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Musings on the Confluence of Drama and Society

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ABSTRACT: *With a 'transhistorical' approach and a 'selective appropriateness' of playtexts and literature traditions, this article muses on the confluence of society and dramatic expression. Drama, compared to novel writing and poetry, remains, as it has always been, a powerful tool of social critique. From Greek and ancient Chinese and Indian drama forms which meditated with both the heroic and downtrodden, to the contemporary world stage that ponders with highly diverse identities and politically charged world scene, playwrighting still maintains its dialogue with society and its ever-shifting trajectories. The article argues that, in response to a constantly changing human condition, drama can be subversive, counter-discursive, or revolutionary in impulse, as it can be produced as an aesthetic space to explore the convergence of intimate and social life forms, and reconcile division.*

KEYWORDS: Drama; society; critique; musings; confluence.

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Introduction

The role of dramatic writing (and the stage) as a platform of social critique has always manifested through the ages. The polyrhythmic nature of playwrighting has allowed writers to grapple with socio-cultural issues as to offer society the possibility to 'grope its way' and come to terms with its historical accumulations. In that sense, plays "are very much part of wider social struggles" partaking in "the shaping, transmitting and at times challenging of group fantasies and desires," where "therein lies the danger and the hope." (Tylor 1997, 227). In their response to society and its changing realities, plays can be subversive, counter-discursive, and revolutionary in impulse, as they can be produced as an aesthetic space to explore the convergence of intimate and social life forms, or to reconcile division. The plays revisited in this article, regardless of region or time period, disseminate one or all of these dimensions of playwrighting. Bringing these dimensions together to explain the interplay of drama and society is the author's own approach of looking at how, since time immemorial, dramatic writing has actively engaged with society.

Drawing on some scholarly insights on the interplay of drama and society, this article muses on the confluence and convergence of society and dramatic expression. It takes a 'transhistorical' approach with a "selective appropriateness" of playtexts which cut across diverse regions, cultures and literature traditions, without deeming the plays chosen to be exclusively representative of the histories in concern. The choice of cases is done unavoidably arbitrarily as there is no intention to provide a historical survey of drama and social critique. Instead, I have chosen to explore a number of plays by noteworthy writers, whose writings have significantly contributed to the development of a dramatic tradition (usually in the form of dramatic conventions) in their respective societies.

On Drama and Society

> "A playwright will always bring not only his or her own sensibility to their work but is also bound to be affected by the conditions and kinds of repression and oppression against which they work." (Plastow 1999, 4).

The quote above speaks of the confluence of context and playwrighting. Context informs writing and discourse the way literary works write back to and meditate with context and how it undergoes changes over time. This section revisits some scholarly insights which argue for the interplay or confluence of drama, as a literary form, and society.

Plays can be counter-discursive in tone. Drama, as a genre, is "particularly suited to counter-discursive intervention," as Gilbert and Tompkins emphasize in their *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996, 18). Counterdiscursive in the sense that they write back to colonialism, imperial discourse, master narratives and the different forces at play in postcolonial societies. Counter-discourse in literature is often associated with Richard Terdiman's 'discourse/counter-discourse' which thinks of writing as 'symbolic resistance' and a way to write back to culture and history. Though he places his reading of cultural discourse and the constant 'contestation' it experiences in 19th century France, Terdiman sees that while discourse is to be interpreted as the "complexes of signs and practices which organize social existence and social reproduction" in a given society, counter-discourse, generally counterhegemonic and contestory in nature, seeks to overturn "this dominance" by "victoriously replacing its antagonist." (Terdiman 1985, 54-57). As such, for a literary work to project as 'counterdiscursive' it has to hold the seeds of resistance within it. This aspect of playwrighting can be unearthed in plays written by playwrights from Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, with relevant cases to be later examined, who seek to destabilize the "power/

knowledge axis of imperialism," and "renegotiate an identity that is not necessarily constituted by the authority of the colonizer's perspective of the past, present, or future." (Gilbert and Tompkins, 50-1).

A play can equally be a space of subversion, a 'milieu of dissidence'. In their study of Shakespeare's plays seeing them as alleyways to understand counter-hegemonic proclivities and political dissidence in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, cultural materialists like Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore, and Catherine Belsey think that hegemonic social and cultural systems draw their potency from the power they impose on the vulnerable masses and the 'margins' in a given social context. Yet, these hegemonic systems create the conditions of their own downfall due to the 'illegal' means they use and 'loopholes' they leave behind on their own way to legitimize themselves as hegemonies. Dissidence against systems of the sort usually comes from social groups which have been target of the marginalizing practices of these systems. Dissidence works with "reference to dominant structures" in an attempt to shake their pre-established notions, implying the "inter-involvement of resistance and control" in the social realm. (Sinfield 1992, 47). Dissidence becomes possible because "dominant ideological formations" usually impose themselves and operate "under pressure." (Sinfield, 41). Plays which proffer scenes of dissidence, like those written by Chinese 'realist critics', African American and Indian Dalit writers, may be seen to "contain a subordinate perspective" in an attempt to defy and overthrow the dominant discourse which relegated them into a position of subordination in the first place. (Sinfield, 48). Texts of the sort seek to construct new meanings which challenge, and in some cases replace, dominant ideologies in society.

Plays are also studied as "structures of feeling"; as spaces to meditate about society and its historically oscillating 'dramas'. 'Structures of feeling' is a concept elaborated by drama critic Raymond Williams to describe the interplay of drama and society. Williams argues that plays and their performances are usually in dialogue with the way social crises themselves unfold and undertake transition in society. Social dramas like, among others, changing national contexts, social crises, revolutions, changing governmental systems, overthrown regimes and environmental changes. Historical change of a society, according to Williams, may be good or bad, as it may take the form of a 'debasement', or a 'refinement' in the human condition, with any kind of evolution being dependent on whether or not there are 'alternative structures' to replace the old and declining life forms in a given society.(Williams 1969, 20). Williams studies plays and dramas as 'structures of feeling' because they are pertinent, due to their performativity, to create 'consciousness' of historical change in society more than any other form of literature.

