. Such hierarchies usually take the form of binary oppositions (often implicit rather than explicit; the explicit term evokes the absent term) and stabilize the text. The general sets of oppositions include white/black, good/evil, day/night, light/dark, truth/falsehood, mind/matter, masculine/feminine, rational/irrational, nature/culture etc. of these terms the first one is always privileged over the second as positive terms. To the poststructuralists, such hierarchies suppress the excess meanings that every text contains. Therefore, Derrida comes up with a strategy known as *deconstruction*, which seeks to subvert such hierarchies and bring out the suppressed meaning.

To Derrida, the relationship between the binary oppositions is far less oppositional than they seem to be. For instance, the term 'day' needs the term

'night' in order to make itself meaningful (and vice versa), for there are no positive terms, as mentioned earlier. Thus generally, the inferior term in the binary turns out to be the condition of the opposition and becomes as important as the privileged term. Derrida's strategy is based on the exposition of the precariousness of the privileged term. He subverts all centers, leaving space for the play of the structure.

Interestingly, Derrida is aware that he himself is caught up in a Cretan paradox. Like the Cretan who says all Cretans always lie, he contends that all language is subject to *differance* thereby putting itself 'under erasure'. With language there is no outside perspective. We can speak about the untrustworthiness of language only by using language. If we apply this principle to cultural texts, we will see that we can make statements about them only from within culture.

Foucault and Discourse

Michel Foucault is another key poststructuralist thinker who took the subversive sting of deconstruction outside the text at hand. His analysis of the history ('genealogy' in his terms) of the rise of the human sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, (also called the Enlightenment era), unravels how these systems of knowledge and the institutions built around them are essentially based on the notion of difference. He also illustrates how these new branches of knowledge have been used as an instrument to marginalize and even demonise 'the different', thereby excluding them from political power.

One of the key terms that Foucault employs is 'discourse'. He defines it in various terms such as 'the general domain of all statements', 'a series of sentences or propositions', 'a regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements' (Archeology of Knowledge 80) and so on. These definitions are interchangeable and can be overlaid on each other. Essentially, discourses are groups of utterances that are regulated in some way and they make knowledge possible. Thus, as Foucault says one could speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse and so on. The basic mechanism here is the creation of a field. Once the field is set, it automatically organizes the various propositions made in this area. Such discourses produce claim to knowledge.

Colin Counsell opines, discourse must be understood as both a type of language as well as a practice of language. As a type of language it creates a view of reality. For example, in the discourse of microphysics a chair is made up of atoms whereas in the discourse of common sense it is a solid piece of furniture. As a practice of language discourse is involved in the process of making meaning in the real social space. It forms ideologies and power structures. Thus discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity.

For Foucault power and knowledge are inextricably linked with each other. Power works through discourses and discursive formations. He uses the term power in a much more general way than it is commonly used. Power produces knowledge

and knowledge produces power; and our obedience to power is by consent. “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says ‘no’, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs throughout the whole social body” (Power and Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 119).

Foucault reads in the difference-excluding tendencies of the post-renaissance culture a politics to exclude from power ‘the different’ – the insane, the prisoners, the homosexuals etc., - through the marginalisation and even demonisation of these minorities.

Knowledge, in a sense, is a way of defining and categorizing others. Thus discourse becomes the frame for identifying the other. Discourses are primarily organized around practices of exclusion. Foucault explodes the Western democracies’ pretensions of freedom and tolerance by exposing how they force the individuals into a self-imposed surveillance with the aid of the formation of ‘discourses’. He contends that the so called liberal democracies have been creating self-imposed surveillance on the individual with the help of the new sciences – psychiatry, criminology, medicine, sociology etc., and the institutions built around them. To him these discourses form a metaphorical prison, like the *Panopticon* designed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, with the help of the self-

appointed guardians of normality such as the doctors, the psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, social workers, where each individual becomes his own guard.

The Foucauldian idea of discourse has a number of implications as far as the perception of reality is concerned. In the first place, it questions or destabilizes our notion of 'truth'. For Foucault, 'truth' is not something intrinsic to an utterance nor is it a transcendental ideal for which we aspire. What we hold as 'truth' is something that is regulated and held as truth by the agencies which possess power. He says:

Truth is of the world; it is produced there by virtue of multiple constraints.... Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth; that is the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true: the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth: the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true ("Truth and Power: an interview with Alessandro Fontano and Pasquale Pasquino" 46).

According to Foucault, those social elites who possess the power to validate a 'truth' are those who claim to have knowledge of it. Thus the idea of knowledge also becomes problematic. Although knowledge is considered as a universally valid

means to comprehend the world, in the Foucauldian version, it is not such a simple and transparent procedure. Contrary to the common belief, knowledge does not derive from the real world nor has it got any access to reality. For Foucault, knowledge is a product of a certain discourse, which has enabled it to be formulated and has no validity outside it. Thus what we accept as scientific knowledge is an effect of discourses or language and has no validity outside those discourses. For instance, we read certain behavioral peculiarities in an individual as the sign of some mental disorder. Such a judgment is based on the ideas of 'mental disorders' supplied to us by the 'science' of psychiatry. However, the same phenomenon can be perceived as the possession of spirits in the discourse of spiritualism. Thus the notion of discourse is essentially a questioning of the fundamentals of our perceptual tools.

If discourses do not reflect reality why should one accept them? The fact is that one does not adopt discourses consciously. They are merely what appear to be 'commonsensical' or 'natural'. For instance, our acceptance of modern medicine is not due to the fact that it is a discourse, rather it seems to us commonsensical. In other words, discourse is not something that is imposed upon the individual. It is something that one adopts voluntarily because each individual requires a set of concepts to make sense of the world and we choose a position. But the issue here is, how much of freedom an individual has in choosing his position or his subjectivity?

None in fact, says Foucault. An individual's subjectivity is determined by the warring discourses he lives with, particularly those hegemonic ones.

Lacan and the Poststructuralist Psychoanalysis

Another thinker who contributed significantly to the contemporary worldview is the post-Freudian psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. His contribution is in re-orientating the Freudian model of the development of a child. Lacan's theory of the development of the child from the 'imaginary' stage to the 'symbolic' stage via the 'mirror' stage has added a new dimension to the post-structuralist theories.

Like Freud, Lacan also considers the progress of an infant to childhood as the crucial stage in the development of an individual. In the 'imaginary' stage the child is not aware of anything outside of its body. At this stage, the child is subject to all sorts of fantasies and drives and it has no sense of boundaries. From this stage the child enters into the world of the social. Lacan terms this stage, as the entry into the 'symbolic' stage, for one can never know the 'real'. Our conception of reality comes to us through various representational systems like language. This process of recognizing the various systems and internalizing them is what Lacan calls the 'mirror' stage.

In the 'mirror' stage, the world acts as a mirror to the child and it recognizes its self-image in terms of the responses it receives from those around it. In other words, the child's identity is construed in relation to 'others' – in terms of similarity or

difference. Thus the 'other' becomes the frame of its identity. However, the 'other' is not represented by any concrete individual (although sometimes it may be embodied in figures like the father or the mother), but by the larger social order, culture, language, the world of signifiers. Thus the child's identity becomes a relational phenomenon as the child's conception of what it is depends on how others perceive him. Besides, the configurations of the social are always in a state of flux and therefore the identity of the child becomes neither coherent nor stable. Here Lacan approximates the Saussurean notion of the relational nature of the sign. But he differs from Saussure on the question of the stability of the relationship between the signifier and the signified.

Lacan's idea of the 'mirror' has three major implications for us. In the first place, it presents a model of how we consign many of our pre-verbal fantasies and drives into the realm of the unconscious and how it leads to the creation of desire. Secondly, since our identity is no longer authored by us but by the gaze of the others, the notion of the self is replaced by the idea of the 'subject', a culturally shaped entity. Finally since we have repressed whatever is pre-verbal and entered into the realm of the symbolic, that of the language, our identity itself becomes a linguistic construct. More importantly, this language is not ours and hence it cannot express the contents of our unconscious.

Lacan's notions have serious implications as far as representations are concerned. It suggests how language and culture force the individual to repress his self and how ideologies mediate in the shaping of one's subjectivity. Lacan's theory is of particular interest to the feminist and the Marxist theorists as it gives new insights into the creation of ideologies (the construction of the feminine self) and to examine representations.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a somewhat disparate area. It is perhaps the one term that subsumes the central tenets of the theoretical work of the various thinkers discussed above. Simon Moplas in his introduction to Postmodern Debates remarks, "Postmodern theory has become a space in which practically the whole range of different forms of modern critical enquiry intersect: many feminists are concerned with the implications of postmodernity, as are writers on race and colonialism, political theorists and philosophers"(1). However, he adds that postmodernism is neither a contemporary fashion nor a unified movement but rather a mood that informs the contemporary world. Hence we find that many cultural critics dub the cultural condition of the post-war world, especially that of the Anglo-American society since the 1960s, as postmodern.

Nevertheless, it would be too narrow a definition if we use it as a term referring merely to a cultural condition. Many critics consider postmodernism as a style of

thought and an aesthetic practice as well. As a critical term it is a site of critical debate rather than a term of consensus. Although critics like Frederic Jameson view it as a periodising term "...a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society", Moplas 23) there are others who are of the opinion that it is not treated so. Mark Fortier says "if postmodernism is a condition of contemporary culture, then all culture produced in our times is by definition postmodern" (120).

Referring to the term 'postmodernism', Linda Hutcheon remarks that it must be 'the most over- and under-defined term' and inevitably so, because it subsumes a whole gamut of anti-foundational cultural and critical discourses as well as their aesthetic and ideological implications.

At the heart of postmodernism lies a form of skepticism, especially about what is known as the Enlightenment Project of the western society. It represents the western societies' belief, since Renaissance, that science could truly liberate man from the oppression of drudgery and that it could lead to the creation of a society, which is free of evils. Hence we find that the centralizing forces behind western thought of the last five centuries have been reason and science. This belief in the liberatory potential of reason lies at the heart of what is known as liberal humanism.

One definition about postmodernism that is often quoted by critics is Jean-Francois Lyotard's reference to the "*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives." (The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge xxiv).

Narratives and Metanarratives

A narrative is a sequence of events recounted as in the case of a story. Although it is commonly used only with reference to fiction, the term can be applied to any account of events or any series of statements that are linked by the principle of causality. Thus historical accounts, philosophical discourses, scientific accounts are all narratives in some sense. To put it in other words, we gather our sense of the world or what we call knowledge in the form of narratives. However, there are certain organizing principles or rules that determine the form in which the events are to be organized. For example, the principle that underlies the narrative of philosophy is logical progression. In the case of history, it is temporal development. These sets of organizing principles / rules are what Lyotard calls, metanarratives/metalanguages. These metanarratives act as legitimizing principles in each of these narrative forms. They are not a stable set of principles. Each age and each discourse has its own set of metanarratives. For example, Robert Burns's famous line, "O my luve's like a red, red rose," is a legitimate statement within the discourse of poetry; whereas it is not considered acceptable in a textbook on Botany.

Metanarratives and Grandnarratives

As mentioned above, each age modifies the metanarratives through the creation of new philosophies, sciences, histories etc.; that is, through its discourses. Cultural critics opine that what informs modernity is the belief that the world is in a constant state of change and progress, and the endeavor of the grandnarratives is “to generate a philosophical account of this change that will bring together the diverse events and experiences under the auspices of a grand narrative capable of presenting a link between the past, present and future” (Moplas 6). The western philosophers since Immanuel Kant have been engaged in the task of providing such a ‘definite natural plan’. Moplas observes, “If metanarratives give the formal rules for the legitimation of narratives, grand narratives legitimate their contents in relation to an overarching theme or idea” (7). Besides providing a story of the progress of humanity, the grand narratives provide us with a set of premises for interpreting events as well as the rules of behavior differentiating good from evil. Thus grandnarratives set up the subject’s position in the world, providing various forms of knowledge that can interpret his experiences. The grand narratives include various religious systems, political discourses, and systems of thought from the field of philosophy to science, which are often mutually opposed and contesting.

Postmodernity is the moment of a crisis in grandnarratives. The two world wars and the monstrous shapes that totalitarian ideas took came as a rude shock for those who dreamt of an egalitarian world. The fall of the grand narratives of communism, especially the fall of USSR was the death-knell of the dream of a socialist society. Another proof of the failure of the grand narratives was the disintegration of many a nation state. The rise of late capitalism, which rides on the ideas of specialization, efficiency and consumption, in which use value is substituted by exchange value, commodified every aspect of life. An explosion of theories in the field of social sciences and cultural studies was another contributing factor in the creation of the cultural context called postmodernism.

The cataclysmic changes that followed the world wars led to the creation of a socio-cultural condition in which the grandnarratives of modernity no longer seemed to function adequately. This situation led to a sense of incredulity towards all grandnarratives of progress. Postmodernity thus, marks a radical transformation of the way human beings understand and relate to the world. The crisis has had its toll on three important aspects of existence: the ideas of subjectivity, meaning and representation, as well as on questions of authority.

As mentioned earlier, postmodernism is a disparate area. Thinkers have differing and often contradicting attitudes towards it. While for Lyotard it is primarily about the skepticism about the grand narratives, Baudrillard conceives the

postmodern world as the world of simulacra. It is characterized by a state of technology in which it is impossible to distinguish between reality and simulation. There are other thinkers such as Frederic Jameson, Christopher Norris, Terry Eagleton, and Jurgen Habermas who contest the very thought-value of postmodern thought.

