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Decolonizing the Indian Theatre

Bishun Kumar, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Decolonization, as a post-colonial movement, attempts to dismantle colonial effects and imperialization of weaker countries. It is a process of uprooting colonial facade coated on the valuable Indian cultural legacy with the purpose to make it invaluable. Theatre is one of the glorious legacies of India. During the freedom struggle, the seeds of decolonization were already planted by the freedom fighters such as Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Chandrashekar Azad, etc. Gandhi's battle cry for 'Swadeshi', 'Hind Swaraj' and 'Quit India

Movement' strengthened the concept of decolonizing the Indian mind. Literary writers such as Tagore, Tendulkar, Karnad, Anand and Raja Rao realized the need to decolonize, re-discover and re-establish the glory of Indian culture, myths, language, religious ethos, democracy

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and Indian governance, etc., and prepared an international stage for the textuality of Indian theatre. The plays of Badal Sarkar, Vijay Tendulkar, Tagore, and Karnad have dominated the world of theatre and encouraged defiance against the effects of colonialism. Re-inventing Bharata's *Natyashastra* raises India to compete with the Aristotelian theatre. Kalidas's plays have sufficient theatrical flavour to dominate Shakespeare's plays. 'Action' is the very feature of the Western theatre while the very feature of the Indian classical theatre is 'action with sentiments' and is an improvement upon the western theatre. In post-modern period, the plays like Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal* and Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* have evidenced the incomparability of Indian theatre. The present paper aims at finding the effects of decolonization in the Indian Theatre.

Key Words: Decolonization, post-colonialism, assimilation, Natyasastra, poststructuralism, classical theatre.

Decolonization

Decolonization is a paradigm shift from colonial dominance to the freedom of natives, from subordination to co-ordination, from suppression to expression, from imposition of language and culture to one's own choice, from surrogate Englishman to indigenous man, from forced civilization to ethnic culture, from autocracy and dictatorship to democracy, from domineering politics to the politics of human welfare, from the exercise of the castration of psyche to re-gaining of manhood and many other things. Postcolonialism has studied the threefold exercise of colonial powers. The first is to rule the colonized interpreting them to be savage, uncultured and immature other and yet promised them of better governance and upliftment of the natives. The second is implementation of 'Macaulay's Minute'—'the mission to colonize the mind' literally to educate the colonized and to civilize them but politically to turn them spiritually handicapped and place them on the position of ambivalence; and the third is to teach them English literature, a model of advanced civilization literally to enlighten the colonized but potentially to castrate them from their spirituality and ethnicity.

The reaction against these exercises made a proper ground for the volcanic explosion of postcolonialism which consequently gave birth to decolonization. Thus, decolonization is an unfailing weapon to dismantle the colonial powers.

Three-fold Forces of Decolonization

Forces of decolonization are also threefold. The first, to resist the imperial government, the second, to resist the imposition of language and the third to reject colonial conditioning what we say castration by way of acculturation. The impact of decolonization earned us several achievements such as independence, Indian Writing in English, Translation of Indian Literature into English and re-establishment of the glory of Indian spirituality. The process of decolonization in India began with the first War of Independence in 1857, followed by Gandhi's claim for '*Purna Swaraj*', 'Quit India Movement', and writers' paradigm shift from the imitation of British writings to the ethos of nationalism either by rejecting English or indianizing it. Implication of Indian culture, myths, customs legends, epics, folk tales in writing relieved the colonized, the natives from the sense of alienness in their own country to the sense of at home.

It is an outcome of the increasing momentum of anti-colonial, anti-imperial and nationalist movements which, after the World War II, took a more confrontational, no-compromise approach to decolonization than had their founders and predecessors.

The demand was for complete independence: '*Purna Swaraj*' (in India), '*ujamaa*' (or independence along collectivist lines in Tanzania), a mandala (or power, the power of the people in South Africa). The demand extended not only to the liberation from political structures which included liberation by violent or militant means but it also aimed at the obliteration of what the revolutionary seer Aurobindo Ghosh in Bengal or Fanon in Algeria, first named the colonization of the psyche. By this they meant the arsenal of complex (Fanon's term for feelings of inferiority and of social invisibility) created by the experiences of having been colonially marginalized and oppressed.