On the affinity of drama, as an art form, and psychoanalysis, Rustin and Rustin (2002) see that intimate human undertakings find a good expression in dramatic writing whereby drama "creates imaginary worlds... by the carrying over of understandings gained from a play to fields of experience beyond it." (Rustin and Rustin, 6). This is to say that domestic and private "tensions in the relations of generations, and between sexes" can be seen to resonate with wider social processes whereby they "expose the structure of entire societies in different states of crisis."(Rustin and Rustin, 13). Plays dealing with 'small-scale' and intimate conflicts can be read as signs of decay and instability experienced at the social level. Rustin and Rustin give examples which speak to this confluence. They speak of how Oedipus', in Sophocles' play, defiance of the laws which regulated life in Greek society, by committing "patricide and incest", brought his city of Thebes to the "edge of disaster." (Rustin and Rustin, 17-18). This is to say that Thebes' dismay bears witness to Oedipus' own *enorme delictum*. Other cases include how some of Shakespeare's plays draw attention to the fact that the "abuses of kingly power" can have dire effects on the society over which people of power rule. In plays like *Julius Ceasar*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare shows how ordinary citizens fall victim to their rulers' voracity for power and domestic prestige; what a "greedy and brutal court can do to the society from which it draws its wealth." (Rustin and Rustin, 21). This means that drama is perfectly suited to bring to proximity the 'public or outward sphere' of politics and public

institutions and the 'private inward sphere' of family and intimate relationships. Some plays taken as cases in this article, like Chekov's, Miller's and Shaw's, convey this interplay of drama and psychoanalysis.

Plays can also act as spaces to reconcile division and mend social ruptures. In the aftermath of the New World order and the bio-polar politics preceding it, the multifarious late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century life forms made issues like hybridity, miscegenation, migration, freedom, xenophobia, as the most explored themes in works of literature. The new world order and globalization gave way to new kinds of societies the defining character of which is 'difference' whereby divisions along ethnic, class, religious and linguistic lines have become common. In their *After the Nation-State: Citizens, Tribalism and the New World Disorder*, Horsman and Marshall point out how increasingly diverse and different beliefs, identities and affiliations are being fostered across the world where "individuals are increasingly encouraged to view themselves as members of groups – not national citizens exclusively, not members of a social class, but as blacks, as Slovaks, as Muslims, as French-Canadians, as born-again Christians, as gays, as environmentalists, and so on." (1994, 20). The East European, Balkan, Caribbean, and African societies exhibit recent and emerging forms, to a certain extent, of interculturality, translocality, syncretic amalgamations, which ushered in new modes of how to view the cultural 'Other'.

In his study of the changing notion and character of culture with an emphasis on investigating the predicament of contemporary cultures, culture critic James Clifford describes late modern culture as one which is fluid, mobile and inventive, one which "no longer presupposes continuous cultures or traditions," and that existence among fragments is characteristic of human contemporary history whereby "everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re) collected parts." (Clifford 1998, 14). In such miscellaneous cultural contexts, playwrighting can be relevant in addressing fragmented realities; realities which necessitate reconciliation, reshuffling, and reordering. Plays reflective of such late modern mood are usually written against a fertile soil of divisions, othering, and exclusion assuming a current task which is "to mend social fractures and to address once again homogenizing concepts." (Horsman and Marshall, 20). Plays mirroring Apartheid/Post-apartheid realities in South Africa, refugee and migrant crises of border crossing and the traumas which result from ethnic, racial and religious conflicts can be seen to reflect this dimension of playwrighting, and this task of 'mending social fractures'.

In the sections which follow, a number of illustrative cases which speak to the confluence of drama and society are revisited. Cases which are taken from different historical contexts, different time periods, and ones which represent different, yet intersectant, literature traditions.

Classical, Medieval and Early Modern Contexts

Ancient Greek dramatists thought of the stage as a medium of speaking out social fallacies and immoral bearings. Drawing their material from Greek myths and legends, the three Greek tragedians Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides produced plays that were socially engaged; plays that tried to stir open issues like injustice, the abuse of power, gender inequalities, civil disobedience, and false heroism. Due to the 'air of skepticism' that he creates in his dramas, Euripides, for example, unveiled a special interest in the plight of women and other underrepresented groups in Greek society (Chergui 2019, 92). His reproach targeted "the ruling generals and kings of the Homeric age for pursuing their own ambitions and passions at the expense of their people's sufferings," and the atrocious consequences of, for example, "the destruction of the mythical Troy" and the "Peloponnesian War" on Greek society at the time. (Rustin and Rustin, 21). His play *Orestes*, which addresses the issues of justice and vengeance both personal and communal, and *The Trojan Women*, interpreted as an anti-war play that criticizes Greek imperialism and its destructive repercussions on both Greeks and outsiders, are two of his most inventive pieces and for which he received the label of the 'literary ancestor' of modern tragic thought. The social outreach of Greek dramatic writing

can also be traced in Sophocles' plays which, as earlier noted in the first section and as Rustin and Rustin argue, emphasize the interplay of 'personal tragic flaws' and crises at the social level to emphasize that "the fate of the main figures of these plays would be inseparably tied to the fate of the societies over which they ruled." (Rustin and Rustin, 20).

In many Eastern and Southeast Asian countries, dramatizing issues related to heroic deeds and glorious histories had defined the content of most of the plays for a long period. This type of drama was much performance-oriented with plays not produced for public readership but as sketches destined to public performance and amusement. In ancient and Medieval Chinese imperial courts and much similar to Italy's *Commedia del l'arte* of the 16th century, *Shadow* plays, *Zaju* dramas, and *Nanxi* plays had a rather festive character combining music, dance, folklore, and pantomime which were much popular in other regions too like Indonesia and Japan. Nonetheless, the social and political message of playwrighting in Asian drama, a point which I will later explore in this article, emerged towards the end of 19th and all over the 20th century during which dissent against ruling classes and their abuses of power grew in intensity.