Theories of the Postmodern and Theatre

There are three fundamental questions that arise out of the postmodern condition. First, is there something called a stable reality to represent? Secondly, if there is a reality, is it representable? Finally, are the representations reliable?

The chief impact of the cultural condition mentioned above is that it has reoriented the way human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world. Reality is no more looked upon as a given, but a construct - linguistic, discursive, ideological, social or technological. While Saussure contended that the *parole* is a construct based on the system of language, the structuralists perceived all meaningful human acts, including literary works, as constructs based on certain systems. The post-structuralists went a step further and argued that the human consciousness itself is the product of cultural constructions and therefore its products ultimately reflect the socio-cultural discourses. They discerned the role of the ideological and power structures in the construction of the literary work as well as our sense of everyday reality. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their work *The Social Construction*

of Reality, argue that our sense of reality is produced by the interaction between the apparently 'objective facticities' in the world and social convention and personal perception. Even the continuous shifts in the historical structures go unnoticed by us, as they are being continually re-synthesized. We move from one reality to another without being conscious of it. It is habit that disguises this movement. Berger and Luckmann identify language as a chief instrument in maintaining this sense of everyday reality.

Two questions arise out of this condition. The first interrogates all forms of representations by exposing the meaning-making mechanisms of the stage. The second focuses on the instability of meaning let alone representations.

Representation

Theatre has always been looked upon as a space for representations. The notion since the classical times has been that the stage held a mirror to life. This view was endorsed by the dominant discourses of the previous eras. However, the new discourses contest the apparent neutrality of representations. This is informed by the insights the postmodern theories have lent to the mechanisms at work in the creation of human subjectivity, particularly the role of the dominant discourses. Besides, they exposed the collusion of the forces that wield economic and political power in shaping cultural perceptions and thereby controlling social structure. Thus every form of representation is looked upon with a sense of suspicion. The central

To the theorists of the postmodern, representations cannot be outside the discursive and ideological formations of the society. To put it in other words, what we have are not the representations of the world but the discourses in it. To Foucault, representations have implications of power. Hence the representations of gender, race, class, sexuality, madness etc., (the ex-centric) are always associated with power and by the same token, problematic too. The post-modern perspective is essentially a de-centered one. Thus in the post-modern works the ideas of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc., acquire a new significance in the light of the recognition that the sense of culture that we have inherited is that of a homogeneous monolith - the middleclass, male, heterosexual, western, white. What we find in the post-modern works is a de-construction of these cultural constructions. Thus the alienated 'otherness' gives way to 'differences'. In the place of a 'centered' humanity, we have de-centered communities.

This questioning attitude towards representations in the European theatre was inaugurated by the German dramatist Bertold Brecht. His theatre paved the way for later practitioners to further deconstruct theatre's constructions. Thus we find in contemporary theatre a series of practices that are based on the decentering procedure of the post-structuralist tradition. This has in fact given space for the discourses of the marginalized such as the feminists, blacks, homosexuals, and other subaltern groups.

One of the strategies adopted by the post-Brechtians is the re-reading of the canonical texts from the earlier periods in the new *mise-en-scene* in order to expose their ideological foundations. The other strategy is to revive the conventions that are exclusive to the group concerned. These procedures are essentially oppositional in nature. The following chapter is a discussion of how Brecht anticipated this side of postmodernism.

Meaning

Another significant casualty of the postmodernist developments on contemporary theatre is the way we read the meaning of the theatrical act. Meaning in theatre is a very complex area as it is authored by three independent agencies, namely, the playwright, the director and the actors (besides the other agencies such as the set designer, the music designer, lighting designer etc.). Out of the three major agencies that create the theatrical text, the playwright's role is perhaps the least felt in theatre as he has no means of reaching out to the audience except through the *mise-en-scene* set by the director. Keir Elam remarks,

In the contemporary theatre, ultimate responsibility for the overall semantic and stylistic coherence of the performance rests with the director. At the same time, it is clear that the unifying of non-uniform messages of the kind discussed above – kinesic, 'informal' proxemic, linguistic, paralinguistic, etc.-

is very much dependent on the *actor* in his role as multi-channelled transmitter-in-chief (The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama 84-85).

Roland Barthes's notion of the 'death of the author' is literally true in the case of theatre. Barthes says, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" ("Death of the Author", Image Music Text 148). The director is the primary 'Reader' in theatre, who apparently controls the meaning of a theatrical production. However, the director's control is not absolute. The actor is the medium of the director. Hence, once the act is set in motion the director has virtually no control over the performance text. However, we must concede the fact that even the actor is not in absolute control over the meaning of the signs he produces. As the signs he produces on stage are often read differently by the spectators. Sometimes even the 'noises' (unintended signs) during a performance, like the accidental fall of a cup or an actor's stumbling against a chair, can be read as intentional by the spectator attributing meaning to that action. Meaning on the stage slips and slides, leading to a free play of signification. Thus the spectator (reader of the performance) becomes the ultimate source of meaning as well as its destination. Roland Barthes remarks on the role of the reader that "The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; the text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" ("Death of the Author", Image Music Text 148) is more apt in the case of the spectator in the theatre.

Meaning is subject to 'difference': more so in the case of theatre. At all levels of theatrical communication the slips and slides of meaning can take place. Thus one of the areas that we find problematised in contemporary theatre is the idea of the meaning of a theatrical text itself. The postmodern theories' revelations about the meaning-making procedures and the unreliability of the given meanings have forced contemporary practitioners to give up any attempt at closed meanings, let alone representations. Therefore the contemporary playwrights maintain the plurality of theatrical signifieds. Thus the text becomes a site of conflicting readings that refuse to convalesce in a final global meaning. This plurality of signification is achieved through the various devices such as the rejection of the stage hierarchy, the multiplication of theatrical enunciators and a relentless effort to frustrate any attempt at a hermeneutic activity.

Since the written text has a tendency to center meanings thereby creating the effect of 'logos', contemporary practitioners tend to rely lesser and lesser on written texts. Derrida's eulogizing of Artaud's efforts is relevant in this context. He notes, "The theatrical practice of cruelty, in its action and structure, inhabits or rather produces a non-theological space" (Writing and Difference 296). He continues:

The stage is theological for as long as it is dominated by speech, by a will to speech, by the lay out of a primary logos which does not belong to a theatrical site and governs it from a distance. The stage is theological for as long as its

structure, following the entirety of tradition, comports the following elements: an author-creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assemblies, regulates the time or the meaning of representation, letting this latter *represent* him as concerns what is called the content of his thoughts, his intentions, his ideas. He lets representations represent him through representatives, directors or actors, enslaved interpreters who represent characters who, primarily through what they say, more or less directly represent the thought of the "creator"(296).

This side of the postmodernist perception is anticipated by the Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett whose works refuse to offer a single 'theological' meaning for his works. Moreover, Beckett's plays, particularly the last plays attempt at overcoming theatre's reliance on the written word. Apart from these aspects, Beckett's introspective attitude towards the stage converges with the self-reflexive posture of the postmodern art. Beckett's de-construction of the stage is brought to its logical culmination in the works of the American theatre practitioner Robert Wilson. In Wilson's theatre the spectator is provided with signs that are completely open and plurivocal.

Brecht and the Tradition of Resistance in Post-modernist Theatre

C.S. Francies “Reality as construct: representation and meaning in post-modernist theatre with special reference to the works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht ” Thesis. Department of School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, 2003

Chapter - 3

Chapter 3

Brecht and the Tradition of Resistance in Post-modernist Theatre

The persuasive power of language has been recognized by thinkers since time immemorial. One clear instance of this fact is the development of the branch of knowledge called Rhetoric, as early as in the fifth century B.C. Rhetoric, by definition is the study of how words work. It was basically a practical art, concerned with the business of persuading judges in law courts, senators in assemblies, and congregations in churches. While Rhetoric focused upon verbal artifice, there were other art forms, which were also aimed at performing a similar function.

The Natyasastra, the Indian classical text on aesthetics, contains an account of the origin of the art of theatre. It narrates how lord Vishnu asked sage Bharata to give shape to an art form that would entertain as well as instruct the public and help bring the people back to the path of virtue. And the art form that sage Bharata conceived is drama. This description is significant on two counts. One, it presupposes and underscores the persuasive power of arts. Secondly, of all art forms, dramatic art is considered the most ideal one that can perform this function.

The persuasive power of arts has been at the center of controversies too, ever since Plato who wanted the poets to be banished from his ideal republic. At

the heart of this controversy was the issue of representation. Plato's chief accusation was that what art and poetry represented were false ideas. To him, poetic representations were thrice removed from reality and they lacked moral concern and hence they misled the common man. Thus, for Plato, the essential principle of arts namely, "mimesis" (translated differently as 'representation' or 'imitation') was a pejorative term. It meant a removal from reality and distortion.

It is noteworthy here that for the early Greek dramatists like Aeschylus and Sophocles, *mimesis* was essentially convention-based. But the tendency of their successors like Euripides was to make representation look more and more like the external reality. That is, to make illusion seamless. In other words, it was a movement from 'dialectical realism' to 'analogical realism' as Roland Barthes puts it. Of the two strains of representation/imitation the one that took deep roots down centuries was 'analogical realism'- the attempt to make representations look as close to external phenomena as possible. Looking from this perspective, even Aristotle's notion of unities can be read as a device to set the stage in terms of it.

Realism and Representation

This tendency to make representation of reality seamless came to be the strongest impulse on the western stage, particularly since the neoclassical period, and it culminated in the artistic tendency known as Naturalism. Naturalism was a direct descendent of the principle of determinism which held the view that the human

being is a product of heredity and environment. In theatre, Naturalism was characterized by a great deal of emphasis on the meticulous cataloging of the characters. Thus the focus of naturalistic theatre became the material circumstances in which the characters were situated.

However, Naturalism's engagement with the 'indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life' (Benedetti 11) turned out to be a matter of discontent for many including the Russian master Stanislavski. Stanislavski rejected Naturalism's focus on the externality as he felt that the true unity of an individual came from within and not from without. Therefore he sought a method that could draw out the inner reality of the character. His acting method known as the 'System' was essentially a process of bringing out the internal self. For this he wanted the actor to internalize the consciousness of the character. He notes:

To play truly means to be right, logical, coherent, to think, strive, feel and act in unison with your role... we call that living the part.... You must live it by actually experiencing feelings that are analogous to it, each and every time you repeat the process of creating it. (14)

In the Stanislaviskian System the actor has an important role in the building up of the character. The signs emanating from the actor adds to the psychological complexity to the character and thereby to the final meaning of the play. Thus the individual becomes the chief medium for the spectator to make sense of the play.

Thus, the way the spectators read the play depends a great deal on the notion of the individual represented on the stage. To System, human beings are willful entities that pursue their own aims, and their actions are dictated by forces within their psyches. Thus the individual is presented as rational and therefore solely responsible for his actions. Obviously, Stanislavski's individual is modeled on the subject in the liberal humanist tradition - a unique, autonomous, self-motivating 'Individual', who is the sole author of his own actions.

However, this notion of the human subject became the chief casualty of the new discourses that accompanied the dawn of the twentieth century. As can be seen, Stanislavski's idea of the human subject is built on the exclusion of the social aspect of the self. This was a contestable notion for thinkers from Marxists to poststructuralists. To them, human behavior is chiefly determined by the subjectivity that is assigned to the individual by the cultural, social and economic circumstances. In other words, an individual's consciousness - his subjectivity - is determined by the subject position assigned to him/her by the discursive context.

Modernism and Representation

The Stanislavskian endeavor, nonetheless, can be seen as running parallel to a larger tendency in the western aesthetics of the early twentieth century called modernism. As discussed earlier, the central pursuit of the western society since Renaissance has been scientific reason, although with its emphasis shifting slightly

over time. During the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the subject of the rational enquiry shifted from the natural world to the human kind and its creations. This was launched by the emergence of a series of discourses especially in the field of physical, biological and social sciences. Among them were a series of discourses relating to the nature and working of the human mind. The psychoanalytic theory of Freud; the Bergsonian concept of *dur'ee* or psychological time; and William James's notion of the 'stream of consciousness' were the chief among those discourses. These discourses prompted a series of experiments in the field of art and literature, which formed part of a larger phenomenon called Modernism. The area of interest for the modernist movements such as Impressionism, expressionism and surrealism was the internal, sub-social realities.

While placing the 'System' in the historical context of modernism it becomes evident how it shared with the modernist movements a common platform. Colin Counsell remarks:

With the system we see a blending of the basic figure of the bourgeois individual with the new emphasis on psychology, an ideological construct, born in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, concretised into an aesthetic with nineteenth-century realism, and finally modified and informed by modernist discourses that explored the realm of interiority" (47-48).

The system shared with the modernists the notion of a “transcendent ‘human nature’ common to all individuals, which links them more profoundly than any differences may separate them.” (Counsell 26). For the modernists who explored the realm of the interiority of the human self the new sciences only underscored the old assumption of the unity of the individual. What is important to note here is that the modernists hardly displayed any kind of epistemological doubts as they saw the human self as the only reliable point of reference.