Concurrent with the political changes like Indian Independence in 1947, Ghana Independence in 1957, Nigeria in 1960, Algeria and Jamaica in 1962, and Kenya in 1963 (Mau

Mao guerrilla activity) came also across the once colonized world, the retrieval and animation of indigenous culture as an important vehicle of national self-expression and, therefore, of resistance to the colonial exclusion of the native as uncouth, uncivilized, inarticulate, irrational.

Fanon's View

Fanon is an unquestioned authority in postcolonial readings. American critic Henry Louis Gates calls it 'Critical Fanonism'. His ideas have molded a number of different interpretations of Postcolonial resistance. The wretched became a virtual primer for different movements in 1960s, such as African American Black power led by Malcolm X ; the intellectual Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's revolutionary Marxism in Kenya in 1970s. It has very differently but powerfully informed the Marxist postcolonial critic like Neil Lazarus in *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (1990), and Homi Bhabha's psychoanalytic readings of the colonial process, as his "Introduction" to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1954).

It helps those who work on the objective conditions of decolonization and those who deal in colonial subjectivity which better be called double consciousness. Fanon's tripartite schema or 'panorama on three levels' is:

- a) **Colonial Assimilation** – leads the politicized native.
- b) **Disturbance**- involves reconstitution of identity through reclamation of local cultural traditions.
- c) **Fighting Phase** – will shake the people.

(Fanon, 98)

Deconstruction

Etymologically decolonization resembles feminism, deconstruction, post structuralism and Marxism that de-structuralize the disparity among human society at various levels. Translation, too, has played an indispensable part to set stage for Indian writing and to dismantle the colonial powers in almost all disciplines. Indian English novel originates from the translation of Bengali novels and the birth of Indian English theatre is from the translation of Hindi, Bengali and Sanskrit plays. Indian English drama is last to get its origin. The keys to decolonization are:

- a) To disapprove the Western conception that suppresses the ethos of nationalism.

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- b) To reject the European ideology that disregards indigeneity.
- c) To establish the Orientalist theoretical framework at international stage.
- d) To dismantle the Western hegemony of governance, language, literature, discourse and text.
- e) To re-discover the cultural and spiritual heritage of India (the periphery) and writing back to the centre.

This task has to be done in almost all the disciplines such as literature, politics, culture and art and the theatre being one of them.

National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi

The setting up of the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi, with the collective efforts of Nemichand Jain, is a milestone in the history of development of Indian theatre and in decolonizing the British theatre as well. Jain's mission of presenting theatre abroad, especially in England in Indian festival of dramatics is a pioneering effort to achieve an avant-garde identity of Indian theatre. Undoubtedly, in the very beginning of the presentation of plays like Girish Karnad's *Tuglaq*, Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure* bore the traces of the Western dramatic sensibilities and practices and could not represent any significant creative departure from the West or originality of the Indian sensibility and treatment.

Exploring Classic Sanskrit Tradition

But the constant effort of the directors soon explored the classical Sanskrit tradition with a lot of imagination and vigour, in its search for an identity and its own artistic personality. In this area the directors like Kavalam. Narayana Panikkar, Ratan Kumar Thiyam, and B.V. Karnath have been exceptional and highly creative. Therefore, they were invited by the repertory to produce a *Sanskrit* play for the festival. For, at the time, selecting a modern Indian play can possibly be most ticklish and difficult, particularly so if those entrusted with the responsibility were not properly and deeply aware of the contemporary theatre scene in the country.

Controversial Plays

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The controversial presentation of the Marathi play Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal* produced by Theatre Academy, Poona under Jabbar Patel's direction, made a tremendous impact on the Western audiences and consequently contemporary Indian drama earned its own prestige on international stage. Excited with the unexpected applaud of the theatre lovers, the directors of Theatre Academy, Poona and National School of Drama staged play after play in the festival in England and abroad but with deviation from the Western sensibility and practice. Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*, Badal Sircar's *Juloos*, Girish Karnad's *Hayavadna* and Arun Mukharji's *Jagannath* were infinitely more distinctive both for sensibility as well as form.

