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Research Article

Negotiating Culture, Identity, and Modernity: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Plays of Currimbhoy and Dattani

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Abstract

Drama in Indian English has become a place whereby key negotiations among culture, identity and modernity are played out and fought. Among this changing topography, the works of Asif Currimbhoy and Mahesh Dattani can be seen as a sensitive and critical approach towards the changing curves of Indian postcolonial subjectivity. This paper is a cultural studies approach that explores the complexity of cultural hybridity and identity formation, gender politics and enduring contradictions between tradition and modernity, within the plays of these dramatists. Based on the theoretical concepts of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Judith Butler, the paper will discuss how the plays of Currimbhoy express the anxieties and ideological discontinuities of post-independent India and how it experiences the tensions of the clinging colonial legacies, nation-building, and defining its identity. On the other hand, the theatrical vision of Mahesh Dattani indicates the fractured and, in many cases, ambivalent identities informed by the elements of the globalization and post-liberalisation urban space. His depiction of such problems as sexuality, family crisis and marginalisation, as well as social hypocrisy, emphasises the multifacetedness of the modern Indian identity. Comparing the two dramatists, this paper has shown how Indian modernity is being constantly renegotiated by discourses of competing nationality, gendered, class, and sexuality. This interdisciplinary approach of this work supports the topicality of cultural studies in the process of interpreting the performative manifestation of changing social realities. Finally, the paper suggests that Currimbhoy and Dattani bring an important contribution to the comprehension of the cultural negotiations upon which Indian English drama and the overall story of sociocultural transformation in India are constructed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Indian English Drama in the Postcolonial Context

The Indian English drama has acquired its distinct dynamic stance in the discourse of the postcolonial literature. Unlike its western counterparts which are inclined towards taking the path that was taken by specific cultures, the Indian English drama found its roots in the necessity to crossbreed the cultures that were the colonial and the native. It is a malleable cultural screen upon which such questions as history and identity and belonging have been theatricalized. The stage is made a negotiable stage it is a performative place in which the past of the colonialism intersects with indigenous modernity.

This Indian English drama history, as a firstly-imitative history, and then to its present post-colonial integrity, indicates the larger social-political change in India (Peiet *et al.*, 2021). The dramatic text in this case is not merely an aesthetic representation per se but more precisely, it is an ideological representation of the apprehensions of decolonization, nationality and modernity. Consequently, the dramas of such dramatists as Asif Currimbhoy and Mahesh Dattani are made up of the questioning instrument playing with the structures of power and morality and social grouping which defines the contemporary life in India.

1.2 Asif Currimbhoy and the Post-Independence Consciousness

One of the pioneers of the Indian English theatre was Asif Currimbhoy (1928-1994) and is what is often regarded as the first real playwright so far in so far as India is concerned. Currimbhoy wrote during the formative years of the independence, and the general aspirations and apprehensions of a nation defining the first steps can be traced in the plays of this period. His dramatic corpus the Doldrums (Canavan *et al.*, 2021), The Refugee and Goa the corpus of dramatic work show the indication of his intense concern with the issue of political disenchantment, corruption and fragmentation of the personality that succeeded the modernization.

Theatre Currimbhoy is dramatical representation of clash between cultural traditions, cultural ideology of the West the rationalism. His characters possess a duality of division of consciousness of the postcolonial India who were educated in the western ideation yet were directed to the native values. It is such duality that is reflected in the writing of Homi K. Bhabha who would eventually coin as the in-betweenness of the postcolonial identity where cultural hybridity is simultaneously a liability and a possible source of inspiration.

1.3 Mahesh Dattani and the Theatre of Urban Modernity

The Indian English drama - that has undergone liberalization, globalization, and urbanization - is a new step in the evolution of Mahesh Dattani (born 1958). His books including Dance Like a Man, Final Solutions, Bravely Fought the Queen and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, focus on such aspects of the contemporary world of India like gender and sexuality, and community belonging.