The interiority of the human subject, however, was only one side of modernism. On the other side, was a serious effort to conceive the notion of the self from another perspective, namely, the social. Such an effort was an offshoot of a series theory that set the mood of the twentieth century, such as the social theory of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, the anthropological theories of James Frazer, the Relativity theory of Einstein, and the semiotic theory of Saussure. This side of modernism was based on an epistemological crisis regarding the construction of consciousness and consequently, of all other human creations. Thus all human constructions – art, literature, history and social and cultural institutions – became the subject of a rigorous scrutiny. This side of modernism had its antecedence in deterministic principles. Determinism held the view that human character is the product of heredity and environment. This face of modernism that focused on the

role of the social in the construction of human consciousness opened up a Pandora's box of issues particularly with regard to the apparent neutrality of representations.

One of the key figures who undertook the project of analyzing the social process through art was the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's career in theatre was marked by non-conformity to any single style. His object was not the building up of a stylistic pattern. He argued that the style of a work should be dictated by the polemical purpose of it. His was essentially a search for a theatre language that is capable of analyzing the social process. He felt that the theatrical practices of his time in Europe, dominated by Naturalist or realist modes of representation, were too narrow as it was centered on the individual. His concern was the larger social world – how the social, economic and ideological forces shaped the individual's subjectivity. His search for a methodology for the analysis landed him in the theory of Marxism, in which he got interested in his twenties.

Marxism had from the beginning shown two facets of interests and projects and by the 1920s the followers of Marxism fell into two broad categories. The immediate concern of the first group that included Lenin, Gramsci, Lukacs, Mao and others, was the creation of a socialist society. They viewed culture as a medium for the formation of views or ideas that in turn would help bring about the revolution. Once the revolution succeeded, cultural opportunities would provide the conceptual framework for the building up of the new society.

For the second group of thinkers, Marxism was an analytical practice, engaged in the analysis of society and particularly culture. They subjected to scrutiny, all cultural artifacts, ideology, and representation in general, in order to explain the mechanisms involved in the production and the reception of culture. For this branch of Marxists culture was not primarily a medium for political ends. Theirs was an inquiry into the mechanisms behind the cultural products. In the words of Counsell, it was an attempt at producing "a liberatory social and historical understanding" (108) of the mechanisms behind cultural production.

From the theoretical perspective, Marxism perceives society as an ongoing process in which the different forces collide and struggle against one another, forming a *dialectic*, which in turn determines the nature of a society, its history and its perceptions - about the individual, morality, aesthetic norms, human nature, etc. Thus what appear to be 'natural' or 'commonsensical' in a society are urged to be seen as man-made and that they are associated with the existing relations of power.

In the Marxist view, the most important factor in determining a society's class relations and its political forms, including its government and its institutions, is economic power. The group that has control over the 'means of production' erects the social and political structures. These elements work reciprocally: the social and political structures help the continuance of the existing economic relations and conversely, the economic relations support the social and the political structure.

Moreover, these forces manipulate the ideological pattern of a society too. Thus the ruling class succeeds in making the social system created by them appear 'natural' and 'commonsensical'. The analytical side of Marxism sought to look at a society's practices from the outside.

To this tradition belongs the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht. He wanted to expose not only the ideological constructions of the world but also the means by which those constructions were represented. Thus his task was two-fold. On the one hand, he wanted his audience to develop a critical perspective, and on the other, he had to invent a new theatrical form that could bring out the dialectical process. It involved a question of scale; and the existing model of theatre dominated by Naturalist/Realist traditions with its narrow frame was too limited to accommodate his concerns. Therefore he chose a larger frame – an 'epic' frame. His search for a new theatre language resulted in what is known as the 'epic theatre' (a phrase originally used by Erwin Piscator to refer to his documentary style of theatre) or 'dialectical theatre'.

Brecht's search for a new theatrical form was necessitated by his dissatisfaction with the available model of theatre, which he describes variously as Aristotelian drama, bourgeois theatre, dramatic theatre, and *Gesamtkunstwerk* (G-werk) or 'total artwork' - a term derived from Wagner who wanted to create a form of theatre in which all elements worked in unison. (Of these terms, G-werk seems to

be the most useful one for our purpose as it is expressive of certain fundamental characteristics). For Brecht, the *G-werk* was seriously handicapped by the nature of its scale. It was too narrow, confining itself to the domestic and the personal. He wanted to get out of the quandary of scale in which the *G-werk* was embroiled and debate issues such as the ideological processes in which the society was involved. His reply to *G-werk* was 'epic' theatre. The term 'epic' carried two implications in this case. In the first place, it was epic in its scale as it dealt with larger ideological issues. Secondly, for discussing such issues he wanted to incorporate a larger spectrum of situations, a larger number of episodes. Therefore his theatre discarded the traditional theatre's notion of unities and adopted episodic scenes in the place of a narrative.

Critics like Elizabeth Wright identify two distinct forms of theatre developed by Brecht during his career. They are *Lehrtheater* or learning/teaching-play theatre and the 'epic theatre'. The former, according to her, "aimed to revolutionize the bourgeois theatre" and the latter was "designed to reveal the contradictions in bourgeois society" (Wright 24).

According to Counsell there are three outstanding features for the *G-werk*. The first among them is that it attempts at effacing its own artificiality. By a seamless covering up of the machinery behind the production, the *g-werk* engenders the illusion among the audience that the performance is "powered by the forces within

the play world.” (Counsell 89). It conceals the fact that the performance is a representation under construction, and that the reality presented on stage is a construct. Such a form of theatre denies the audience a critical perspective and forces them to remain passive, in Brecht’s terms, as a ‘lot of sleepers’ (Willet, Brecht on Theatre 187).

The second feature of the *g-werk* is that it is based on the principle of organic unity – the creation of a coherent reality. The illusion of *G-werk* is produced, not necessarily by means of resemblance but by means of a Pavisian coherence, that is, by establishing an aesthetic logic by which the work can be read. It must be said that the spectator also has a role in creating this unity as he/she seeks a single logic for the reading of the performance text.

The third feature of the *G-werk* is the ‘framing’ of the performance space. This refers to the conceptual separation of the performance space from the social space. The *G-werk* achieves this by the creation of a locus or a hypothetical place/time where the events take place. What it presents is assumed to be a slice of the world. Through the construction of the locus the *G-werk* privileges the abstract register over the concrete, the told over the telling. In this register the actual objects stand for a class of objects. The particular table on the stage represents the class of ‘Tables’; the particular moral system of the play is presented as ‘Morality’ and the particular construction of the human subject is presented as the universally valid

'Individual'. Thus a certain construction of reality is offered as given, universal, author-free. Together, these three elements constitute the mechanics of the *G-werk*.

Brecht was very much conscious of the fact that if he wanted to attack the ideological or discursive foundations of *G-werk* he had to first dismantle its formal devices since form itself is an encoding of discourse. His reply to *G-werk*'s formal devices was *Gestus*. The term, as the critic John Willett formulates it, is a combination of 'gesture' (of the actor) and 'gist' or the social context of the action (The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht: A Study from Eight Aspects). Unlike the Realist theatre where the individual action depends mostly on the actor's skill or his/her psychological conditioning, in *gestic* acting the action is prompted by the social discourse. For example, the way a character walks about, or bows in front of a superior in *gestic* acting was informed by the codes of the social relations of the world depicted in the play. However, the *gestic* actor does not depend on a set of stereotypical conventions about how a character behaves in a particular situation. He/she selects from a repertoire of socially derived conventions of behavior. What Brecht achieves through his idea of *gestus* are two things. In the first place, he subverts the focus on the individual action and attributes the qualities of the action to the social. Thus the spectators' attention is constantly drawn towards the general action of the play rather than the individual depicted in it. Secondly, the notion of the 'great actor', whose depiction of a character pervading the action of the play is also undermined in the process.

The second aspect of *gestus* is what is known as the *gestic* split. Here the actor assumes two roles. One is that of an observer and the other is that of a demonstrator. In his essay, "The Street Scene" Brecht discusses in detail the role of a demonstrator. He illustrates how an eyewitness who recounts a traffic accident becomes a model for the gestic actor.

The bystanders may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may see things in a different way; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behaviour of the driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident (Brecht on Theatre 21).



Figure 1

A scene from Die Mutter (1951)

The background is the projection of an industrial area

Like the street demonstrator, whose presentation is only a version of what happened, the gestic actor does not attempt at forcing any particular view on the audience. What he presents is only an opinion on which the spectator can make his

judgment. The effect that Brecht wanted to obtain from such a distancing is the incorporation of the audience into the theatrical event as judges thereby establishing a 'democratic' relation with them.

Another effect of gestic split is that it subverts conventional theatre's illusionism. Contrary to the practice of the System actors, the gestic actor does not make any attempt at assimilating the psychology of the character he represents and thus to step into the shoes of the character. The actor, while performing the role knows that he is acting the role of the character and he flaunts that fact to the audience. To add to the flaunting of the artifice of his stage, Brecht was even willing to use unskilled actors. His contention is that the observer of a demonstration is not concerned about the skill of the demonstrator. His interest is in the content. Brecht remarks, "To the street demonstrator the character of the man being demonstrated remains a quantity that need not be completely defined. Within certain limits he may be like this or like that; it doesn't matter." (Willet, Brecht on Theatre 124)

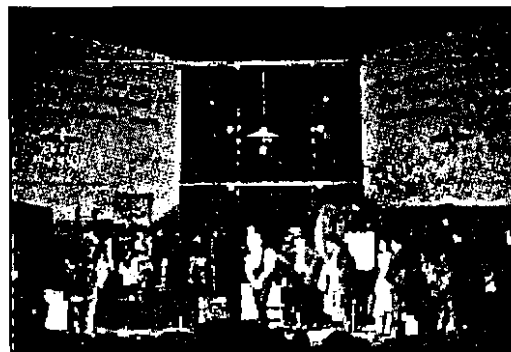


Figure 2

A scene from The Threepenny Opera (1928)

Brecht's insistence on letting the stage machinery visible to the spectators was also aimed at a similar effect. It was a means of breaking the illusionism of conventional theatre. Besides, he introduced narrator figures, projections (see fig. 1), display of titles (see fig. 2), and often had his performance with half curtains or no curtains. The type of sets he used for his productions were also of the same ilk, their artificiality being open to the view of the spectator (see fig. 3). In the place of the illusionist sets used in the *G-werk* he used suggestive sets. For example, in *Galileo* the prince's palace was signified by a doorway on a bare stage. Brecht states in 'The Street Scene', "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from our street scene: the engendering of illusion." (Brecht on Theatre 122)

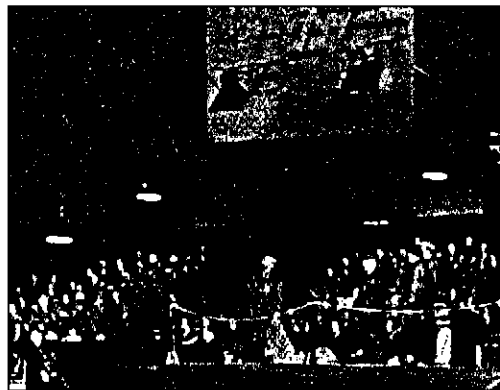


Figure 3

*A scene from the Lehrstucke Die Massanahine.
The titles are projected on the screen.*

The gestic split involves another key aspect. It undermines G-werk's notion of unity. In the case of G-werk, it is the text that is staged. Hence there is hardly any

conflict between the telling and the told. A common 'aesthetic logic' rules the play text and the performance text. The meaning of the performance is entirely derived from within the locus or the fictional universe of the play. Thus there is no conflict in the discursive universes. On the contrary, in *gestus*, this unity is broken. The locus of the play is in conflict with the 'demonstrative' *mise-en-scene* of the performance. The meaning of the play is thus, generated by the conflict between the telling and the told, the intersection between the abstract and concrete registers. This conflict is the fundamental dialectics of the Brechtian theatre.

Brecht's subversion of the G-werk's treatment of dialogue is also significant. Traditionally dialogue is considered the *raison d'être* of drama. It is through the dialogues that the theatrical narrative is built up. Brecht was aware of the use of dialogue in propping up a preconceived reality. Therefore, through a variety of disjunctive techniques in the structuring of the dialogues he tried to abandon the narrative in favor of discourse. Elizabeth Wright notes, "Wherever Brecht used dialogue he used it in a critical subversive way, showing that the speaker's voice did not originate in a pure and pristine selfhood, but was the effect of an intersection of many codes" (Postmodern Brecht 114). Through this Brecht sought to liberate theatre from its traditional identity as a literary form.

Brecht does not limit the scope of the *gestus* to the level of acting alone. His juxtaposition of episodic scenes set in contradiction with one another is another

instance of the dialectics on his stage. Besides this, the use of titles, placards and projections are intended to create this sort of a dialectical context in which the spectator has to make his own judgment about the warring discourses. In Brecht's practice, while the play depicted the particular, the titles were statements relating to the general, historical. The particular is juxtaposed with the general inviting the spectator to see how the apparently unique event is related to the general socio-cultural condition. Brecht writes, "The titles must include the social point, saying at the same time something about the kind of portrayal wanted, i.e. should copy the tone of a chronicle or ballad or a newspaper or a morality" (Brecht on Theatre 201). Here, the supposedly unique nature of the individual experience depicted in the G-werk, is subverted by the juxtaposition of the title, which carries the general, implying that it is not a particular case but a corollary of the general or the social. Thus the discourse of individualism is juxtaposed with a discourse of sociality. This exposes how subjectivity is produced in the G-werk. This also is an instance where the concrete register of the stage takes an attitude against the abstract.