Ghasiram Kotwal

The establishment of Indigenous culture and literature in the international knowledge market is also a process of decolonization. India is famous for its unity among variety of cultures and has its own unique quality. Translation of indigenous plays into English has given a wide recognition to those plays. For instance, Vijay Tendulkar's play *Ghasiram Kotwal*, a Marathi play, receives appreciation of the critics of the world wide when it was translated into English. The play is about the historical conflict between Nana Phadnavis and his henchman Ghasiram Kotwal. The play, in its theme, resembles Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The play becomes classic for its folk drama format. With the elaborate use of facial expression, mime, song, dance and symbolic use of stage techniques Ghasiram's statement of vengeance when he was humiliated and put into jail by Poona Brahmins;

I will come back to Poona. I will show my strength. It will cost you! Your good days are gone. I am a Kannaui Brahmin, but I have become a Shudra, a criminal, a useless animal (*Ghasiram Kotwal*, p-26).

The statement reminds us of Seneca's *Revenge Tragedy*.

In his mad pursuit of revenge upon Poona Brahmins, Ghasiram sells his own budding daughter to Nana. When he finds that his daughter is exploited, tortured and finally killed, his heart broke and tormented with inner pain that he could not express it in public. But when he is stoned to death by mob he regrets and cries;

I danced on your chests
But I wasted the life of my little daughter,

I should be punished for the death of my daughter.

(Ghasiram Kotwal, p-46)

Faustus and Ghasiram

This scene reminds us of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* when Faustus sells his soul to Mephistopheles to fulfil his ambition of over-reaching power to become the superman but at last he regrets his own decision and ends his life in death.

Contrast in Deconstruction and Other Features

On observing drama from a comparative point of view, we find that Indian drama deconstructs and disapproves the British drama and is an improvement upon it. The western theory of drama derives from, and is conditioned, by Aristotle's *Poetics* which contains his analysis of the tragic drama in the light of Greek praxis. It rests on the assertion that "Necessity is blind and man's encounter with it shall rob him of his eyes" while Bharata's theory of drama is based on the very Indian concept '*Karma*' and the Greek concept of necessity is alien to Indian theory of human suffering.

Western theory talks of only two types of drama- the tragedy and the comedy. The former is disposition of sorrow by tears while the latter is of joy by laughter. But this distinction is inconceivable in the holistic pattern of Indian thinking. Though Bharata, too speaks of the ten kinds of plays but his classification is purely based on the differences in the styles (vritti) of composition and has nothing to do with the naturalistic consideration. He advocates that the drama represents human nature "with its joys and sorrow" (From the Translation of *Natyasastra* by Manmohan Ghosh. 1950). Both sorrows and joys are the complementary part of holistic human life and hence, in his conception of drama both of them play an integral part which resembles tragi-comedy only such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It* or *The Merchant of Venice*.

The significant features of drama, according to the western conception, are peripety, anagnorisis, and hamartia while Bharata maintains that the drama is an artifact just like a toy. Western theory of "imitation" may appear reality for the object of Aristotle's imitation is "action" while in Bharata's case it is emotional states (Bhava). Furthermore, Aristotle suggests

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that drama originates from human instinct for imitation but Bharata rejects it and claims it to be a deliberate creation as “an object of diversion” (Kridanyak).

Purpose of Drama According to Indian Theatre

The Indian concept of theatre rejects the concepts of western theatre and claims that the sole purpose of drama is not to produce an effect of ‘Katharsis’ (that is limited to tragedy in the purgative or curative function) but to provide people with amusement and instruction. In this connection Bharata says,

The drama, as I have devised, will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all (1.111-12).

The drama will, thus, be instructive to all . . . it will give relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief or [over] work, and will be conducive to observance of duty (dharma) as well as to fame, long life, intellect and general good, and will educate people (1.113-15)

The scope of ‘rasa’, a significant feature of Indian theory of drama, is wider than that of Katharsis. Katharsis provides audience only a negative aesthetic pleasure (experience) as in tragedy while ‘rasa’ provides both positive and negative as in tragedy, in comedy and also in tragicomedy. Thus, rasa can also be applied to other forms of literature. It is an emotive object which is produced by a proper set of “objective-correlatives” and enjoyed by the spectators as an aesthetic pleasure.