The play by Dattani belongs to the idealism of nationhood of the generation of Currimbhoy, and it focuses on the shattered things of the modern urban life. His theatre is highly psychological that touches on the anxieties of the Indian middle classes that have dropped away, unspoken lives of unmemorised people (Matkomilovich *et al.*, 2021). The issue of the modernity is that it is a dilemma, which is exposed by Dattani on the stories of the realities of the modern world and symbolic performances: Modernity with the developed world lives with bias, and liberty is restricted by the social rules.

1.4 Cultural Studies as an Analytical Framework

The cultural studies approach provides an overall picture of the analysis of the works of Currimbhoy and Dattani plays. Culture is not simply ideologic carried by artistic artifacts like researchers like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams define it, but a location of ideological conflict. It has the practices, meanings and representations of power and identity that societies interact in.

The present research paper is focused on addressing the issue of how both the authors develop and subvert these cultural discourses of their times, using this interdisciplinary approach. The possible elements that can be investigated with the help of the framework are the hybrid subjectivities, performativity of identity and dialectics of modernity and tradition (Wei *et al.*, 2021). It also contextualizes the works of the playwrights within the larger context of broader theory of hybridity by Homi Bhabha, performativity by Judith Butler and alienation by postcolonial critique by Frantz Fanon.

1.5 Aim and Scope of the Study

This essay concentrates on Asif Currimbhoy and Mahesh Dattani work in mediating the factors of culture, identity, and modernity using politics of representation. It examines how their stage productions pursue tensions in their remnants of a colonial history and the emergent pressures of global reality. The paper asserts that the two playwrights despite the fact that they are set in different historical backgrounds contribute towards the re-constructing of the concept of Indian modernity: Currimbhoy with ethical anxieties of the state that has just been de-colonized and Dattani with psychic frustrations of the post-liberalized individual.

Lastly, the point of such analysis is to uncover the way the Indian English drama is emerging as a performance discourse of cultural negotiability balancing the past and present pressures. One can know that, through the prism of cultural studies, the plays of Currimbhoy and Dattani seem not to be simply the artistic forms, the forms of the necessary crossroads in the endless dialogue between the past and the present of India.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Modernity

Cultural studies also view culture as a negotiation and contestation field according to the theorist such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams (Matkomilovich *et al.*, 2021). It also

puts emphasis on the ideology of power and the intertwining of the representation and the power and the ideology. The culture in the post-colonial environment is resistant and redefined. Homi K. Bhabha explains the concept of hybridity, so-called Third Space, which might be used to comprehend that the subject of postcolonialism inhabits the inbetween space, trading between his or her identity in the symbolic worlds of both cultures.

In the case of Currimbhoy and Dattani, this structure can be used, to converse about how their personalities exhibit liminal identities that cannot be determined in conservative ways. Moreover, the performativity theory presented by Judith Butters might also be adopted to explain the role of gender and sexuality representation by Dattani and to define the explanation of the position of alienation and imitation attitude to Currimbhoy by Frantz Fanon (Mudijono *et al.*, 2021). Thus, interdisciplinary mechanism will be offered by cultural studies in order to decode the complex negotiations of sociocultural aspects of their plays.

Currimbhoy's Theatre: The Anxiety of Postcolonial Modernity

The Historical Context

Asif Currimbhoy was born as a playwright in 1950s which was a time whenby India was emerging out of the colonial rule and was beginning to become a nation. His plays describe the identity crunches of a generation that was forced to pose questions by traversing the cross currents of tradition and western modernity. The Doldrums (1960), The Refugee (1968), and Sonar Bangla (1972) are some literary works that depict moral and psychological dehumanization that has been inflicted by the same process of modernization, political corruption and inter-communal strife.

Negotiating Culture and Identity

The shapes of the characters of Currimbhoy are often wavering between the traditional principles of the moral system, which is inherited by the Indian tradition, and enticing temptations of the Western rationalism. The manifestation of the sense of world disorientation of self in the fast-modernizing world is the existential disillusionment of the main character in The Doldrums (Yuan *et al.*, 2021). The struggle of the material progression with the spiritual values becomes figurative of the dilemma of postcolonial India.