Brecht's technique of placing the Abstract register of the stage against the Concrete is central to his much talked about *Verfremdungseffekt* or the 'alienation effect' (also called de-familiarisation or distancing effect). Brecht notes, "A common use of alienation effect is when someone says: 'Have you ever really looked carefully at your watch?' (Brecht on Theatre 144) This question unsettles one to realize that

one has grown too familiar with the object to really see it. However, Brecht's remedy for seeing the object afresh is not by making it more conspicuous but by placing the object in the context of another discourse. He explains, "To see one's mother as a man's wife one needs an A-effect; this is provided, for instance, when one acquires a step-father (Brecht on Theatre 144)." What happens here is that the woman is placed in a new discourse – the discourse of Sexuality. Thus the placing of the same subject in mutually conflicting discourses results in what Brecht calls *Verfremdungseffekt*. Here the observer is offered the subjectivity of the woman from two discursive angles.

This is what V-effect achieves on stage. It shakes one out of the illusion in to which one is drawn in the 'theatre of illusion' (Wright, Postmodern Brecht 32). It complements his project of disrupting the universalization of particular discourses practiced in the 'Aristotelian theatre' in which the particular ideological constructions of reality are treated as if they are 'natural' or 'commonsensical'.

One possible flaw in Brecht's method of presenting the Abstract and the Concrete registers simultaneously is that the Concrete register has a tendency to nullify the discourse of the abstract. In this event, Brecht will be positing one discourse in place of another. However, Brecht does not allow this to happen. As stated earlier, the epic theatre flaunts its own artifice. It proclaims it's meaning as manufactured and therefore whatever meaning it produces is provisional. Commenting on the affinity of Brecht's theatre with postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon remarks:

There is no masking of ideology, no smoothing out of contradiction, either in character or plot. The subject is an object of inquiry – and problematization. It is not taken for granted; it is not unchanging or unchangeable. Brecht's theatre and postmodernist art further contest that entire set of assumptions we have seen to derive from the humanist concept of subjectivity: originality, uniqueness, authority, universality. Both paradoxically rewrite the historical events and personages within their texts, both manage to problematize historical knowledge and to break any illusionist frame (220).

Moreover, his theatre raises the audience from the level of being passive sleepers who get embroiled in the illusion on the stage, to the status of co-producers of meaning. Colin Counsell remarks, "Epic theatre offers dialogic relations but no single dialogic position, meanings but no univocality, with the result that the audience is confronted with no settled interpretation [...]"(106). This is where Epic theatre anticipates the later deconstructive procedures that aim at disrupting all centering discourses.

It will be a grievous mistake if one accedes to the common notion that Brecht's was totally a Marxist propagandist theatre, particularly in the context of the developments that took place in epistemology during the later twentieth century. His greatest contribution to later intellectual projects is that he has thrown light into how representations are mediated. In this respect, Brecht's position is tangential with the

greatest concern of the postmodernists. Linda Hutcheon states: "Postmodernism raises the uncomfortable (and usually ignored) question of the ideological power behind basic aesthetic issues such as that of representation: whose reality is being represented?" (182). Thus Brecht's theatre turns out to be prognostic as well as diagnostic.

He developed a methodology for theatre that enabled the spectator to see how the reality on the stage, as well as other forms of representations, is ideologically laden, mediated. Counsell observes, "Having the audience think *of* the text's constructions of the world rather than *within* them is epic theatre's ultimate goal" (106). The spectator is encouraged to 'adopt an attitude of smoking and watching' (Brecht on Theatre 44). Arguably, Brecht's reliance on Marxist theory was primarily in terms of its methodology.

Brecht problematized the notion of subjectivity too. Contesting the humanist notion of the subject, Brecht remarks, "The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew" (Brecht on Theatre 15). To him, subjectivity is a process; constantly modified by the dialectics working in the society. Its apparent constancy is like the optical illusion in a cinema hall where the still frames produce the effect of motion.

Critics often refer to three stages in Brecht's career as a theatre practitioner. Such a classification however, is problematic, as his theatre was ever transgressive. Terms such as *Lehrtheater*, 'dialectic' theatre and 'epic' theatre are suggestive of

this transgressive nature of it. Yet, there was one clear thread in his oeuvre. It is a perpetual search for a form that could expose the ideological constructions of reality. Brecht's theatre was amorphous as in the case of the postmodernist works. The fact that he modified his works each time they were produced testifies this. Just as his *Lehrtheater* focused on the process rather than the product, the Brechtian theatre itself was one that resisted closure, and remained open. "For Brecht the audience is an essential part of the work; the work is open and unfinished ... and calls on productive capacities of the audience" (Wright, Postmodern Brecht 75).

Brecht and the Discourses of the Marginalized

A great deal of the recent theories and practices are engaged in a systematic and meticulous analysis of the coercive and disciplining modes of representation by producing a space from which the 'other', traditionally marginalized, subject could speak. Looking back, one finds that Brecht's theory and practice in theatre were of immense value in ushering in the era, which in the Lyotardian terminology, is characterized by a certain incredulity towards metanarratives.

Brecht's practices in theatre have been decisive particularly in the development of the resistant forms of theatre. His insights into how representations have to be interrogated have been of fundamental importance to the discourses of the marginalized in theatre such as the feminist theatre, black theatre, theatre of roots, the Agitprop companies etc., Apart from this, Brecht's rediscovery of the subversive

potential of the plateau has radically influenced the development of a postmodern performance form (formless though) known as 'performance art'.

The resistant tradition of the post-modernist theatre hinges on the interrogation of the cultural constructions. The feminists and the subaltern groups in particular are critical about the way subjectivity is assigned to them by the hegemonic forces in the society and attempts at subverting it through a series of strategies. This kind of a resistance arises in theatre out of the consciousness that art is no longer a mirror that reflects reality but an instrument for subjugation.

Among the discourses of the marginalized in theatre, Feminist theatre seems to be the most dominant one, as it happens everywhere in the world. However, one cannot talk about feminist theatre as though it is a unified phenomenon. Just as there are many forms of feminisms so are there many forms of feminist theatres. The essential quest of the feminist theatre is to find a space for them in a patriarchal society. Each group is interested in its area of interest. Generally speaking the feminist theatre represents some experiences common to women and seek to affect change in the consciousness of its audience and thereby in the society as a whole. Some of the areas that draw special attention of the feminist theatre practitioners are the following: the role of women in a patriarchal society, the mediated images of women particularly in cultural production, cultural representations of the female body and gender discrimination.

Of course, there are denominations within feminism itself which focus on the issues of women of a particular racial or communal group. The feminist theatre is not merely the application of a certain politics to a 'ready made art'. It also informs the making of a theatre – its selection of the subject, method of working, form and style.

A large body of the works by feminist theatre groups consists of re-readings of the canonical texts of the various eras and expose how women were represented in them, as in the case of The Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company's 'consciousness raising' Shakespeare's Sister (1980). These works highlight how the gaze is gendered, and they seek to subvert and reorient the audience's perception.

What is Brechtian about feminist theatre is that it recognizes that representations are fraught with ideological contents and therefore refuses to take them for granted. Secondly, feminist theatre does not assume its perspective as the 'truth', and hence it expects the audience to take a critical posture rather than being passive dreamers in the auditorium. Janelle Reinelt remarks, "For feminists, Brechtian theatre offers a way to examine the material conditions of gender behaviour (how they are internalized, opposed and changed) and their interaction with other socio-political factors such as class" (36).

Finally, as in the case of Brecht's *Lehrstuck*, the resistant theatre believes in theatre's potential to convert its spectators. Therefore most of them remain overtly propagandist.

Brecht and Performance Art

As discussed earlier we make sense of the world around us in terms of certain culturally derived categories or 'frames'. Thus these frames act as the medium through which we read the world. Therefore a disruption or a dismantling of the frame can lead to radical subversion in the meaning. This is what 'performance art' attempts at.

There are two common strategies adopted by the performance artists. One is to frame the everyday, as Marcel Duchamp did with his 'sculpture' *Fountain* (where the title and the place of the object set the frame) or John Cage's 'Happening', 4' 33". However, most of the performance artists use their medium as a means of resistance to representations. Performances like Annie Springle's show in the 1980s, Chris Burden's Shooting Piece (1972) and the work of Karen Finley are instances of it.

The other strategy of Performance art is the breaking of the frame. A fine example of this type of work is The Wooster Group's Brace Up! The work is supposedly an adaptation of Chekov's Three Sisters. However, Chekov's play has got little to do with Brace Up!. Chekov and Three Sisters merely set the frame for the present work. Yet it discards the naturalistic setting that Chekov's work demands. It effaces the locus almost entirely. The production personnel move about the stage; the stage props are handed in a visible fashion; the actors after their parts for the scene take rest on a bench in the back stage smoking, chatting or drinking. During the performance, the actors slip into

real behaviour. On the whole, it is a case where the distinction between the locus and the platea is effaced. In such productions one can discern the clear influence of Brecht's practices.

Although Brecht is often seen as part of the modernist avant-garde his interests were far more futuristic as they anticipate the concerns of the postmodernists. Linda Hutcheon statement underscores this fact. "The avant-garde however shared with the modernists a general focus on the individual subject, personal speech and specific text, for which postmodern would substitute an interest in culture, in collective discourse, and in semiotic codes or aesthetic conventions." "Of course, there was a contemporary both the high modernists and the avant-garde who was also interested in precisely these things: Bertolt Brecht" (Hutcheon 218).

He sought to subvert the existing model of theatre from within in an act of self-reference in order to expose the ideological framework that lay behind it. This is exactly what the later postmodernists did in the various departments of cultural life. However, he deviates from the postmodernists on the point that whereas the postmodernists suspected the subject's potential to transform the world, Brecht saw the world as infinitely transformable so as to force the audience into a continuous process of re-writing it. Brecht's failure was, his attempt at providing pleasure to the audience, often ended up in his audience getting carried away by the action of the play rather maintaining the distance he wanted them to maintain.

To sum up, Brecht's influence on post-modernist theatre has been multi-faceted. His spirit of analysis; his insight into the role of ideology in representations; the formation of subjectivity; his consciousness about the non-finality of meaning and his attempt at creating a methodology for training the spectator to discern the constructions of reality, have all had a decisive influence on the later theory of postmodernism which essentially reflects an "incredulity towards metanarratives".

The De-narrativised stage: Beckett and Robert Wilson

C.S. Francies “Reality as construct: representation and meaning in post-modernist theatre with special reference to the works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht ” Thesis. Department of School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, 2003

Chapter - 4

Chapter 4

The De-narrativised stage: Beckett and Robert Wilson

A narrative is a recounting of events in a certain sequence. It is a means of condensing and explaining experience. The history of narratives begins with the history of mankind. It began with the first man who attempted to communicate his experience to another. Although we refer to narrative in the context of stories, it is a versatile genre. We find narratives in literature, history, painting, in conversations, in a news item etc. Narratives are universal. They are found in every culture and in every age. Roland Barthes says, "Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself"(Barthes, "Structural Analysis of Narratives", A Roland Barthes Reader 251-252).

Narratives are also a means of making sense of the world. The Book of Genesis in the Old Testament is a fine example of a world-explaining narrative. As stated earlier, the kinds of narratives are diverse. Their purpose and attitude towards the listener differ. Therefore, each type of narrative has its own set of rules or legitimizing principles of sequencing. For example, the legitimizing principle of a conventional story is cause and effect, whereas it is logical progression in the case

of philosophy and temporal development in the case of history. The well-known French thinker, Jean Francois Lyotard calls them 'metanarratives'.

As mentioned earlier our consciousness is wrought by narratives of various kinds (see chapter 2). Among the numerous narratives there are some that are grand in their scale as they are world-creating. They are known as the grandnarratives. For example, Christianity is a grandnarrative as it explains the world and the purpose of human life on the earth in a certain way. Marxism is another grandnarrative as it also performs a similar function. Thus, our sense of the world is basically made out of the tools that are supplied by the various grandnarratives. Yet these tools do not remain the same down the ages. For instance, while the pre-modern western society held the view that the universe was working according to the plan of God, in the historical modern age we find a shift in the paradigm. Reason and science took the place of God. In the older worldview, all experiences could be explained as part of the scheme of God. The focus of the latter worldview was on disinterested intellectual enquiry. It was based on a trust in the ability of the human mind for disinterested and objective knowledge. However, despite the divergence in the approach, the pre-modern and the modern worldviews converged at one point. Both of them were teleological, attributing a purposeful design for the functioning of the universe. Thus the universe worked according to a plan and everything in it had a place in the scheme, above its materiality.

However, the twentieth century marked a crisis in metanarratives. The socio-cultural and scientific developments that accompanied the dawn of the century led to a stage where the metanarratives of the previous ages appeared to be inadequate to put together the individual experiences. What resulted was a process of disintegration. The failure of a centralizing principle led to the disintegration of narratives. Conversely, the failure of narratives to present a coherent universe led to the disintegration of the legitimizing rules (metanarratives). Postmodernity is the condition of this disintegration.

Such a state of disintegration can give rise to two possibilities in artistic expression. The first, according to Lyotard, is represented by the Modernist avant-garde which 'presents the unrepresentable', and the second category which, leaving all familiar categories, presents the unrepresentable in presentation itself. In Lyotard's view, the former category is represented by the avant-garde works, while the latter is characteristic of a truly postmodern work. In his essay, "What is Postmodernism" Lyotard states,

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (Postmodern Debates 61-62).