The purpose of comparison between Indian and Western theatre is not to prove the superiority of Indian theory of drama rather to dismantle the colonizer’s belief that the colonized are savage, immature and ignorant of everything and to prove that they are no less than them in any discipline be it knowledge, life experiences, governance, art, literature or human values. However, the misery of Indian theatre is that it remained in the dark phase during colonial period.

The Use of Language as a Medium of Expression

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On the point of the use of language as a medium of expression one may be confused that Indian drama in the Postcolonial scenario is dominated by English language which is a mark of the colonized mind that reminds us of Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind*. But this confusion can be removed by realizing the difference between a language that is imposed and a language that is chosen of one's own. The purpose of the former was to exercise colonial powers on the colonized while that of the latter is to learn an extra skill or talent to respond, to make the global stage for the art and intellect of the colonized. Ngugi advocates the rejection of the English language and literature from all the Departments and he himself started writing plays in his national language 'Kiswahili' while Indians preferred to invade it by gaining expertise no less than the British. Once the language is Indianized, remains no more the language of the colonizer but a property taken away from them and manipulated as per needs of the natives. Thus, the process of Indianization too, is an act of decolonization.

Brecht on Indian Drama

Whether western critics agree with the artistic excellence of Indian theatre or not, but Brecht, in his search for artistic impulse which bridged centuries and continents, did not fail to notice the attractions of Indian classical drama. For evidence I quote from the fragmentary "Song of the playwright";

I studied the presentations of the great feudal lords
By the English, rich figures
To whom the world is good for unfolding their grandeur,
I studied the moralizing Spaniards
The Indians, masters of beautiful sentiments
And the Chinese, who present the families
And the motley destinies in the cities.

(Lutze, Lothar. "Indian Classical Drama in the Light of Bertold Brecht", 101)

With his praise of "the Indians", Brecht has entered his name into the list of German admirers of the Sanskrit drama, which includes such illustrious names as Goethe, von Humboldt

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and Schlegel. On close observations of Brecht's plays, it seems that characteristics of Indian classical drama might have been worth utilizing for his own dramatic theory and practice. Such very features are:

1. Indian classical drama is anti-illusionistic and conducive to alienation, because it is
 - (a) Largely epical and descriptive.
 - (b) Artistic and audience-conscious in the composition.
2. Its humanity becomes evident, above all, in its combination of religion and servility.

Indian dramatic tradition has always been aware of the fact that a drama, among other things, is "a spectator to delight the eyes" (Keith), perhaps more than the drama of Europe; the very term 'Rupak', play implies "visible form".

The Epic

The Epic, being a universally acknowledged supreme genre, becomes the soul of classical Indian drama. Keith has provided "abundant evidences of the strong influence on the development of the drama exercised by the recitation of the epics", especially the Ramayana, in the case of which this influence "appears in its full development". This very feature of Indian drama becomes a source of interest and inspiration to Brecht, who mentions epic recitals in a different context, calling them "theatralische veranstaltungen", a theatrical performance.

Kalidasa is a renowned personality in Indian theatre for his achievement and incomparable success of *Abhigyanashakuntalam*. He fuses his plays with life, love and poetry into bare lifeless unromantic epic tale. With his keen eye of genius 'in fine frenzy rolling', he has sublimated the story of sordid passion to the very quintessence of ideals of love and poetry. For his poetry, characteristics, plot construction, diction and his treatment of nature and vision Kalidasa has attracted the attention of critics not only of India but of abroad too. Goethe, a German critic pronounces him, 'I name thee O' Shakuntala: and all at once is said'. Sir William Jones gives a patronizing statement for him "our illustrious poet, the Shakespeare of India". And Sir Monier Williams calls him, "The Shakespeare of India". The comparison, however, is yet another instance of measuring the colonized from the standpoint of colonizer. Whether consciously or unconsciously but it is very interesting to notice that if

both of them have been equated, what has prevented all the Western critics in all these years and ages from calling Shakespeare as the Kalidas of India?

