CHAPTER 3

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

- Utpal Dutt, "The Street Play"

3.1. Theatre and Relationships of Power

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

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

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

3.2. The Twentieth Century as the Age of Revolutions

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

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

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

3.3. The Political Nature of Literary Texts

The crucial understanding of the political nature of literary texts offered by Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) fuelled a major trend in critical thinking in the latter half of the twentieth century. Issues of historical 'situatedness' or historical embedment rang true to the ears of critics living through decades of enormous social, economic and political upheaval. Marxist critical thought was greatly influential in Chinese literary circles, and among many thinkers worldwide. Drawing
from Marx's position that the way people experience the world around them is wholly or largely conditioned by the mode of production of material life, thinkers like the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918–1990) developed the concept of 'ideology'. Althusser's thesis is that "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence" (18). Althusser further indicates the all-pervasive impact of 'ideological State apparatuses' – including organized religion, the law, the political system, the educational system – on the individual's beliefs and actions. Whereas Althusser's view of ideology is largely deterministic, the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) published in the 1970s make room for the possibility of resisting hegemony with counter hegemonic actions, even if not entirely escape its all-pervasive influence (25).

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

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism emphatically argue that authors and texts cannot transcend their own times; rather, the ideological constructions within which authors live have been internalized and inescapably shape their work. Texts then, are always political in that
they are always vehicles for power. Literature creates and consolidates power relations, so that it not only 'reflects' the culture in which it came to be produced, but actively contributes to the making of culture and history. Within this critical discourse there is, however, debate and disagreement about the question of autonomy and the role of agency. Whereas Stephen Greenblatt assigns only a very limited role to agency (23-24), Cultural Materialists like Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield point out instances of dissidence, subversion and transgression that emerge during political struggles. Dollimore comments:

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

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

3.4. Theatre and the State

The concept of politics cannot be restricted to the power relations of those who govern and the governed. In their essay: "Contesting the arts: politics and aesthetics" critics Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell refer to a "politicization of discourse." They remark: "Its sustaining premise is that every relationship is a power relationship. Therefore any relationship among humans that purports to be principally mediated by, or sustained by, a shared interest in the arts, for instance,
is *ipso facto*, a power relationship. In this case, aesthetic and political judgements may become indistinguishable” (2). However, in this chapter attention is focussed on the relationship of the State with theatre during the period under study and the location of specific playwrights as well as internal references, if any, in the selected plays, to issues of the power of the State. The chapter sets out to throw light on the far from monolithic nature of a ‘nation’ and the fact that dominant meanings can silence communities but can also at times be challenged by residual or emergent meanings of an alternative or contradictory character. The study of theatre in a society in transformation can make accessible alternative maps of meaning to perceive and weigh reality within a particular culture.

3.5.1. State Presence on the Chinese Stage

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

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

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

**Censorship:** Censorship was not unheard of in Chinese theatre. It prevailed in the Ch'ing and Republican periods and even more so in the Communist era. "Censors could at any time attend the theatres, where 'official seats' were normally available to them, and order the closing of the theatre or the suspension of any drama from the stage" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 92).
The Establishment of the Republic: The political events of the early twentieth century displaced the Manchu imperial court and ushered in the revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen and the proclamation of the Republic in 1911. At first it seemed that the theatre was not greatly affected by the changing political scenario. In fact there was a resurgence of theatre, with the increasing interest in the history of China and heroic drama. Soon, theatre artistes discovered the potential of theatre for revolutionary propaganda. Wang Chung-sheng, a well-known actor encouraged a new 'progressive' spoken drama and helped found the Spring Society in Shanghai. His political sympathies prompted him to stage several revolutionary plays. He was arrested and executed in 1911. Colin Mackerras remarks on this new avatar of theatre in China: "When the Manchus were in fact overthrown a few weeks later, it became obvious to the revolutionaries that if the theatre could be used to uphold the status quo, then it could also function as and effective weapon against those in power. [...] The adherents of successive revolutionary movements were to remember this lesson" (Chinese Theatre 49). Like everything else in China in mid-twentieth century, theatre became highly politicized.

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

The Party Line on Art: The Communist Party consolidated its power in the 1950s and brought to Chinese society some stability and freedom from war such as it had not enjoyed for
almost a century. The new government encouraged the arts, and theatre particularly was viewed as an important element of propaganda and social change. As an offshoot of the Communist policy against private enterprise, theatres were gradually nationalised. The nature and function of art was defined by Mao Zedong, and his statements in the "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (1942) became the basis of the party line: "All culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics" (129-141). Mao forcefully maintains that the artist's responsibility is to ensure that his work benefits not the bourgeoisie but the broad mass of the people.