Lyotard's notion of the postmodern work of art has affinities to the Kantian notion of the 'sublime'. In his third critique, Kant divides human mind into three faculties – understanding, reason and judgment. All knowledge is determined by the concepts formed by understanding. Our phenomenal experience of the world is related to this. Set against this, is the concept 'idea'. 'Idea' is the product of reason. It cannot find conceptual or sensory embodiment. It serves as an ideal, which we can never experience or conceptualize. In other words, imagination can excite in us ideas that cannot be realized or represented in sensory form. Sublime is connected to this realm of pure ideas. To Lyotard, the sublime takes place:

when imagination fails to present an object, which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it. We have the idea of the simple (that which cannot be broken down, decomposed), but we cannot illustrate it with a sensible object which would be a 'case' of it. We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience); they also prevent the free union of the faculties which gives rise to the sentiment of the beautiful; and they prevent the formation and the stabilization of taste. They can be said to be unrepresentable (59).

A classic example of the sublime is the concept of God. At the heart of the commandment in the Book of Exodus, 'Thou shalt not make graven images' (20:22) is the idea of the unrepresentable. For the Absolute cannot be represented.

For Lyotard, then, a truly postmodern work of art is the art of the sublime. This implies two things: one, the postmodern world is a world of the sublime, unrepresentable, transcending the limits of the tools of representation. Secondly, a genuinely postmodern work of art is that which 'puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself'. In other words, it is the art of transgression. It does not yield itself to any familiar categories. It refuses to structure reality in a coherent pattern. Such works elude the possibility of a complete understanding of the world. In short, it is the art that rejects all metanarratives. They are characterized by a Derridean 'slippage'. Therefore the receiver of this art is in a constant state of search for paradigms to comprehend them. Hans Bertens comments:

The art of the sublime is thus an art of negation, a perpetual negation, since the rules that sublime works of art will in spite of themselves establish must again be broken. Like postmodern science, and like his discursive moves, Lyotard's postmodern aesthetic is based on a never-ending critique of representation that should contribute the preservation of heterogeneity, of optimal dissensus. The sublime does not lead towards a resolution; the confrontation with the unrepresentable leads to radical openness" (The Idea of the Postmodern: A History 130).

The central distinction Lyotard makes between the avant-garde art and the sublime art of the postmodern is that while the former conceives a form for the experience of the sublime the latter is a form without a form. It is the art of transgression. It prevents the stabilization of taste as they rewrite the aesthetic norms each time it appears. In short it does not yield itself to any overarching sense-making procedure.

Lyotard's sublime is a self-conscious postmodern sublime, which has renounced all nostalgic yearning for correspondence between the world and our constructions. Patricia Waugh remarks, "Existing as a form of radical subjective fictionality, as aesthetic which refuses mimesis, organic unity, consensus, it offers multiple perspectives which ostentatiously and dramatically refuse to coalesce or resolve into some transcendent or more profound whole" (Practicing Postmodernism Reading Modernism 27).

A reflection on the postwar theatre in the west points to a definitive shift from all previous aesthetic norms. On closer examination it will become clear that it was a shift characterized by a rejection of the metanarratives of the past and that it was essentially an inescapable quest for a theatrical form that could impart an experience of the sublime.

Among the early writers and intellectuals who expressed disbelief towards the metanarratives of the previous era was the Irish born French dramatist Samuel Beckett. To him reality was something other than what it appeared to be, something

incomprehensible. No universal law could account for our experiences. His world had no teleology. Whatever meaning one saw in the universe was only the projection of one's own longing for coherence. Throughout his career Beckett sought to find a theatrical language for his vision of the meaning-making process in which man is involved.

Stage De-narrativised

Of the manifold impacts of this disintegration, one of deep significance to the art of theatre was the de-narrativization of the stage. In the traditional theatre, the illusion of the performance space is maintained primarily through the various strands of narratives used during a performance such as the plot constructed through the verbal narrative, the kinesic narrative, the acoustic narrative etc. Generally, these elements work in unison in order to establish the aesthetic logic with which one can untie the performance text.

A great deal of experiments in the post-modernist theatre was marked by a deviation from the way in which the traditional theatre established the aesthetic logic of the performance, by a de-narrativization of the stage. This was spearheaded by the Irish man, Samuel Beckett, who drew upon a new aesthetic, the aesthetic of the sublime.

In fact, both Beckett and Brecht were encountered by the same kind of crisis - the legitimacy of representations. For Brecht the reality on the stage is a construct

as it is mediated by ideological elements. Brecht's means to counter this was by the undoing of the constructions of reality on the stage. Beckett, on the other hand, sought to problematise the sense-making process adopted by the spectator in the theatre hall.

Of the means of establishing the plot of a play the first in order is the establishment of the locus. Beckett's stage refuses to be translated into any specific place. The setting of Waiting for Godot, 'A country road. A tree. Evening.' is an unspecified place. The bare interior with gray light set for Endgame is similarly non-specific. So is the case with the Mouth talking in the darkness (Not I), or W merely rocking (Rockaby), or 'A late evening in the future' (Krapp's Last Tape). There is no construction of an 'other' place or a locus. These descriptions are too general or abstract. Besides these, the bare stage or the sets created out of shafts of light in the darkness of the stage, or the squares and circles on the stage floor does not give any kind of information regarding the locale of the play. Thus the spectator is denied a means of making any specific sense of the play. Costumes in his plays are always anachronistic denying any possible associations of time or place.

This is perhaps the most striking aspect of Beckett's theatre. For an audience that is used to the Stanislavskian theatre's signifying procedures, this kind of an abstraction of the real space of the stage or the platea is unsettling. There is no attempt at signifying something other than what one finds on the stage. The signifying

devices remain opaque. There is no 'other' meaning signified. The stage objects that are traditionally taken for signifiers turn out to be the signifieds. The performers who are supposed to put on the mantle of characters remain performers. Thus the concrete register of the stage turns out to be the abstract register.

In Beckett's theatre one finds a free play of signifiers. There is no overarching interpretative regime in his theatre. The crystallization of one meant the settling down on a particular discourse. Beckett always wanted to avoid any sort of hermeneutic sedimentation. Therefore, one finds that the signs on his stage constantly 'quiver' and 'loosen', leading to the openness of signification. As a playwright and director Beckett was very meticulous about the stage directions. For him every dialogue and every movement on stage carried a lot of weight. There was no question of any 'noise' on his stage. This was to keep the performance from the contamination of any specific signification. His fierce objection to the violation of the author's specific staging instructions in The American Repertory Theatre 1984 production of *Endgame* directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, turned out to be an enormous scandal. Akalaitis had chosen to set the play in an abandoned subway station. (See figure 4, Cohen, Theatre, 257).

Beckett's objection was not without justification. Any major reworking of the instructions could lead to the sedimentation of signification, which went against the grain of his dramaturgy.



Figure 4

A scene from The American Repertory Theatre production of Samuel Beckett's Endgame (1984) directed by JoAnn Akalaitis

Reality as projection

In his essay 'Proust' (1931), Beckett argues that what we perceive to be reality is a 'perpetuum', a random series of phenomena that does not have any meaningful design. But man imposes a design upon it, thereby rendering it comprehensible. This is because, in the absence of such an intelligible design, man would sink into an existential angst, which he refers to as the 'suffering of being'.

This notion of human condition which Beckett shares with other existentialist thinkers has close links with the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*, the primordial 'being-there', as Alain Robbe-Grillet suggests in his essay 'Samuel Beckett: Presence on the Stage'. Beckett's tramps Vladimir and Estragon in his play Waiting for Godot

are the finest representation of this condition. They are merely there on the stage alone, futile, 'with no future or past, irremediably present' ('Samuel Beckett: Presence on the Stage' For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction 119). Whatever sense they read in their presence on stage is their own projection. Similar is the case with Hamm and Clov in Endgame. Hamm is eternally bound to the chair and Clov is eternally bound to Hamm. There is no exit. The world outside is dead and the world inside is running out fast. With the little time left, they try to make sense by playing the 'story time'. The narration is a desperate effort at imposing some sense of order on the chaotic, unaccountable, inexorable condition of being. In Krapp's Last Tape, the protagonist attempts to form a narrative out of the disparate selves of his own past. The apparently continuous self of Krapp is subjected to a process of analysis on the stage and the result is a decentered Krapp. The Krapp who occupies the stage is not the Krapp that speaks through the tapes. Winnie, the protagonist of Happy Days tries to build a narrative out of the series of activities she performs. In Play, That Time, Ohio Impromptu and Not I language itself is the structuring principle.

Like Brecht, Beckett also suggests that it is habit that imposes meaning and continuity on to the disparate and chaotic nature of experiences. However, Brecht chooses to break this illusion of coherence by asking a question like, 'Have you ever really looked carefully at your watch?' (Brecht on Theatre 144). Brecht's method was to enable the spectator to watch from a distance what had been hitherto taken for granted. Beckett, on the other hand, exposes our constructions of reality by

rupturing the grand scheme that supports the structure. He achieves this by the subversion of every theatrical tool that we conventionally rely on, in order to read meaning out of the performance. In his productions, the spectator's position is a tricky one. At one moment he/she is lured to build up a certain logic of interpretation and in the next, he finds his system ruptured. Consequently, the sum total of the signs produced on the stage remains open and plurivocal.

Narrative

Beckett's plays have shown a steady tendency to discard narratives in the conventional sense. His last plays in particular are devoid of textual narratives. They deal more in situations than in plots. Even in his most conventional play, Waiting for Godot, for instance, nothing happens. There is no development in the action of the play. There are only repetitions of activities. Vladimir and Estragon fall over and struggle to get up; they gaze at the sky in comic unison; they exchange the bowler hat in a slapstick action; and they wait. Just as the tramps wait for the arrival of Godot, the spectators wait for the conclusion of the play. But the play does not conclude. It just ends. To Beckett, our experiences of the world are disparate and random. Yet they appear continuous because we get used to it by going through it repeatedly. It is similar to what we experience in the cinema hall where the projection of still images form a continuum, creating the illusion of motion. Beckett's play worlds are circular where actions recur in a pattern. The sense of continuity is created out of the repetition of actions.

In Endgame there is no progress in the action towards a climax or a denouement. Nothing happens in their world. Therefore they make sense of it by playing some kind of a game in which one is the master and the other is the servant. The activities on the stage consist of repetitions of precise, chess-like movements. The world inside remains unchanged and the world outside has nothing to change. The play ends in the same way as it began. As Enoch Brater says, there is only 'an agonizing "presentness"' (8). The refrain 'Something is taking its course' acts as the central statement of the play. However, it is nothing other than a regression.

Happy Days is set on a bare landscape. Its central character Winnie is buried to the waist in a mound of earth. A bell rings and she wakes up. This is followed by a series of actions – praying, brushing her tooth, applying make up, searching her handbag etc., which are repetitive in nature. The apparent sense of development is supplied by her habits. However, the play ends the way it began, without any change in the situation. Beckett's later plays in particular are devoid of narrative contents altogether. In the television play Quad the action consists of temporally structured movements. The performers move around the square pool of light projected on to the floor of the stage. What happens in the play is the ritual-like movement of the performers around the square. There is neither a plot, nor any kind of development. In Rockaby W is seated in a chair, rocking and listening to a taped voice. When there occur long spells of silence she responds with an occasional 'More'. The text remains open. The spectator is invited to read his meaning.

Character/Subjectivity

As discussed in the earlier chapters, the liberal humanist notion of the self was that of a stable and reliable one as it was independent of the body. This was founded broadly on the model propounded by Descartes and Kant.

But in Beckett's view, the human self undergoes shifts in time and therefore identity is never stable. However human mind has a tendency to recall the past into the present and remodel the present in accordance with it. This will create an appearance of continuity. As in the case of the creation of reality, in the creation of the self too one superimposes separate identities, one on another, creating the effect of a single image.

In Krapp's Last Tape, for instance, we find an illustration of this. On his seventieth birthday Krapp replays the tape recordings of his voice made on his previous birthdays. The recordings throw light into his selves in the past. As an aspiring poet he once denied himself all physical pleasures for the sake of art. Today he has a changed self that is purely after bodily pleasures, drinking, eating and replaying his sexual exploits in the past. The separation of the different selves of Krapp is made very explicit in the play.

Most of Beckett's characters are puppets of the Chaplinesque breed, lacking in will to have any kind of control over life. Most of them are disabled or maimed. Hamm is unable to move around without the support of another. Clov is emotionally

tied to Hamm; Nagg and Nell, like Kafka's metamorphosized insect, are in the dustbin. The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in Waiting for Godot, is similar to that of Hamm and Clov in Endgame. It is a master-servant relationship. Yet each cannot survive without the other. Towards the end Pozzo goes blind and Lucky becomes dumb. Similarly, Vladimir and Estragon are also less than perfect human beings. Neither is a willful individual. They depend on each other in order to exist. The protagonist of Happy Days is literally subhuman. Only the top portion of her body is visible to the spectator. She too is sinking into the subterranean darkness. Her husband Willie's responses to her incessant babble reveals him weak and hopeless. In Ohio Impromptu, the Listener's self is constructed out of the Reader's reconstruction of the fictional character he was reading from a book. In Not I, there is no character in the conventional sense. There is only a speaking mouth.