Modern Indian Drama and Classical Sanskrit Drama

The concept of modern drama does not deviate from that of the classical Sanskrit except the change in the subject-matter according to the present conditions and needs of India. Indigenous plays are playing significant role to decolonize the colonial dramatic theories. Chorus Repertory Theatre originated on the outskirts of Imphal, Manipur is no less than Eliot's morality play like *Murder in the Cathedral*. Ratan Thiyam, an Indian playwright, actor and theatre director has made the use of chorus in his play *My Earth, My Love* (2008) like that of Eliot's play which, however, is not new for Indian theatre. Thiyam is known for writing and staging plays that use ancient Indian theatre traditions and form in a contemporary context. Mixing the past and the present with myth and history, he unearths a new form in dramatic presentation. The play revolves around horrendous past of warfare and destruction such as devastation of Manipur by Burmese Army, killing during the world war II, Russian Revolution and the mass killings, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, genocide during Khmer Rouge regime in Kampuchea. The play is presented with a mythological background of seven sisters, the celestial nymphs, busy at the loom weaving a cloth which is the traditional symbol of love, peace and honour. They are to offer it to the Almighty with a prayer to stop all warfare and destruction, ushering in an era of peace and brotherhood. The nymphs become the piece loving citizens of the world. The prologue begins with the prayer song sung with the accompaniment of pena (traditional Manipuri bow and string instrument) invoking divine blessings and forgiveness.

O Lord! Lord of the Lords
O Mother Goddess
In your divine courtyard
We, your humble servants,
Are offering a length of cloth
Please accept it whole heartedly,
O, father!
Forgive our sins. (Thiyam, 50).

The nymphs offer the cloth to the Almighty to put an end to conflict and war and usher in an era of prosperity, peace and harmony on the earth. The very features of Indian writing are spiritual vision, world piece, universal humanity and communal harmony. When western literature focuses individualism Indian focuses on universalism. Though, western critics, on colonial and postcolonial perspective, wish to universalize their own ideology but the Indian writing uncurtains the fact beyond. The title of the Thiyam's play *My Earth, My Love* dismantles all the claims and evidences of western critics. Thiyam's characters are citizens of the earth, a global village rather than of India, Pakistan or of England, America. The nymphs pray to God not only to save the people of India but to save the people on entire earth.

The following passage is an evidence of ignoring nationalism for the sake of Internationalism;

O father, forgive our sins,
Save us from making mistakes
With these words,
At your divine feet
We are paying obeisance. (77)

Moreover, images of Lord Buddha's teachings, Mother Teresa's nursing, and Gandhi's world piece in the play are unparalleled in the entire history of world literature.

Regional Drama

The Zhadipati theatre of Vidarbha region of Maharashtra is yet another highly claimed postcolonial perspective of finding voice by reclaiming one's own past. Emergence of the Zhadipati theatre from *theatrum mundi* has undergone severe change in subject matter such as from gods, goddesses and local deities to cardinal issues like economical exploitation of *adivasis*, suicides of farmers, naxal activities, growing corruption in government schemes, and cross fire between the naxalite and the police. One of the important features of this theatre is an intact liberty for women to take part in

the performances. The Theatre geared up for a change with the formation of all India Zhadipati Academy in 2002. The Zhadipati theatre is a kind of mobile theatre, similar to Tamasha of Maharashtra or Jatra of West Bengal.

Etymologically, the term 'Zhadi' means jungle and 'pati' means place. Thus, it gives sense that the theatre enacted at jungle place or simply 'Jungle Theatre'. This theatre directly or indirectly intertwines with Augusto Bwal's 'The Theatre of the oppressed' and Brecht's 'Epic Theatre'. Though known for its indigeniety Zhadpati theatre reminds us of the melody, Aristotle's one of the essential features of drama. However, its subject matter may be indigenous but the implication is always universal, global and humanistic. Melody is the very feature of human life which is indispensable from the Indian *Natya Sangeet* (Musical Drama), a celebrated dramatic tradition in Maharashtra. Whatever may be the subject matter of the play, the use of songs is mandatory. The performance is taken to a great height with the help of songs. Each play starts with the Nandi, an invocation for the blessings of deities. The Zhadipati theatre generally does not follow any particular conventional norm of presentation; rather it modifies the notion of 'Art for Art's Sake' into 'Art for Audience's Sake'.

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