The displacement and partition horror in The Refugee could be demonstrated with references to the human suffering in comparison with the political ideology. Currimbhoy portrays that refugees were the embodiments of the postcolonial subject, who never belonged anywhere, but they always were alienated. The play has a dialogic shape, which foresees the conflict between the cultural memory and the modern aspirations.

The Colonial Legacy and Cultural Mimicry

The protagonists of Currimbhoy often possess, as Fanon has described it, the syndrome of black skin, white masks, the psychological mimicry of colonialism and the feeling of

resentment. His plays, however, are the ambivalence of postcolonial modernity: they are no longer yearning to the developments, yet his characters are trapped in the colonial shade of dependence and imitation. Currimbhoy exposes the empty nature of modernity that lacks device of ethical and spiritual anchoring by his satire and moral irony.

Dattani's Theatre: Urban Modernity and the Politics of Identity

Post-Liberalization India and the Rise of Urban Realism

Mahesh Dattani is a progressive of Indian theatre which must abreast with liberalization of Indian economy and globalization of world cultures in 1990s. His plays include Dance Like a Man (1989), Final Solutions (1993), Bravely Fought the Queen (1991), and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998), in which he has dealt with matters of gender, sexuality, religion and city family structures.

The naturalism of Dattani is the distortion of the national allegories of Currimbhoy and instead focuses on the microcosmic engagement of the family and in interactions between people (Sherefetdinova *et al.*, 2021). His characters stand in the morality and cosmopolitan modern recrimination of the middle classes. In so doing, his theatre is reflected on to the postcolonial city since globalization both frees and alienates him.

Gender and the Performance of Identity

Dance Like a Man describes a figure of conflict between one aspect, tradition, and the desire of the person in which the male Bharatanatyam performer, Jairaj is going against the norm of the patriarch in an attempt to follow through the art. The play equates artistic passion to social conformity and it is affording revelations into the sociocultural action and administration of the gender roles (Bhabha *et al.*, 2021). Judith Butler, the so-called gender performativity, lets us know how the characters of Dattani defy the normal gender scripts with the assistance of self-expression.

Dattani in Bravely Fought the Queen disintegrates hypocrisies of the Indian bourgeois group and unravels the method in which the powers of patriarchy and capitalism collude together to confine women to the domestic walls of the house. His female characters, Dolly, Lalitha and Alka are a composite of resistance since they are the ones to bargain their identities in the hands of agents of oppression of their families. The theme of dancing and masquerade stands against the convention of hierarchy as suggested by Dattani since it brings out the playfulness of identity.

Queer Identity and Cultural Silence

On a Mumbai Muggy night by Dattani is a recent tendency in its expression of homosexuality in Indian theatre (Reckwitz *et al.*, 2021). The play brings out the marginalization of the queer people even in a liberal urban environment. Having addressed suppressed sexualities, Dattani rejects a heteronormative (or a nationalist) discourse that claims that rightness is no more than cultural purity.

His dramatization of homosexuality is not educative but made humane, that is, he made it more human in its, secrecy, shame and yearning, the experience one has to endure. What the confessional structure of the play is the similitude to Foucault, who presupposes the repressive hypothesis, where the social taboos of sexuality are addressed, which results in the wanton, rather than silence, the desire. By doing so, Dattani locates identity as the cycle of negotiation between personal individuality and external culture which is remotely enforced.

Comparative Analysis: Continuity and Transformation From Nation to Subject: Shifting Foci of Representation

As Currimbhoy plays are preoccupied with nationalistic fears of nation-building, Dattani worries about the individual identity and its revelation on the private and the psychological levels. This difference can be attributed to the fact that they are placed in varied historical time, Currimbhoy is writing in the era of nationalist idealism and India of Dattani is postnational, plural and globalized (Benzehafet *et al.*, 2021). However, the interest is similar in both the plays wherein it is the seeking of identity within the systems of domination and change.