In Europe, Medieval morality and mystery plays, which were biblically inspired, were fraught with religious scenes set inside churches and cathedrals. Theocentric in nature, biblical dramatists dealt with the serious problem of morality and the issue of the salvation of human beings represented by the individual's sacrifice in his struggle to avoid sin and damnation and attain salvation and penance in the world after. Such religiously oriented dramaturgy gave little or no space to the way human nature and psychology relate to the external world or the way the social circumstances may have a hold on the human psyche. In reaction to this, and in England, Elizabethan drama started marking the scene with new and fresh rhythms that were in communion with the Renaissance era featuring western history generally and England specifically. As its distinguished mentor, Shakespeare drew upon the theatrical experiments of writers like Marlowe and Kyd, who were known for their historical chronicles type of drama, and some of the tragic features like the motif of revenge most prevalent in Seneca giving them new meaning and outreach. Shakespearean dramatic aesthetic was influenced by the humanist traditions which were an alternative discourse to the pre-reformation understanding that had as its crux the Catholic Church and its monopoly over life and reason. With "religious reform, political change and the influence of classical humanism on literature and the arts" (Muir 1995, 158), morality and mystery plays were slowly replaced by a kind of dramatic writing which resonated with the new humanist trend which called for the centrality of Man in the world propagating such dictums like 'Man is the measure of all things', 'know thyself' and 'The good individual in the good society'.

Responding to such a transitional context, Shakespeare provided the English stage with a 'drama of essence' making recourse to Man and his overlapping nature as his material. His *Hamlet* represents one of the finest depictions of Man's struggle to come to terms with his self-conflicting undulating nature. As a prince and reformer of Denmark, as depicted by Shakespeare, *Hamlet* fashions a tragedy of a character whose aspirations to serve his personal as well as political duties switch back and forth between reality and fantasy with him being hardly able to make sense of his actions. This is typical of the Elizabethan individual whose transition to the Renaissance ideals left him in a weird state towards the status quo ante. In addition to their 'humanistic' urge, Shakespeare's plays, like those by his contemporaries, were related to "the economic and political system of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and to the particular institutions of cultural production (the court, patronage, theatre, education, the church)." (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985, viii). Criticizing royalty and monarchical excess, and as Louis Montrose asserts, "Shakespeare generates dramatic action by combining conflicts grounded in such fundamental cultural categories as ethnicity, lineage, generation gender, political faction, and social rank," with a particular effort towards communicating any "ideological contradictions" developing from the forces at play within the limits of

these cultural categories. (Montrose 1996, 33). As such, Shakespeare's plays can be said to have drifted the attention of Elizabethan readership towards issues which do not only emphasize personal tragic stories of leaders and heroic figures, but ones which are also socially oriented through underlining the mutual relationship that exists between the material and discursive.

The Realistic Impulse

Prompted by the new social and political conditions sweeping Europe in the second half of the 19th century and in an attempt to give more dynamism and social efficacy to the dramatic experience, Realism and Naturalism in drama turned into everyday life issues as their source of inspiration and subject matter substituting the theatrical norms of romantic idealism. Dramatic Realism had its advocates like Henrick Ibsen in Norway, George Bernard Shaw in England, and Anton Chekhov in Russia who "carried the banner of realism to its ascendancy, probing the falsehoods of bourgeois hegemony and drawing away from the circumambience of deceit that permeated the middle class's arrogant self-perception." (Krasner 2012,16). Through their dramas, these playwrights reacted to a reality obfuscated by the frivolous entertaining scenes of the time giving primacy to forging new dramatic styles more resonant with the new social contexts.

Considered to be the father of modern realistic drama, Henrick Ibsen's dramaturgy unswervingly questioned society's mores and values in a shocking and disturbing tone following the fashion of the 'well-made' realistic play. His plays *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *Enemy of the People* (1882), which were banned from public performance upon their appearance and publication, incited much societal reaction and criticism for they exposed the ironies and hypocrisies of a post-Darwinian, industrial-capitalist European society. Such a new society was fraught with ingredients that provided literature in general and drama in particular with issues as the inequality of the sexes; the emerging corrupt political systems; the illusions of material success; and the decadence of European ideals. Nora, in *A Doll's House*, dissents against the institution of marriage and the constrictive expectations of her society through crafting her own path towards individual freedom. Choosing to leave her husband and family to start a life of her own away from the burden of domesticity and wifely duties illustrates Ibsen's own rebellion against society and his critique of its repressive codes of belief. Upon fleeing Norway because of the scathing attack towards his theatrical pieces, Ibsen's fame as a rebel playwright swept Europe and many theaters were initiated in London, Berlin, and Paris to perform his plays which Europeans considered as doing much to reveal the frailties and futilities of the time. Ibsen rebelled in both style and thematic where, in an innovated realistic way, introduced 'colloquial dialogues' into his texts deviating from the romantically and ideally oriented drama approaches:

> The rise of Darwin's evolutionism, Freud's psychology, and Marx's socialism altered perceptions that informed realistic dramas, tilting towards a rejection of introversion and highly subjective art of romanticism in favor of societal conflicts and psychological analysis. Human beings in society replaced the introversion of the mind; history replaced myth; ordinary people replaced royalty as the subject matter; scientific observation replaced religion, and necessity and motivation replaced fate and chance. A work of realism in art and literature was not meant to elevate humanity but rather expose the underlying objective social condition and emphasize the quotidian over the poetic. (Krasner, 15-16)

While Shakespeare aimed to 'elevate humanity' against the backdrop of the medieval religious and restricting conception of Man, the realists veered towards an emphasis on Man's social conditions targeting the 'quotidian' and the 'ordinary'. In a similar realistic vein and through penning about the plight of people trapped in hopeless and psychologically compelling situations, Anton Chekhov's drama gave a new impetus

to the Russian stage in the form of a "theater of mood" through which he dramatized with a 'submerged life in the text.' He insisted upon the idea that the artist's role is to ask questions and set riddles and not to answer them for his "art demands a theatre of mood, a richer submerged life in the text is characteristic of a more profound drama of realism, one which depends less on the externals of presentation." (Stayn 1981, 84). His plays *The Seagull* (1898) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1902) deal with issues that are both socially and psychologically engaging like the paradoxical dimension and vulnerability of civilization, people's unfulfilled and failed expectations within the confines of a dissolving social order (the imperial order), and miscommunicated relations characteristic of the Russian society of the time.