Beckett's play world lacks individuals of the liberal humanist kind who possess rational, stable selves. They are weak, 'subhuman', puppet-like creatures whose subjectivity is revealed to be scattered and uncertain. This portrayal of the human self finds its theoretical matrix in the theories of the postmodern, which treats the human subjectivity as an unstable phenomenon as it is written by mutually contesting discourses.

Temporality

Time is another element problematised by Beckett. In a rationalistic

perspective, time is a dimension of development or progress. Therefore, in a teleological conception of the world, time functions as an axis of meaning. The working of such a world, where causes lead to effects, is intelligible; and because it is an intelligible world, it is subject to correction as well. But Beckett's universe lacks any such designs. There is no progress here. Time stands frozen. There is nothing to be fulfilled. As in the Heideggerian vision of 'dasein' the characters are just there on the stage. Waiting for Godot is a fine illustration of this idea. The tramps are just there, waiting. Waiting is a state of non-existence. It becomes meaningful only on the fulfillment of what they are waiting for. The act of waiting in Waiting for Godot is never fulfilled. It is a state of infinite regress.

Time in Beckett is a paradigm of deterioration. Food runs out in Waiting for Godot; pain killers, sugar-plums, tide, rugs and coffins in Endgame. It is the loss of physical powers in Krapp's Last Tape. In Happy Days it stands for the condition of declining. By the problematisation of time Beckett declares the death of theological time as well as the teleological vision of the world.

Meaning as Effect of Language

Beckett's works reiterate the poststructuralist position that language precedes thought and constitutes the framework within which thought operates. Contrary to the traditional view that there is a reality that pre-exists language, and that language is meant to reflect that reality. The poststructuralists argue that reality itself is

constituted by language. For instance we can distinguish the difference between 'spinning' and 'rotating' only through language. It is the primary tool with which we conceptualise the world, argues Saussure. The plays of Beckett demonstrate this principle in a special manner. Here language is the chief instrument with which the characters keep themselves alive in a world that is fast running out on them.

Endgame conveys the sense of an awesome sea of silence in which the four survivors of a shipwreck struggle to keep themselves afloat by talking. Each time the characters fall silent, one is given the feeling that the overwhelming gloom is going to consume the remaining specimen of life. The long pauses in the play create a strong sense of the final darkness. Just as the silence is about to overwhelm and consume the last surviving specimen of life someone speaks out, and that keeps them all from being consumed by the final silence. In Happy Days Winnie keeps talking in her tragic situation. Her persistent speech gives a veneer of meaning to her sub-human existence. In Waiting for Godot, Lucky and Pozzo fill the emptiness by talking, cracking jokes, philosophizing. In Krapp's Last Tape the taped words create the protagonist's universe. Thus, whatever meaning one reads in the Beckettian universe is ultimately the projection of the spectator himself/herself. It is not intrinsic to language. It is a construct of the human mind. Here Beckett seems to share the Heideggarian notion of *Dasein*.

Colin Counsell opines that it is not surprising that Beckett shares the poststructuralist concern with the creation of meaning and subjectivity, for Beckett

was also a product of the intellectual milieu that gave birth to the intellectuals who sketched out intellectual firmament of the late twentieth century.

This is not perhaps incidental, for the '*emigré*' Irishman Beckett spent many of his formative years as part of that milieu of French intellectualism which gave birth to such as Claude Levi Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard, figures central to critical theory as it has developed (125).

Like Brecht, Beckett also regards meaning as a construction. However in the case of Brecht, meaning is a social construction and he believed that the group that has economic power controlled the production of meaning. Both start with the point that habit is the factor that blinds us from perceiving the constructed nature of reality. However, they differ in their positions regarding the originary point of the constructed reality. For Brecht it is supplied by the discourses that are controlled by the group that has economic power. For Beckett, on the other hand, it is supplied by the innate desire of man to make sense out of the chaos. While Brecht's chief contribution to poststructuralism was in terms of exposing the role of discourses in the construction of reality, Beckett's was in terms of the signification process. He found his task to be the freeing of the signifier from the tyranny of the signified.

While Brecht's theatre is immersed in its political engagement, Beckett's theatre is one of political disengagement in the conventional sense. It may sound

reactionary to some. Yet, Beckett's rejection of the metanarratives of the humanist kind is itself a form of politics. Moreover, the postmodern condition gives us the lesson that one has to view every ideological position with suspicion.

Traditionally, critics treat Beckett's works as part of the avant-garde tradition. However, a reassessment of his works, particularly in the light of the Lyotardian distinction between the avant-garde and the postmodern traditions, reveals that his works, especially the later ones, usher in the tradition of the postmodern sublime, presenting the unrepresentable in presentation itself.

Robert Wilson's Theatre of Visions

Beckett's project of putting forth the unrepresentable in representation is brought to its apocalyptic climax by the versatile American theatrician Robert Wilson. Wilson's oeuvre is so astounding in its variety and in its prodigiously imaginative content that it is difficult to pigeonhole his works into any extant category. It is ever transgressive, like the amorphous postmodern art itself. Wilson started his career in the 1960s when New York was emerging as the new center of a cauldron of artistic experimentation. It was out of this milieu, there emerged forms like Happenings, postmodern dance, performance art, Warhol's movies and so on. Wilson however prefers not to be called a child of the era of the artistic experiments of the 1960s, but as someone who came out of it.

Virginia Woolf's statement that "On or about December 1910 human character changed" (Woolf 320) was imprecise in a sense, as it was not a clear and decisive transition but the beginning of an evolutionary process that was to continue for many more decades. The old self disappeared; it was relegated to the trashcan of history. The change occurred primarily in the way we perceived language. Artists recognized a gaping hole in the sense of reality represented by language. Hence they sought to interrogate the validity of language as means of representation. One of the genres that underwent radical changes consequent upon this reappraisal is theatre, as theatre is a quintessential field of representations. What followed was a series of experiments in theatrical representations. In the western front this was spearheaded by two figures, namely Bertolt Brecht who questioned ideological construction and Samuel Beckett who explored the formal devices of theatrical representations.

Beckett's theatre ruptured the notions of narrativity, temporality, characterization and visuality, besides exploring the potential of space. However, Beckett's effort was only the beginning of a major revolution in theatre. It was Robert Wilson who worked it to the finest shape. Incidentally Wilson was an admirer of Beckett, especially about the way Beckett used language in theatre. In the early part of his career Wilson even wanted to direct Beckett's Happy Days. Like Beckett, Wilson interrogated the limits of representation by pushing the theatrical frame to its limits.

Like Beckett's theatre it was metatheatrical, reflecting on its own apparatus of communication, on its own codes. Wilson's deconstruction of theatre comes in six major areas – the subversion of language, the problematisation of narrative, the rupturing of temporality, the decentering of subjectivity, the plurivocality of meaning as well as in the re-writing of the stage space.

Logos Ruptured

Arthur Holmberg in his monumental work, The Theatre of Robert Wilson remarks:

For the past two thousand years Western theatre has never cut its umbilical cord to the word. In the *Poetics* Aristotle discusses drama like a philosopher without eyes, and theatre is usually taught as a literary genre. Not surprising in a logocentric culture that privileges the verbal over the visual, associating language with reason and gendering it male, and associating the visual with the irrational and gendering it female (48-49).

The inadequacy of language in capturing life has always been plaguing writers and thinkers for a long time. Hence we find writers like Flaubert talking about the wrestling with the 'cracked kettle'. The development of cultural theories by the second half of the twentieth century has rendered the position of language still more problematic. The poststructuralist insights into the formation of discourses have

revealed language to be a weapon to control and subjugate. It has taken the aura out of language, and found it a social construction: its codes being arbitrary and conventional. Wilson upstages the theatre that is dominated by the word. In its place he offers a theatre where the visual is hierarchized above the aural. Thus the tendency that was inaugurated by Beckett finds its flowering in Wilson. On Wilson's subversion of the use of language in theatre Holmbert comments, that it was a "Copernican revolution" (49). Language ceased to be the center of the theatrical universe.

Wilson's methods of relegating language are manifold. In Deafman Glance for instance, he avoids the use of language entirely. If Beckett discovered the eloquence of silence, Wilson perfected it into an art. Eugene Ionesco, after seeing the play expressed astonishment at the way silence spoke for hours. Another interesting way in which Wilson undermines language in theatre is by converting words into images literally. He uses them on drops, program covers, and posters. His attention is on language itself, its brute physicality. On the backdrop they form a visual rhythm (See figure 5, 6). Such a presentation of language, as in concrete poetry blocks the linear or temporal progression of language and focuses on simultaneity and multiplicity of possible relationships. A third method is to focus on the pure rhythm of the speech in which the materiality of the speech as sound is heightened. What we find here is the privileging of the signifier over the signified. Words cease to function as symbols and become objects – the referent is evaporated

into physical sound. Wilson's habit of working meticulously with the actors' voice in order to get the color, the pitch, the duration and the accent he wants is significant in this respect.



Figure 5

A scene from A Letter for Queen Victoria.

The visual scheme in the backdrop consists of letters

Language is a factor that binds society into a coherent whole. It is dialogic in this sense. In Wilson's practice the dialogic quality of speech is often removed. He often instructs his actors to respond to the speeches in a fashion of playing ping-pong, allowing the words to fly past them. Through this he breaks the feature of language as a socially integrating factor. Much of the language that Wilson uses is found language. The de-contextualization of it throws into relief the precariousness of meaning. Here too the spectator is forced to think about the materiality of language.

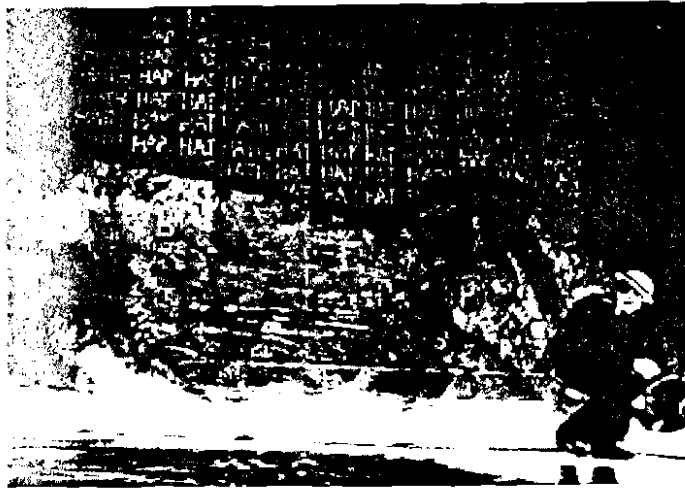


Figure 6

A scene from A Letter for Queen Victoria.

His penchant for long sentences, long tirades, opalescent words, the extreme reductionism, as in Beckett, are other important devices to subvert language. Often one finds in his theatre words being drowned out by other noises. Here language gets evaporated in a cloud of sonic dust. In When We Dead Awaken it is the loud industrial sounds that submerges the speech. In Alcestis one finds him deliberately drowning the speeches using recorded voices.

Disjunction

One of Wilson's important contributions to theatre is the disjunction of theatrical codes. Layers of codes are placed against one another in his plays. Often the visual and verbal tracks run in mutual contradiction. The audience is confronted



Figure 7

A scene from CIVILwarS.

Multiple visuals are juxtaposed in the multimedia theatre event

with multiple realities simultaneously. While the stunning visuals of the trompe-l'oeil tradition he creates on the stage underscores the abstract register of the stage, the series of denarrativising elements destroy whatever association one reads in them (see fig 7).

Through the technique of disjunction Wilson dramatizes how we impose a mental construct which we call reality, on the multifarious and dissonant stimuli bombarding our mind from without. Word and image create our world. By placing them in contradiction Wilson highlights the arbitrary and inadequate nature of all representations.



Figure 8

A scene from The American Repertory Theatre production of Ibsen's When We Dead Awaken (1991) directed by Robert Wilson

Another effect of disjunction is that it draws attention to the art object as art object. Here theatre reflects on its own means of representation and signification. On Wilson's stage both the word and the image are arbitrary and they are placed in contradiction. Whatever meaning we read is our own mental construct. His theatre, in other words, teases our mental ordering of reality.

Holmberg remarks:

The dialectic he sets in motion between realism and fantasy is not innocent: it violates our assumptions about how the universe works (see figure 8). A flight into pure fantasy does not threaten as much as a juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar. By juxtaposing the real and the bizarre, the normal

and the abnormal, Wilson creates tension. By confronting the audience with discordant realities taking place simultaneously, he dramatizes how we mobilize subjective interpretations to fabricate our sense of reality (180).

Semantic Openness

As mentioned earlier Wilson does not follow texts in the conventional sense. The traditional theatre treats stage language as a shining forth in visual language the words on the text. For Wilson a text is only a context to generate further meanings. It is a form of *langue* in the Saussurean sense. Like the *langue* that can generate an infinite number of utterances and ideolects, a dramatic text can generate an infinite number of concrete performances that are dissimilar. None of which remains definitive. Like speech, performance is contingent. The visual text of Wilson works magnify the plurivocality of meaning. Holmbert comments, "Wilson's theatre militates against the imposition of a single, theological interpretation. Wilson's theatre dramatizes the coexistence of different and opposed meanings" (92).

His stage language conforms to the semantic openness he intends for his works. As mentioned earlier, on his stage speech collapses. Words that are about to form sentences collapse into silence. Signs refuse to signify. Stories refuse to tell themselves.