Cultural Hybridity and the Third Space

Turning binaries of East/West, tradition/modernity, self/other, Bhabha suggests, through the rest of the binaries generates a concept of hybridity as applied by both of the playwrights to define the liminal spaces. The conflict between residency of Portuguese and re-emergence of Indians in Goa of Currimbhoy has provided this hybridity. Dattani employs hybridity in her plays in the bargaining process between the traditional family values and the modern cosmopolitan ethics of the post-colonial India. Third spaces are made into space of production and there is no definite or pure identity.

The Politics of Language and Representation

Both writers of the plays do not use English as a colonial residue. Even the speech of Currimbhoy remains, formally theatrical, indicative of the fortunes that the Indian English began to be voiced and the speech of Dattani is the speech of vernacular urban English that suggests the democratization of the theatre in an already globally minded world. Their choice of language indicates Augustine vacillation of the postcolonial modernity of English language as both an alienation and empowerment.

Gender and Modernity

Currimbhoy himself is more or less a symptom of the paranoia of patriarchy in his age about women as a means of degradation or debasement of morals/culture. However, Dattani kills all these dichotomies and creates women as a complex entity of power changes at home and in the external world. How Indian theatre has transformed into a national allegory, into gendered subjectivity has been the picture of the historical development of Currimbhoy physical didacticism into feminist Realism in Dattani.

Ultramodernity and the Disjointed Self

The modernity does not happen as a progressive process in a manner that is depicted by Currimbhoy and Dattani, but is a fragmented and contested experience. In Currimbhoy, modernity is haunted by the remnant of colonialism, in Dattani, capitalism eats it away, the consumerism and hypocrisy of morals (Çiçek *et al.*, 2021). Both the authors demonstrate the hypocrisy of the relations between modernity and India, existing and backward, being free and being in chains, being visible and being forgotten. Their personalities are the fractured face of the modern India, the disappointed idealist of The Doldrums or the lowly-homosexual of On a Muggy Night in Mumbai who constantly finds himself torn between self and society.

Theatre Cultural Politics

Theatre as politicians of stand up and speech is also a significant aspect of both plays by the two playwrights. The moral degradation of the country gets criticized in the moral allegories of Currimbhoy and is a theatrical intervention, where the voiceless is reappropriated in the theatre written by Dattani. Both authors render theatrical enactment the location of the cultural memory and contemporary criticism by visualizing the medium that is embodied to depict the use of theatrical acting (Wanget *et al.*, 2021). Further, their dramaturgy is the ideal representation of what Raymond Williams has dubbed as the structures of feeling- the felt and loving part of the social change. The two other levels of cultural modernity in India are that moral anguish of Currimbhoy and ethical pluralism of Dattani, but the two levels are related to each other.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Indian modernity since the age of nationalism to the global age is traced in all the plays of Asif Currimbhoy and Mahesh Dattani. They locate the shifting landscape of postcolonial subjecthood in their dramatization of cultural struggle and identity crisis, as well as moral change. Cultural studies approach reveals how both dramatists mediate the crossings of ideology, power, and representations and transform theatre into a dialogue space on which a sense of Indian identity is being re-defined over and over again.

The theatre of Currimbhoy complies with the phobias of a decolonized nation that is still struggling to shape its modern identity, the Dattani play complies with the logo of the globalized India in which identities are multiple, performative and in process. This continuum culture is not something that is taken as an inalienable inheritance but negotiated or always in flux in a manner that is not only non-closed.

What has kept their works relevant after all this time is the fact that they are challenging the politics of belonging as well as their capacity to conceive contemporary modernity as being such not as something that ruptures but rather as something that is consensual. It is thus possible to consider both Currimbhoy and Dattani as one of the most critical commentators of an endless confrontation between the past and present, tradition

and the transformation, local and global, and as such endowed with the cultural studies approach to the Indian theatre.

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