In England, Realism had its voice with Shaw's realistic 'problem plays' as *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), *Major Barbara* (1905), and *Pygmalion* (1913). In "Bernard Shaw's Dialogue with Chekhov," Anna Obraztsova emphasizes the direct influence Chekhov had on Shaw's realistic expression in the way he described his play *Heartbreak House* as "A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes," where "the same nice people, the same utter futility" can be encountered in both England and Russia. (Obraztsova 1993, 43-4). The manner in which Bernard Shaw responded to the ethics of the Victorian Age through transforming conventional plays into a ground for social debate has been lampooned by many critics. In *A History of Modern Drama* (2012), David Krasner opines that Shaw "conceived of drama and theatre as a moral institution, akin to the Church in its significance. Drama, he believed, should provoke thought, prompt one's conscience, elucidate social behavior, fight despair, resist dullness, and serve as a holy temple for the ascendency of humanity". (182). Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), for instance, spoke against the norms of the time when Mrs. Warren, an owner and manager of brothels in Brussels, Budapest, and Vienna, shakes the moral ground in her belief that prostitution can be one pathway women can take to escape the depraved working conditions and the drudgery permeating the Victorian society of the time. Mrs. Warren argues that she lives in a society with scarce opportunities open for women which is a good reason to try more possibilities even though against societal will and judgment. This is the sort of a thematic rebellion characteristic of Shaw's realistic problem plays.

In China and India, and for the last century, compared to the earlier mentioned plays about heroism, the social and political aspects of playwrighting started taking center stage. Chinese drama shifted in concern to plays loaded with nationalist, ethnic, and revolutionary statements. This new dramatic expression emerged in the form of 'spoken drama', intensely politicized, which was in tone with the new anti-totalitarian sentiments the Chinese held against minority feudal dynasties and ruling classes. A good example to mention about the spoken drama form is playwright Zeng Xiaogu's play *Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* (1907) which is based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). This play communicates the plight of the subjugated masses who rebelled against the minority racial repression namely the mobilized anti-Manchu dynasty ideology and the attempts to overthrow it in the name of more republican ideals.(Gunn 1983, viii). With the foundation of the Republic and with the 'cultural revolution' that followed it, playwrights explored "sensitive issues such as social inequality and government bureaucracy," germane with the changes coming with a 'new socialist China' rather than "evoking memories of the past."(Haiping 1998, x-xi). A later wave of 'realist critics', prominent in the 80s and 90s, turned the stage in favor of the needs and aspirations of common folk addressing the contradictions surrounding the reforms and policies of the consecutive governments. This group of 'cultural critics' enacted:

> social and cultural critiques in dramatically effective ways...their pointed critiques of contemporary Chinese society were therefore woven together with their pronounced emotional attachment to the well-being of the ordinary majority, a commitment that had been one of the essential components in the legitimacy of the PRC government and its proclaimed programs. (Haiping, xiii)

Plays like *Xiaojing hutong* (*Small Well alley*) written by the cultural realist Li Longyun in 1981 points to this new thematic orientation in Chinese drama . The play tells the story of a group of people who have lived together in the same courtyard, with the name of 'small well', for almost four decades. While they start by supporting the 1949 revolution and its welfare plans with excitement and desire for service and devotion, shouldering the hardships associated with it and "sacrificing all they have for an imagined national paradise," they later find themselves experiencing loss, both individual and collective, fear and confusion. They later decide to join their efforts in resistance to "the political opportunists who seek power while destroying many people's lives in the name of leftist radicalism." (Haiping, xi). Longyun's play echoes the stance of other playwrights and culture critics who think that any assessment of the success or failure of Chinese history, in Longyun's conviction, lies in how far the "the well-being of the common folk" is accounted for. (Haiping, xii).

In India, this social ideological message of playwrighting started with plays like Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* in 1831 and Madhusudan Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization* published in 1871 which both project British/Indian, East/West epistemological and cultural conflicting paradigms featuring the pre-independence era. This remained the trend of the dramatic output of the Indian stage throughout the 20th century with more plays that spoke against tradition in preference for a more European-like and modern *modus vivendi* becoming more popular. More plays questioned the caste system, widow-marriage and traditional values. In these times of social crisis and transition, drama proved efficient in conveying people's so often contradictory attitudes. Stepping into post-independence realities with the partition of 1947 disclosing its challenges, and without sidestepping anti-colonial critique as an inevitably essential aesthetic preoccupation, Indian drama shifted in concern to emphasize the collective legacy of India's history on its multi-ethnic, multi-religious and highly stratified social fabric. In their playtexts and critical essays alike, playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, and Utpal Dutt read through India's history to underscore the intersectionality of past and present traumas, usually through reworking the classics, the use of old myths, and stories taken from Sanskrit texts like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, in addition to other forms of oral tradition. The past here is not retrieved to satisfy a historical nostalgia but it is these writers' way to critique their society's failure to learn from its violent past in showing how discrimination against minority groups and religious fanaticism in the post-independence era attest to this failure. It is their way of appraising their society through questioning "received views of the past and the ways of knowing it." (Dharwadker 2005, 11).