While working with texts by other playwrights, or adaptations, Wilson does not take any attempt at 'fidelity' to the author's purported intentions. For him any

attempt at keeping fidelity creates a dead work. Therefore he removes all possible interpretational sediments from his reading. What he attempts is not an illustration of the texts but the illumination of it.

Narrative

Wilson's theatre is spatial in nature. Consisting of a series of astonishingly life-like, moving pictures or *tableaux vivants*, his theatre re-writes our traditional notion of plot. It is one in which the suspense to see the next thing is replaced by a pleasure in this thing, for as long as it takes to happen. The fundamental experience is a sense of being.

Just as he fragments speech, he breaks down narrative too. This is achieved through a non-linear narrative technique. On his stage several strands of narratives vie simultaneously. Each of them attempts to register itself on the visual sphere of the spectator. In Einstein on the Beach, for instance, a number of narrative fragments cross, crash and collide on the stage. I was sitting on my patio this guy appeared I thought I was hallucinating consists of several strands of incomplete narratives. A Letter of Queen Victoria affronts our expectations and defers meaning in a carnival of contradictions. Through the simultaneous presentation of mutually contesting signs Wilson is presenting before the spectator the choice of signs to subjectively fabricate his/her own interpretation of the text. Thus as Holmberg says, "The

reassuring, mechanical universe invented by Newton and governed by the rational laws gives way to a revelation of mystery” (180).

The absence of a narrative destabilizes our epistemological assumptions - the legitimacy of what we know. The conflicting narrative threads indicate conflicting truths. Wilson quips, “I’m an artist not a philosopher. I don’t make meanings. I make art. The responsibility of an artist is not to say what something means, but to ask ‘What does it mean?’ The only reason to do a play is because you don’t understand it”(as quoted by Holmberg 61).

Temporality reworked

Wilson’s productions are notoriously long. The duration of his production KA Mountain is 7 days and 7 nights. The spectators come and go. The play never ends. He problematizes the temporality of performance too. The use of extreme slow-motion effect is a regular feature in his works (See clip 1, Appendix 1). Interestingly one does not find anything abnormal about it. In the post-meditized world of ours such slow-motion effects are nothing new. Our regular exposure to such slow motion replays of sports events in particular, on television have conditioned our sensibility to such sights. In short, Wilson’s works proclaim the death of rationalist time.

As in Beckett, in the works of Wilson too time is unspecific and ahistorical. One can see a clear distinction between mechanical time and interior time. The interior time, like Bergson’s notion of *duree*, is unquantifiable. Wilson’s slow motion

effects dramatize time, 'not as discrete units but as a flowing succession of states, melting invisibly, indivisibly into each other'(Holmberg 11). He presents time as consciousness. And indeed what is characteristic of consciousness is that it fuses the past, the present and the future.

Subjectivity and Character

As in the last plays of Beckett, Wilson's theatre is devoid of characterization in the conventional sense. His 'characters' are chiefly performers engaged in physical activities. Sometimes he breaks characters into separate selves as in the case of *Hamletmachine* in which Ophelia is split into four performers each with her own



Figure 9

*A scene from Hamletmachine directed by Robert Wilson.
Ophelia is represented by four actresses*

distinct characteristic traits (see fig 9). There is no one person or one thing. In the place of a transcendental 'I' we have a series of subject positions, discontinuous and drifting away from any notion of a central entity known as self. In When We Dead Awaken he divided the part of Irene between two performers of two different ethnic origins in order to bring about a total disjunction between the selves. What Wilson demonstrates through this is how the unity of the self is broken.

Thus what we find in the second major strand of postmodernist theatre is characterised by a divorce from the traditional theatre's notions of the stage as a space of representing the familiar. The postmodernist theatre is a theatre of the sublime in the Lyotardian sense, which "transcends every faculty of sense, taunts us with a glimpse of inaccessible plenitude and leaves us with the impossible self-conscious wrestle with words in the hopeless struggle to embody it". Theatricians like Beckett and Robert Wilson attempt at capturing the complex and often bizarre experiences into a realm of theatre. Theatre since Beckett has been one that is introspective, looking at its own modes of representation. This is a significant moment as it has been epoch-making.

Postmodernism and the Indian stage

C.S. Francies “Reality as construct: representation and meaning in post-modernist theatre with special reference to the works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht ” Thesis. Department of School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, 2003

Chapter - 5

Chapter 5

Postmodernism and the Indian stage

As discussed earlier, postmodernity is considered to be essentially a western experience. However due to the explosive growth in communication technology and the immense popularity of television and the internet the world is coming closer than ever before. Hence the fall out of a cultural phenomenon in any part of the world should reach the other parts of globe within a very short time. Besides, for historical and political reasons a country like India cannot avoid partaking in the western experience. A large population in India is familiar with the English language and in almost all the states of India it is considered the second language in the school and university curriculum.

The case of the phenomenon of postmodernism also was not different. During the nineteen seventies and eighties itself the academics and the cultural critics have been discussing the evolution of a new perception in the world. The epicenter of such discussions was chiefly the academic centers. Gradually, the cue was taken up by artists and writers. Thus, as early as in the late seventies and early eighties works of the postmodern genre began to appear in the subcontinent. As in the case of the west here too the works were of two strains. One focused on the resistant

branch of postmodern aesthetics and the other focused more on the stylistic aspects of it. While the former took up the issues related to post-coloniality, as well as the discourses of the marginalized groups like the women, the 'outcastes', the tribals etc., the latter experimented with the form.

One of the common methods of subverting the cultural canons in the field of theatre is the re-reading of the canonical texts from the past in the context of the contemporary mise-en-scene and highlight how certain ideological or discursive positions are valorized over the others.

The following discussion takes up two noted works that gained much critical acclaim in the south of India. One is Saketham, the first in the trilogy written by C. N. Srikantan Nair, directed by Abhilash Pillai and produced by the School of Drama and Fine Arts, the department of theatre, University of Calicut and the other is Chathankattu, directed by Prof. Chandradasan and produced by Bhasabheri Theatre Group (now known as Lokadharmi), Tripunithura, Cochin.

Saketham

Saketam is the first of the trilogy written by C.N. Sreekantan Nair based on the Indian classic Ramayana. The play depicts the conflict of Dasaradha, the king of Ayodhya who in his old age is forced to deny the crown prince the throne in order to keep the promise he had made to one of his wives due to his infatuation for her. The play portrays the moment of retribution.

King Dasaradha had three wives of whom Kausalya was the queen consort. Her son Rama was the eldest of the king's offspring and natural successor of the kingdom. However, many years before, the king had made a promise to his wife, Kaikeyi that her son Bharata would be made his successor. Apparently, the king was so infatuated by her beauty that he made this promise to her forgetting the fact that it was against the royal tradition and was unjust to both his queen and the virtuous prince Rama.

As the play begins we find Ayodhya getting ready for the coronation ceremony of the prince Rama. Obviously, it is a moment of great pride for his mother Kaikeyi, who does not hide her joy as she feels that the king has been making amends for his neglect of her through this decision of his. As the preparations are in full swing in the whole kingdom, we find one unhappy soul, Kaikeyi. It is Mandhara, the waiting woman of Kaikeyi who reminds her of the royal betrayal. Though reluctant at first, the selfish mother in her wakes up. She approaches the king and demands that her son be made the successor. The king has no choice but to yield to her demand. He realizes that he is no longer in command. His present self is only a ghost of the powerful, lusty Dasaradha of the past. This is the moment in which the king realizes how all his powers have failed him. He feels that all this is due to the sin of his youth. His attempts to shake off the past are of no avail. All the past misadventures revisit him. As the play draws to a close we find a Dasaradha who is

purged of his carnal self. After having given up his earthly glories he gets ready for the final journey.

The 2000 production of the play in the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, was directed by Abhilash Pillai, one of the most noted younger directors from Asia, who is currently a faculty in the National School of Drama, New Delhi.

Pillai's reading of Saketam has been deeply political. Sreekantan Nair's text valorizes the religious discourse and takes for granted the power of the clerical authority over the political authority. The two priests of the court, Vasistan and Sumandrar, control the political decisions. The play's opening with Sumandrar's order summoning the court attendants, is in itself a suggestion of the power the religious authorities wield in the royal palace. The text takes for granted the religious authority. In act two Sumandrar justifies political manipulations as "God's will". Throughout the play, one finds the all-pervading presence of the religious discourse of sin and retribution.

Pillai's reading of Saketham interrogates the political discourse that underlies the play. It raises questions such as the role of clerics in the political decisions of a country; how the idea of sin imposes itself on the conscience of men, including a mighty ruler like Dasaradha. The stagecraft itself is designed to signify the power relations in the play. The position occupied by Sumandrar and Vasistan is much higher to that of all the others. They position themselves in the swings hanging high on either side of the stage. They hardly come down. The swing also represents a

life of leisure. On the other hand, the king's royal bed is a maneuverable round table that turns itself out to be a bed of thorns and a funeral pyre. The two constitute a sharp contrast.

Pillai uses the stage purely as a performance space where the performers enact roles. The notion of an illusionary 'other place' where the story was taking place is almost entirely removed. We do not find the use of conventional type of sets to suggest the palace of the king of Ayodhya. What we see is a functional set. The bedchamber, the bathing space, the court, private room, etc., are all telescoped into one set of properties and setting. All the properties are also functional and not realistic in their character (see fig 10). Thus we have only the platea left. The actors



Figure 10

A scene from Saketham

take their positions all over the auditorium. Some enter the stage from the spectators' space; some others from the wings and some suspended in the air. The action is

scattered among the platform in the center stage, the maneuverable round table and the spaces separated by lighting.

Actors' kinesics is another noticeable aspect of Pillai's production. There is hardly a movement that is strictly realistic in its tradition. The primary purpose of the movements and gestures appear to be the creation of the emotional pitch of the play. The slow motion effects in the opening scene of the play reminds one of the kinesic techniques used by Beckett and Robert Wilson in their productions (See clipping 2). In another scene we find the fast rendering of dialogues. This is suggestive of the emotional build up of the dramatic situation. Much of the kinesic units carry the potential of multiple interpretations. Besides these, one can often see Pillai using the technique of disjunction, in which kinesics was positioned in conflict with the emotional content of the scene.



Figure 11

*A scene from Saketham
Kaikeyi's character being enacted by a male actor*

The wild gesticulations and the vehement speeches that recur in the performance adds to the acoustic pattern of the play (See clip 3). A great deal of the choreographic work would remind one of postmodern dance with multiple layers of signification. The costume design also is special. The male-female pattern in dressing is reworked in the play. Further, in the casting, the male-female binary was reversed. The male roles of Rama and Lakshmana are done by female performers while the female roles such as Kausalya, Kaikeyi, Manthara, and Sita are performed by male performers (See fig. 11). The male actors who performed the roles of Kausalya and Kaikeyi enter the stage as males in their innerwear and change to the female roles by putting on the costume of women in a ritualistic manner on the stage itself. One could see a subversion of gender difference. Besides, the directorial move to have the actors do the costume change on the stage itself makes the subversion pronounced.

Although it was not stylized, the diction is also to a large extent varied from the realistic tradition. The director's attempt at removing the psychological realism in the construction of character as well as in the enactment of it is quite evident in the diction. The costume of the chorus is not at all 'period' as one would say. In spite of the fact that the setting of the play is ancient India, the chorus appears in modern costume. The positioning of the characters is another significant element. The level each character occupies suggests their stature in the thematic structure of the play.

Pillai often attempts an intertextual style with the incorporation of visuals from his other productions, as Robert Wilson is wont to do. In the production of Saketham too he has used elements from his other productions. As in the case of Wilson's adaptations, in the production of the play, Pillai shifts the focus of the performance from the illustration of Sreekantan Nair's text to the illumination of the stage possibilities of the text in generating an infinite number of readings.

Thus in almost all the departments of the play such as the use of space, properties, the kinesics of the actors, costumes, the visual language and above all in the reading of the play, the director displays elements that are typical of the postmodern dramaturgy.

Pillai's reading of the play was a significant one in the theatre scene in India. The travails of a king who lacks will and is controlled by the diktats of religious authorities has a lot in common with the contemporary Indian socio-political situation. Ayodhya itself is a symbol of a perturbing power politics in Indian socio-political stage. The production was also significant in terms of its aesthetics, for the performance language he adopted contained several strands of a postmodernist aesthetics.

Chathankattu

Chathankattu (the tempest by the mischievous spirit) is a tradaption of William Shakespeare's work The Tempest. The play was staged by Bhasabheri Theatre

Group, Thripunithura, Cochin, in 1997. The play was adapted and directed by Prof. Chandradasan. The production interrogates the ideological content of the Shakespearean play. It is a native's reading of a colonialist text.

Traditionally, Shakespeare's The Tempest has been treated as a pastoral drama in the tradition of romance or as one of his last plays that eulogize the spirit of forgiveness. However, unlike in the case of a pastoral drama in which the shepherd or the representative of nature is treated as untouched by the corruption of the civilized, in Shakespeare's play, the one who is close to nature is presented as the personification of savagery. The main opposition in the play is primarily between Nature and Art. Here Nature stands for that pole of mankind which is bereft of nurture – "divorced from grace, ...the senses without mind, ...without access to the art that makes love out of lust; ... ignorant of gentleness of humanity"(Kermode, xxv) while Art here is the benevolent art, representing "man's power over the created world and over himself" "(Kermode, xxiv).