Yet, rooted in India's long history of social exclusion are plays written by playwrights who hold a strict stance against the issue of caste and its ensuing social manifestations like *untouchability* and social division on the basis of race, class and ethnicity. Most of them fall under what is known as 'Dalit literature'; a literature which concerns itself with unveiling the repercussions associated with "the stigmatized identity of Untouchables imposed on them over centuries by the opprobrious institution of the caste system in India."(Gupta 2022, 3). Subversive in tone and inspired by the struggles for agency by the neglected margins of society, with both the urban space and village life as their settings, the writings of this socially-engaged group of writers "carry the experience of caste oppression as also that of their struggle against the stranglehold of caste hierarchy in Indian society which continues to privilege the caste Hindu echelons." (Gupta, 2). Plays by playwrights like, among others, Datta Bhagat, Ramnath Chavan, Sampat Jadhav, Kamlakar Dahat, and Sanjay Pawar vocalize the plight of the socially and economically underprivileged, mostly Dalits and untouchables, whose rights have been circumvented in favor of Brahminic and other upper castes. They write "from a Dalit consciousness," from an "awareness of this history of infamy that they challenge as they vindicate their own humanity by assuming the label "Dalit," meaning the crushed ones." (Gupta, 2)

The Inter-war Period

The inter-war period in Europe provided playwrights with new images of social decay and desolation where a talk of a 'dissociated sensibility' as theorized by T.S. Eliot started to take shape. The modernist impulse in literature, enthused by Eliot's mythic method and historical analogism, viewed social experience as a fractured narrative in need of recollection and adjustment, like flotsam that needs to be put together again. Writers of the period wrote plays about alienated, motionless, and insensible characters who were a direct reflection of the general social scene of Europe and the world of the time. This emerging trend in writing coincided with the spread of some intellectual and cultural movements like the New Man (Der Neue Mench) movement in art which criticized the increasing spiritless mechanization of modern life and the way it yielded in anarchic absurd individuals calling, instead, for the revival of the tribal or primitive whims of existence where man's chaotic ecstasies are left unleashed to both clash and dissolve. With Expressionism and Symbolism as the two most popular modes of expression within modernism, playwrights like, among others, Seán O'Casey, T.S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Luigi Pirandello, and Federico García Lorca created dramatic pieces that aimed at communicating the aura of spiritual aridity featuring the inter-war period..

For instance, T. S. Eliot's verse play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), though it is based on a 12th century incident of murder which led to the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket and one which takes on religious overtones, is revived by Eliot to reflect upon the 1920s and 1930s materially tempted European psyche; a psyche which endured the Great War, the roaring twenties, the depression and the first signs of another approaching world war. This historically inspired play reveals the modernists' concern with exposing Man's frustrated relationship with God, the state, the social other, and the self. Martyrdom and sacrifice within the play, dressed up in ritual enactments, are described as two ways to attain spiritual communion at a time when human beings, ethics, and human relations are sacrificed in the name of wealth and material gain. This loss of hope for a spiritual communion is well expressed in the mouth of the play's chorus, encomiastic in tone, moaning the archbishop's death: "Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay/ Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit, certain the danger/O late late late, late is the time, late too late, and rotten the year;/Evil the wind and bitter the sea and grey the sky, grey, grey, grey." (Quoted in Williams 1969, 181).

T.S. Eliot's earlier mentioned historical play was written at a time when Luigi Pirandello's *Teatro del grottesco* was already a popular mode of playwriting. Plays falling within this mode of writing highlight the alienation a character experiences. Luigi Pirandello's famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), for instance, dramatizes the post-war desolate temper in the manner it oscillates between reality and illusion, dissent and orthodoxy. In this play, Pirandello highlights "the nature of reality and of illusion, the facts of man's conscious roles and disguises," and " the difficulty of truth in the shifting versions of any apprehension and account of what is happening," to the six characters of his play, with a concern of creating a kind of drama which "would not require a type of characterization" that is "abstracted from the complexity of experience." (Williams, 162-163). The play's six characters unveil alienated psyches the only thing they have in common is their despicable selves hiding behind social masks. Characters who are at odds with social reality and whose only seclusion is self-constructed inner worlds much befitting to shelter their evasive temperaments.

The American Stage

On the other side of the Atlantic, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller articulated a kind of drama that spoke directly to the nation's consciousness targeting its essential foundations like freedom, opportunity, and the alienating aspects of the American dream. While realism had its voice with O'Neill

who chose his characters from the desperate fringes of American society using vernacular English in his texts, Miller, known as America's Aeschylus, produced plays, mostly tragic in tone, that targeted the common sense. O'Neill's plays, like *Bound East for Cardif* (1916) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1939), are inhabited by characters standing for people from "all walks of life, from seamen and farmers to businessmen and landowners, from derelicts and prostitutes to newspaper editors and professors;" characters who "face numerous challenges unique to their times, from the development of technology to the exploitations of capitalism and the ravages of war, as well as those common to all times, from marital strife and sibling rivalry to illness, death, and the need for dreams or illusions to endure life."(Bloom 2014, 248). And while some of his plays' characters "experience the hopefulness of triumph and success," others, reflective of society's struggles and inequalities, experience the "hopelessness of defeat and failure." (Bloom).

Just like O'Neill's, Miller's plays were socially engaged. His play *The Crucible* (1953), to which I will return in the next section, is often read as a direct commentary on the growing sense of despair and the deluding skeptic outlandish and xenophobic sentiments spreading in inter and post-war American society like McCarthyism, anti-communism, and exclusivism towards the non-American. His other play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) questions the limitations of the American dream. Different in thematic concern as they are, both plays bring to stage the concerns of a society whose ideals of democracy and individual freedom are put into scrutiny by the events sweeping the world at the time. Miller's contemporary Tennessee Williams undertook a slightly different approach towards critiquing American society of the 30s and 40s. Instead of addressing the collective plight and responsibility of individuals in an alienating society like what Miller and O'Neill did, Williams was rather concerned with looking into the "struggle for expression of the misfit individual." (Bottoms 2014, 340). His plays like *Summer and Smoke* (1948) look into how people's image of self on their way to achieve who 'they want to be' is often defied by society's expectations and vision of 'respectability' (a possible connection can be made here with Pirandello's characters who struggle to be accepted in a standoffish inter-war society as earlier indicated). Though vulnerable, individuals struggling to fit without being socially rebuffed end up, according to Williams' depiction of them, accepting their limitations and revoking their 'sense of self' in hopes to survive the judgments of their social milieus.

To put the dramatic expression in service to the African-American struggle for equality and justice, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) propagated for a revolutionary kind of drama through which "people must be taught to trust true scientists (knowers, diggers, oddballs) and that the holiness of life is the constant possibility of widening the consciousness. And they must be incited to strike back against any agency that attempts to prevent this widening." (LeRoi Jones 1966, 210). Society's passivity and lack of insight, according to Jones, to try to question and reveal the truth that lurks behind everyday life circumstances has always been part of the dramatists' attempt to come to terms with changing social conditions in their communities. Driven by a "politics and economics of representation," (other African American playwrights like William Browns, Joseph Bradford, and Pauline E. Hopkins "understood their significant roles in not just the birth of a dramatic tradition but in the reconstruction of Afro-Diasporic identities as well as the spiritual healing of a nation." (Mcallister 2014, 218). They displayed an interest in showcasing how the subjects of their plays, resonating with a wider Black American public outside, "navigated the difficult transition from slaves or colonial subjects to the living, moral embodiment of "ol' freedom himsel'." (Mcallister, 232)

The Age of Revolution and Late Modernity

In the last fifty years, which are referred to as the 'age of revolution' and anti-colonial movements, drama turned out to be more vehement in its political and social commitment. Playwrights tried to tailor dramatic spaces to meet the calls of the deprived masses by trying to destabilize and question social conditions for the sake of instituting a more ordered way of life. They made of the stage a terrain to satirize and deride cynical indictment of politics in their respective societies. In Africa, South East Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and innumerable guises and theater trends, playwrights worked towards subverting oppression, questioning corrupt governments, exposing totalitarian regimes, forging identities, and articulating conflicting discourses and narratives around them. The dramatic writings of the Nigerian Wole Soyinka, together with his essays and prison writings, were at the forefront in the face of African corrupt leaders and a degenerating socio-political scene. Through his 'shot-gun-writing' aesthetics, Wole Soyinka crafted dramas that counteracted totalitarian regimes across Africa through politicizing mythology and tradition to reinforce his political messages. His plays *Kongi's Harvest*, *A Play of Giants,* and *King Baabu* fervidly exposed and criticized the corrupt political atmosphere in the African post-colony, to use Achille Mbembe's term. Gilbert and Tompkins see that postcolonial playwrights "run a greater risk of political intervention in their activities in the forms of censorship and imprisonment, to which Rendra in Indonesia, Ngûgî wa Thiong'o in Kenya, and countless South African dramatists can attest." (Gilbert and Tompkins, 3) As such, whatever is the path taken by these playwrights, subversion of abusive political and totalitarian systems helps them make known the dynamics of power and political abuse in their respective societies, however challenging this can be.

In the Arab World and with the creation of the Israeli State in 1948, Arab playwrights, represented by the Syrian Sa'd Allah Wannus, called for the 'politicization of theater' to serve political and social change. The Six Days War of 1967 and the 'Setback' which followed precipitated this shift towards the political dimension of playwrighting. Through his plays, Wannus was critical of how the Arab nations, which slowly formed themselves after the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the joint French and English monopoly over the region which followed it, were politically 'immature' or they were meant to be as such. He criticized people's lack of consciousness towards issues recurring at their doors. While Wannus had his own way of how to politicize the theater and make it in the service of society, his 'political plays' can be said to be partly inspired by German playwright and drama critic Bertolt Brecht's 'Epic Theater' tradition and mainly his technique of the 'A-effect' or 'alienation' effect. In Brecht's theatrical paradigm, plays with an 'alienation' effect are meant to take the "human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as striking, something that calls for explanation," which is "not to be taken for granted, not just natural," with the purpose of allowing "the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view." (Wasserman 2003, 37). Wannus' plays reflect this dramatic dimension for his plays emphasize the failure of Arab political leadership and work towards driving the reader/spectator to both question and intellectually engage in problem solving. Of all the plays he created for the stage, his play *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June* (*Haflat samar min ajl 5 Huzayrān*) published in 1968, questioned Arab leadership during the war against the Israeli state; a leadership which kept emphasizing its capacity for victory if it was not for the enemy ending up victorious. Vehement and sardonic in tone, the play attracted much attention on the part of a public who took things for granted when it comes to politics, and rarely questioned their leaders. The play was banned from further performance and it is still Wannu's great dramatic debut in what he called *masraḥ al-tasyīs*.

Not far divergent from the alienating political context in Africa and the Arab World, in Latin America and the Caribbean, from the 1970s onwards, Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal's pedagogies and theaters of the victimized and the oppressed tried to "assert the culture of the dominated classes …making

people not only aware of but also active participants in the development process." (Nogueira 2002, 104). It is a kind of theater or drama that works towards a change in an attitude, a transformation in the way people perceive social phenomena. It is a dramatic experience that generates expectations of what is to come as it evokes in the reader/audience the desire to question and try to predict answers. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal elucidates that "bad playwrights in every epoch fail to understand the enormous efficacy of the transformations that take place before the spectators' eyes. Theatre is change and not simple presentation of what exists; it is becoming and not being." (Boal 1985, 28).The successive authoritarian regimes sweeping many Latin American states since early 20th century and the social convulsions they generated in the region have shaped the content of many plays written by Latin American playwrights. Examples of these regimes include, among others, The Dirty War in Argentina (*La guerra sucia*), Augusto Pinochet's regime in Chile (1973-1990), and Alfredo Matiauda's authoritarian rule in Paraguay (1954-1989). Argentinian dramatists, for illustration, including Recardo Monti, Roberto Mario Cossa and Griselda Gambaro used the stage to criticize the militarization of life and the terror experienced by those whom the state thinks of as its potential and 'secret enemies'. Gambaro's play *El campo* (The Camp, 1967) and Monti's play *Visita* (The Visit, 1977) intersect in their description of the dictatorial state's repressive policies and its strategies to silence those who form a threat to its existence. Both playwrights, echoing others, see that one way to expose these regimes is to lay open the repercussions of their 'silencing means' on the simple Argentinian individual and the society at large.