Beneath the veneer of the pastoral play lies strong political statement that valorizes the western notions of culture, humanity, love, grace, etc. Moreover, the play authenticates the white man's natural right to educate, rule and be the master of the historically colonized people.

Like The Tempest, Chathankattu is set in an island inhabited by 'subhuman tribals' who have mastery over the art of magic. When the play opens there is

already a new master for the island, Prospero. He and his daughter landed in this island by 'accident'. In the island, Prospero meets Azhakan Chathan who was held captive in a magic spell by a powerful evil magician of the island. By the superior magical powers that he learnt from books Prospero releases Azhakan Chathan and in return Azakan Chathan agrees to be the trustworthy handyman of Prospero until Prospero achieves the goal of his life. Using Azhakan Chathan's skills Prospero soon becomes the master of the island. Interestingly, unlike Shakespeare's Ariel, Azhakan Chathan (the equivalent of Ariel), is represented by a chorus (see figure 12). This is significant as it exemplifies how the colonizer has made use of a section of the local population in colonizing a people. There is another important character in the play Karumadan Chathan, the prospective ruler of the island. Prospero has tamed him too, 'with love, education, and punishment' (production brochure).



Figure 12

*A scene from Chathankattu
Ariel is represented by the chorus*

The drama begins with the tempest raised by Azhakan Chathan at the behest of Prospero. In the storm, the ship in which Prospero's enemies were sailing is wrecked but they are all washed ashore safely. Through a series of events Prospero brings his enemies to their knees and reconciliation is wrought at the end of the play. Interestingly, however, almost everyone among the whites who sets foot on the island has a colonial instinct. Each of them in his/her own way thinks of converting the island into a colony and taking the inhabitants of the island as slaves to be sold in the European market.

There are quite a few interesting twists given to the original Shakespearean text. Before returning to the homeland Prospero breaks his magic wand into two and bestows them between Azhakan Chathan and Karumadan Chathan. This is a metaphorical translation of the Indian experience of colonization. Quintessentially, India was divided between Jenna and Nehru, leaving the people of the subcontinent to a new destiny of abandonment. Another interesting addition is that two of the foreigners, Trinculo and Stephano choose to stay back in the island. They are not the most perfect of men. One is a court jester and other is a drunkard. This reading is a telling comment on those Europeans who chose to stay back in India to share in the destiny with the natives.

The Bhasabheri production looks into how the Shakespearean text valorizes the colonial discourse by making the colonizer's version of reality as the

'commonsensical' and 'natural' order of things. The production also problematizes issues relating to power, freedom and knowledge – how the colonizer succeeds in convincing the colonized that his culture, his morality, his religion, his language and his knowledge to be the true one.

Apart from the postcolonial reading of the Shakespearean text, the Bhasabheri production attempts at subverting the western canons of the stage too. The acting style, the costume, the music, scenic setting were all given an ethnic coloring (see fig. 13).



Figure 13

A scene from Chathankattu

The Bhasabheri production of the Shakespeare's The Tempest was not the first of its kind taking place in this part of India. There had been two notable productions before this. One was by the noted director Kavalam Narayana Paniker,

and the other was by the Finnish director Maya Tangberg. Paniker's production, thoroughly Indian as it was in its dramatic style, did not seem to aim at giving any strong political reading to the Shakespearean text. Maya's production was out and out political. It interrogated the Shakespearean text's cultural politics. However, it was a westerner's reading of the process of colonization.

Perhaps what distinguishes Prof. Chandradasan's reading of the play is that it could look at the whole series of events from the angle of the 'salvaged men' of the Shakespearean text. In an interview with the researcher, the director said, "What struck me about the Shakespearean text, apart from its colonial discourse, is its silence about Trincolo and Stephano. Their spirit seems to be still present in the subcontinent, enjoying the fights among the various groups for political power".

Conclusion

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Conclusion

Conclusion

Drawing a map of the contemporary practices in theatre is fraught with manifold problems. In the first place, one cannot talk about a theatre that can represent the theatre traditions of all the communities in the world. Secondly, one can find the simultaneous existence of a variety of theatrical practices within a given community, necessitating the use of multiple aesthetics in order to read them. Besides, the very idea of 'theatre' itself is a constantly changing one. Yet, it is worthwhile to attempt at a grammar with which one can make sense of the Babel of the theatrical languages we find today. This study is basically one of that kind - a cartographer's work.

The trajectory of the western theatre until late modernism can be traced with relative ease, as the basic canons of it remain more or less stable. It was fundamentally Aristotelian in its aesthetics. With its focus on narrative, the centrality of character, illusionism of the stage space, unity of time, and above all, its positioning of the spectator as a passive recipient, the Aristotelian theatre remained the representative medium of an intelligible world. The revelations made by the various branches of knowledge such as physics, biology, psychology and social sciences radically reshaped the perceptions of the twentieth century man. The universe ceased

to be the intelligible, coherent, and stable place it was thought to be. What we call modernism was the outcome of this historical moment. Modernism represents the endeavor to rewrite aesthetic canons in accordance with this changed perception of reality. Naturally, theatre too became part of this process. What resulted was an explosion of movements and styles. By the post-war years, this cauldron of divergent tendencies boiled down to a solidified attitude, characterized by the consciousness that reality is but a construct. This attitude reflected itself in the problematisation of two key areas of the stage. They are the representational side of theatrical communication and the meaning-making mechanism of the stage. The whole gamut of post-modernist theatre can be said to be informed by the problematisation of these areas.

This task of the post-modernist theatre was spearheaded by three map-makers, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht. Among them, Artaud poses a special problem for a researcher, as his vision of theatre is yet to find a complete physical manifestation. Although Artaud's vision remained esoteric and problematic in getting translated into theatrical practice, it has played a key role in shaping up the aesthetics of the post-modernist theatre.

Art in general, and theatre in particular, has always had a problematic relation to reality. This became a particularly troublesome one in the post-modernist theatre. What had hitherto been considered as neutral representations was found to be

mediated by ideological elements. Art was no more a transparent window to life but a collaborator of the dominant ideological forces in the society. This revelation lies at the heart of the works of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht.

Brecht's contributions came basically in the form of analyzing the ideological properties of the various discourses including the discourse of theatre. For him, the very form of the traditional ('illusionistic') theatre carried ideological contents hidden in it. Therefore he attempted at re-writing the existing canons of theatrical communication. The result was 'epic' theatre. Brecht's theatre is founded on the subversion of the three key constituents of the Aristotelian theatre, namely its attempt at rendering the stage illusion seamless, its notion of the organic unity of the stage and its framing of the stage as an 'other' place. Epic theatre flaunts the artificiality of the stage. The stage mechanisms were made obvious to the spectators. His intention was to wake up the spectator to the reality. In the place of narratives, he introduced episodic scenes, forcing the spectator to be an active participant in the production of meaning. The acting was overtly demonstrative; the Brechtian actor 'played' the role of the character and was no longer the one who displayed his skills as an actor. The framing of the stage was often broken by the actors who frequently communicated directly with the spectators. Through these devices Brecht reworked the Aristotelian theatre's illusionism, its idea of organic unity and its particular discourses into world-making discourses.

Beckett is another practitioner on the western stage who made key contributions to the re-working of the Aristotelian aesthetics. Like Brecht, Beckett too was suspicious of stage representations. However, he was concerned more with the ability of the stage to carry a unified meaning. Therefore, he problematised the meaning-making mechanism of the stage. Beckett's stage was 'stage' in the literal sense – a construct. He got rid of the idea of the stage being an 'other' place. It was merely space. Therefore he often divided it into zones using lights in order to give abstract effects. In his later plays especially, we find him converting the plateau into the locus. On his stage there were only performers and no characters. He often removed the expressive potential of the actors, reducing them to less than human beings in order to suggest that they were no longer the stable, willful, 'Individual' of the previous ages. His plots had no narratives in the conventional sense. There was no development, nor a denouement. The spectator's position was equally problematised. He was not offered any definite meaning. It was never final and conclusive. The meaning of his works always 'quivered' in the Barthesian terminology. The temporal dimension was also absent in his plays. The spectator was never given an idea where the action was taking place and when. Thus Beckett's theatre was, perhaps, even more anti-Aristotelian than that of Brecht's in its deconstruction of the illusionism, organic unity and the framing of the stage.

Looking back at the works of Beckett and Brecht in the light of the cultural

theories of the nineteen seventies and eighties, one finds that they were the true path-makers of the later series of theoretical positions - which we call postmodernism - in the field of art, particularly in theatre. One can discern a clear Brechtian stamp in the cultural discourses of the de-centered or marginalized groups chiefly in the oppositional discourses. The influence of Beckett has been all pervading in the later practices in theatre. The formal devices he introduced in theatre, notably his explorations of the potential of the stage as stage, have been epoch-making.

One clear inheritor of this legacy of Beckett (also of Artaud) is the well-known American theatre practitioner Robert Wilson. In Wilson's treatment of the stage space, the narrative, characterization, temporality and its tendency to get rid of language, we find the culmination of Beckett's programme. The postmodernist features such as giving importance to process rather than to the product, disjunction, playfulness, semiotic openness, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, spatiality etc., are all evident in the works of these practitioners.

The post-globalised, post-mediatised world of today is characterized by a convergence of cultures. The shock waves of a seismic shift in the cultural field anywhere in the world reaches the other parts of the world before long. Besides, for historical reasons, the cultural constructions of the west have dominated the world for the past two hundred years, and have played a hegemonic role. Therefore, it is but natural that the ripples of a cultural wave in the west should reach the other

parts of the world. The Indian theatre is a case in point. Here too the postmodernist influences have caught on the stage practices. This is particularly so in the case of theatre institutes. The two productions discussed in the study illustrate it. The School of Drama (University of Calicut), production of Saketam, directed by Abhilash Pillai problematises the political discourse contained in Sreekantan Nair's play. Moreover, Pillai's production reworks the theatrical space entirely. Lyotard's suggestion about the role of the academic centers in the shaping of discourses is, to a great extent, true here too, for there is a general tendency among practitioners to take their cues from such centers. Prof. Chandradasan's Chathankattu produced in Cochin, is one among the many re-readings in the post-colonial mise-en-scene given to Shakespeare's Tempest by practitioners in India. These productions testify the influence of the postmodernist theories on contemporary productions in this part of the world.

It is evident that the theatrical practices all over the world have taken a distinctly postmodernist turn since Brecht and Beckett. The outstanding features of contemporary practices are the problematisation of representations and the rupturing of the stage frame. This has had two important consequences. One is at the level of content and the other is at the level of form.

The first is that which results from the deconstruction of representations. The discourses of the 'other', the marginalized, the minoritarian, or the de-centered

has become the order of the day. This has definitely helped in making the voices of the marginalized or the subaltern heard. However it is to be suspected whether it has taken an extreme U-turn. The minoritarian and the subversive discourses have a tendency to re-center themselves with the aid of theory. This is something that the theorists of deconstruction did not perhaps desire for. The practices of some of the feminist groups, the gays, and ethnic communities have only added to the chaos. If art has a representational value, it has to be aimed at making the world a better place to live. Instead, a great number of the subversive discourses have been instrumental in building up hostility among various ethnic, religious and cultural communities. Theatre, being a medium that directly appeals to the public, became handy to the followers of subversive doctrines.

The second consequence of the postmodernist turn in theatre is the de-framing of the idea of theatre itself. The process that was inaugurated by Brecht seems to have played itself out. The experimental theatre of the nineteen eighties and the nineties have been so consistent in its breaking of the frame that the broken frame itself has become the frame today. What we have is a de-narrativised, spatialised and the semically open stage. This tendency to break the stage frame has in some way led to a dispersion of the genre that is already threatened by the electronic media. This is a moment of crisis. There seems to be a need to return to the basics in order to revitalize the art of theatre.

Apart from all these, the postmodern theories' exploding of the notion of the author has had a unique impact in the field of theatre. The species called playwright is on the verge of extinction. Armed with theory, the modern 'director' has nearly banished the playwright from the contemporary stage.

Scope for Further Research

The study undertaken here is only a curtain raiser. There seems to be a need to look into a reverse process that is set in motion by the extreme subversive positions taken by some of the postmodernist discourses. It is characterized by a return to narrativity, and illusionism. Yet it does not belong to the naively realistic kind. It is a self-conscious theatre, popular and technology-oriented. The works like that of Max Frisch, Tom Stoppard and Woody Allen, the intercultural and/or multicultural productions of Peter Brook, McRuvie, Ong Ken Sen and others can be seen as a part of this process.

Another area that we need to look into is the role of the electronic media in equipping the faculties of comprehension and modifying the taste. The practice of contemporary theatricians to make use of technology in order to create magic effects on stage, as well as the audience's free reception of such practices is an indication of how the electronic media have been shaping the aesthetic taste of the spectators. The audience reception to the works of Robert Wilson and Ong Ken Sen bear testimony to this fact.

Theatre has always played a pioneering role in setting artistic tastes. Hence it is legitimate to enquire whether the signs we see in contemporary theatre are that of a new aesthetic phase. Are we entering into a phase of late postmodernism in theatre characterized by a centripetal movement of cultures? is it going to be a rhizomatic cultural matrix in which, each cultural community is given due recognition? Or is it going to be a technology-oriented theatre that is controlled by the market forces?

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