Besides its revolutionary impulse, postcolonial drama probes into the complexities surrounding the postcolonial subject; his psychology, aspirations, and being. Many writers brought to center stage what Frantz Fanon calls a "constellation of delirium;" that condition of existing betwixt various narratives, between center and periphery or amidst various, overlapping global entanglements. This existence amidst centers manifests through categories like, among others, identity, language, memory, belonging, and ethnicity. Seeing that "postcolonialists adhere to 'deconstruction', a term seeking to dismantle the reductive and inherent binaries of West–Other that simplify, codify, and stereotype while inevitably tilting the scales favorably toward Western superiority," as Krasner (2016, 395) argues, writers with a post-colonialist impulse can use drama to forge communities and equally deconstruct them within the confines of their texts, either to serve a national ideal or demystify false claims about individual and community. In the Caribbean, for example, Derek Walcott's plays have been hailed for the depth with which they handle issues like identity crisis, race and colonialism and their offshoots. They "speak to a people struggling to re-identify themselves against a history of loss, defeat and denigration," and how this "affects their sense of community, and implicitly, by extension, their sense of nation."(Plastow 1999, 6-8). Grounded in his Trinidadian and St. Lucian folklore, peasant culture and racial history, Walcott's body of plays, like *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954), *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1957), and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970) dive into his people's struggle for self-assertion in the face of competing discourses both colonial and postcolonial. In the "face of judgements" put forward by a colonial mindset that the Caribbean and West Indies shelter people with identities which are "empty" and "derivative" with the "desperate attempt of nobodies to be somebodies," (Breslin 2001, 2) Walcott used his dramatic expression to speculate about and a forge a "cultural unity of the scattered territories." (Breslin). Through his plays, intended as a critique of the violent colonial discourse, Walcott created a kind of Caribbean identity which absorbs its vitality from the wide range of "eluding definitions imposed by others." (Breslin). He created a kind of protean character, a Caribbean Adam, who sees strength and pride in the fluidity and freshness of his culture, which allows him more freedom to "shed any fixed identity attributed to him." (Breslin).

This age of revolution and decolonization crisscrossed with the different realities emerging after World War II and its subsequent bipolar polemics with their presumed geopolitical struggle between world democracies and communisms. This new era was marred by manifold experiences of trauma and historical

atrocities which presented literature with new venues towards understanding human loss and repression across different cultural loci. Trauma stories and testimonies emerging from the concentration camps, underground shelters, trails of tears between East and West, collective genocides, mass killings, pillage, conspiracies, and murders shaped the plots of many plays and novels to prove once again that literature is both a production and reflection of society and its changes. Reading, for example, Arthur Miller's *Incident at Vichy* (1964), among other texts reflective of the period, one gets across scenes of victimization and terror as seen through the individual and collective experiences of separated families, forced deportations and wounds left ajar. However, Miller's *The Crucible* remains the most relevant text to name when speaking about the anti-communist scare and its effects on people during the Cold War. The witch hunt in 17th century Salem and the atmosphere of discontent they created vibrate with American society during the MaCarthy era and its cynic inquisitions. Salem's pulling of people to death on false and unverified grounds can be read in parallel with MaCarthy's government putting people in jail out of doubts that they secretly entertain communist ideas. The 'witch' scare in early modern Salem and the 'anti-communist' scare in America of the 50s speak of similar, yet distanced, realities.

Yet, playwrighting is not only about examining loss and different forms of repression which emerge during periods of unrest. In conflict-ridden social contexts, playwrighting can actively take part in reconciling division; in the "healing process of asserting culture and identity, so that the people involved can begin to re-value or even to re-invent themselves in the context of their contemporary post- or neo-colonial situation." (Plastow 1999, 2). The South African stage speaks to this need given that most of it is about addressing possibilities towards healing, catharsis and reconciliation in the aftermath of the Apartheid regime. Post-apartheid literary works in South Africa, by both Black and White writers, laid out a number of themes including memory, forgiveness, and the legacy of past traumas of racial segregation in the present. Added to that, many playwrights, choosing to be overtly political, questioned the validity of the post-apartheid state's politics of 'repair' and reconciliation through rebuking its failure to fulfill the promises towards achieving equality and democratization after long decades of political and social oppression. They had a particular interest in representing "the past, and particularly the victims of that past, in such a way as to attempt to accommodate the contradictions, opacities and ambiguities" played over by the South Africa's new leadership. (Mussi 2020, 11). Plays by playwrights like, among others, Athol Fugard, Achmat Dangor, Mike van Graan, Greig Coetzee, and Zakes Mda represent this new thematic concern of the South African stage.

A play to review in context is Greig Coetzee's play *Happy Natives* (2004) which both addresses and reconciles the lines of divisions between South Africa's representative racial groups. The play shows how diversity can be entertained amidst a racially divided reality and in a nation on the process of molding itself after decades of imposed segregation. It tells the story of three characters who represent South Africa's major racial groups; the Zulu, the English and the Indian Tamil. Despite their cultural differences and the segregation which pulled them apart for decades, the three characters feel concerned about the issue being discussed. The play questions, in a satirical manner, the economic and social instability of post-apartheid South Africa and the violence coming along with it, which can be read as an assessment of the new nation's democratization process and its strategies to achieve reconciliation. Coetzee directs the characters', and the readers'/audience's alike, attention from discussing matters along lines of race, ethnicity and color to issues of importance to whoever identifies as South African. He emphasizes the country's bewildering present state through making it an issue for discussion on stage. It is the playwright's attempt to create dialogue and mend social ruptures through spotlighting the new realities which linger between the 1994 established democracy and a present reality fraught with scenes of violence, and decay. As such, on his way to mend racial divisions, the playwright puts the post-apartheid state on trial.

A similar environment of unrest and division along lines of ethnicity and religion, which needs mending and reconciliation, can be observed in Algeria decades after its independence in 1962. After the socially engaged drama of Algerian playwrights like Tahar Ouattar that featured the sixties and seventies, the Dark Decade in Algeria and its confining discourse on religious and individual freedoms found good expression in both writing and art. The Algerian writer Zehour Ounissi's play *The Prayer of Pigeons* (2004), published in Arabic and performed in theaters across the country, examines the way Algerian women were targeted during the Dark decade and emphasizes their notable roles in Algerian history. The play is seen as an aesthetic outvoicing of the great role the Algerian woman played in society since time immemorial. Starting with the story of a young Algerian woman who was murdered as she was preparing to take part in a musical theatrical performance during the Algerian Dark Decade, the play then turns into a historical mosaic when it moves back in time to retrieve historical female figures like, among others, Kahina, Tinhinan, Lella Fatma N'sumer, Meryem Bouatoura, Hassiba Benbouali who decide to stand up to this atrocity and face the black crow on stage which threatens the life of other women like the one who was murdered. The historical females which Ounissi brings to stage have changed the course of Algerian history through their sacrifices and heroism. While the first woman was murdered because she wanted to sing and perform, the other heroines turn into pigeons signing in her place, praying for a better future for Algerian girls and women. Though this play, Ounissi aims to restore the true image of Algerian women and equally fill a gap in historical scholarship about them.

Current Issues on the World Stage

The current stage can be said to be overtaken by the 'problem of place' reflecting the deracination and 'exilic' experiences of individuals and communities in different parts of the world. Displacements and border crossings, associated with the refugee and migrant crisis, have stirred a kind of writing commensurate with reflecting the plights of characters who are in relentless search for home, for belonging. Stories emerging from refugee camps, detention camps, border checkpoints, death boats, and about people undergoing deportations and prison verdicts are actively finding space in literature and the arts.

Charles Smith's beautifully written play *Objects in the Mirror*, published in 2017, tells the story of a Liberian refugee who fled his war-torn Liberia to find himself in the company of Australian strangers telling his journey of displacement. The play tells the story of Shedrick who, upon fleeing his ravaged country, undergoes a series of displacements between refugee camps until he reaches Australia holding the name of his cousin who died in the war. When discovered for who he is in reality by someone he meets in his new destination, his dilemma as a refugee starts to unfold. He has to decide whether to reveal his true identity and that he fooled the government in order to escape, or remain under his new name (his dead cousin's) and navigate the possibilities of a new and better life in his new shelter, Australia. Shedrick represents a large number of world refugees who end up in similar situations where they have to choose either to 'reveal' or 'conceal' their true names and identities. Whatever route taken, the complications of sustaining oneself against the 'unknown' and the dangers of new lands and new experiences remain intense and debilitating as this play clearly shows.

Since most refugee and immigrant crises tend to be the result of wars, dictatorial regimes and other kinds of conflicts, it is worth revisiting how the issue of 'political oppression' is being represented in contemporary drama. Totalitarianism in the Arab world, dictatorial regimes replacing one another, overthrown regimes, and the Arab Spring pushed for a continuous politicization of the aesthetic expression, in plays, novels and poems. While Wannus' political plays marked earlier decades, post-Arab Spring realities and challenges found voice in a number of plays by different playwrights from across the Arab World. A case to consider in context is Egyptian playwright Yussef El Guindi's post-Egyptian Revolution

drama. His collection of plays including *The Revolution* and *The Tyrant* discuss the upheavals of the 2011 Revolution in Egypt and its aftermath on civilians and protesters. Speaking from the perspectives of both dictators and the street protesters, El Guindi sought to delve into "the exigencies of Western-backed dictatorial regimes, the post-trauma suffered by the protesters who participated in the revolutions, and the painful disconnection exiles experience after leaving their homelands and desiring normalcy abroad." (Malek Najjar 2016).

In *The Tyrant,* which develops in the form of a monologue and a one-act play, El Guindi brings a dictator's psychology and emotional state under inspection. The play speaks of Habib, a "captured dictator" who is "on trial before an audience of revolutionaries." (Malek Najjar 2016). Habib, imprisoned, faces the audience and shares his thoughts, in the form of a series of confessions and reminiscences, about what would happen to him and to the audience who, according to him, are to share his destiny, and that he is not afraid of death like other fallen dictators before him. Before returning to his cell, Habib reminds the audience that his regime survived through their support and scorning them for forsaking him "as soon as he was no longer of use," and that he "is free in his mind" and that it is they who "are actually locked up." (Ibid). In an interview with Malek Najjar, El Guindi expresses that "The Tyrant speaks to the fears of change, but is contextualized in such a way that we see the old order retired, ushering in the chance for something new, regardless of the dangers that lie ahead." (Malek Najjar 2015, quoted in Malek Najjar 2016). Reading it in the context of both pre- and post-revolutionary Egypt and in the context of the political situation in the Arab World over the last two decades, we may say that El Guindi seems to propose that dramatic writing during periods of violence and political unrest plays a major role in laying open what was meant to be hidden by political leadership and its hegemonic discourse, and people's silence and complicity with corrupt regimes.

Conclusion

In reiteration, it is relevant to say that playwrighting or theater is much suited for transmitting "group fantasies and desires" since it always "shifts, adapts and re-positions itself in response to changing national contexts." (Boon and Plastow 1999, 3). For many playwrights, drama is viewed as an appropriate space where divergences and fallings-out emanating from their societies can be played out. The confluence of drama and society, the way examined and argued for in this article, channel this 'adaptability' and 'repositioning' of the dramatic expression. Whether plays speaking of classical and Medieval times of heroic and tragic characters whose destinies were tragically intertwined with those of their communities, or late modern hybrid and fluctuating identities which epitomize equally shattered cultural conditions, drama converges with society through subverting it by exposing its hegemonies and power discourses, and mending its divided realities in the aftermath of conflicts and divisions. In both cases, the social outreach of drama, however under-studied as a literary genre compared to novels and poems, remains an authoritative tool at the hands of writers who may find drama's very useful aspects like 'performativity' and outdoor 'publicity' perfectly useful to both interpret and let drop change in society.

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