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

The Cultural Revolution: As the Great Leap Forward was propagated, enormous energy was channelized into the promotion of contemporary revolutionary theatre and a corresponding 'leap forward in drama.' The Great Leap Forward turned out to be a major economic disaster and as it collapsed, the preference in theatre turned again to classical plays. However, within the party raged a passionate debate as to the nature of theatre to be promoted. Mao's wife Jiang Qing, supported by Mao himself, won the day and her ascent to political power culminated in the Cultural Revolution. In the 1960s the press urged that art should propagate socialist principles. The Festival of Peking Operas on Contemporary Themes (1964) marked the beginning of a coercive phase of hostility to the classical drama and the restriction of all drama to highly controlled revolutionary plays. Leading actors of the traditional theatre were hounded and persecuted. Professional theatre ceased to exist, and a handful of 'model' operas were put in circulation. The amateur drama was actively fostered and it was reported by Li His-fan of the
People’s Daily, that in 1973 the total number of amateur actors in China was ‘several tens of millions.’ (Mackerras, Chinese Theatre 189) Actors received reasonable salaries and the status of the actor as a revolutionary rose considerably. However, the theatre life narrowed down drastically, and the range of plays performed was severely restricted.

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

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

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

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

At the End of the Century: These critical voices have entered the theatre too. As the year 2000 ended, some 1000 people in Beijing came into the auditorium of the Chinese
Central Academy of Drama every night to watch the play *Che Guevara* by Huang Jisu himself, Shen Lin and Zhang Guantian. Though named after Cuba’s socialist hero, audiences recognized that the play was about modern China. Staged at a time when China as a country seemed to look to Mammon rather than Mao, *Che Guevara* dealt with social justice and rampant corruption as themes. The play unleashed a tempest of accolades and criticism (Wong 1). Many intellectuals worried about China’s consuming passion for money. Others viewed the play as an unreasonable rejection of economic reform. How does the government view such a play? Ironically, the play might not have passed the censors, who are wary of overly pro-communist writing. However, as a senior professor at the Central Academy of Drama, Shen was able to have his play affiliated to the institution, which acts as its own censor. The State, then, has not lost interest in controlling theatre. However, at the start of the twenty-first century, what it controls is not anti-communist ideology, but, always, anything subversive of the current party line.

### 3.5.2. Literature, Performance and Public Life

The word for ‘writing’ in classical Chinese, *wen*, embraces a sheaf of meanings, way beyond literature: the word indicates culture, civilization, learning, pattern, refinement and embellishment (Yu and Huters 21). The earliest instances of writing can be traced to the Shang period (c.2000 BC) (Ebrey 26) and are believed to have been produced around 1200 BC. Chinese classical poetry was highly refined and as early as the thirteenth century, some seven hundred ‘musical dramas’ were written; however, literature was viewed not as primarily an aesthetic phenomenon. Critics Pauline Yu and Theodore Huters indicate the Chinese conception of literature: “Much more compelling were the presumptions that literature was an integral element of the cosmos and of the socio-political world, and that in writing of the self one spoke ineluctably to and of society as well: the forms and patterns of one’s writing corresponded naturally with those of the universe, itself” (21). In this as in other areas of their culture, the Chinese detected the integration and inter-connectedness of all things.
Chinese theories of the arts did not place heavy stress on the notion of creation, and the linked values of originality and uniqueness. Rather, they emphasized the idea of continuity and convention. Literature spoke of matters of the world; and the tendency of the reader is to contextualise the literary work, to assume it arises from the author's own empirical world. Like all else in the cosmos, the writer exists within a network of relations with the worlds of nature and society: these provide the motivation, the forms and the themes of the writer's work. Yu and Huters suggest that this notion of reality and literature deeply pervades Chinese aesthetics: "A seamless connection between the individual and the world somehow enables the poem simultaneously to reveal feelings, provide an index of governmental stability and serve as a didactic tool" (24-25). Indeed, literature in China was never regarded as an end in itself, independent of context or tradition.

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

Literature in China, unlike its Western counterpart, did not develop as a literature of great heroes. Novels or plays are not really peopled with heroes, and where heroes do appear, as for instance the thirteenth century play *The Soul of Ch'ien-Nu Leaves her Body*, the main virtues of the central female character are the fact that she is a good daughter and wife. (Chai and Chai 154). The absence of wars of external aggression and a war hero mythology in Chinese history has been often remarked upon. The soldier holds a very low social rank, and warfare as a means
of resolving problems has been condemned as an inferior means. In fact, the plays studied here
do not feature great tragic heroes at all. There are even no grand characters like Maghai in
Mahasweta Devi's *Water*, no Kalhan or Indrani as in Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun*.

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

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

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

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

(T)here was profound disillusionment with Western political systems and methods of conducting international diplomacy. Rather suddenly, Chinese radicals became more interested in the significance of the Russian October Revolution and Marxism in general. Thus the ideology of the May Fourth Movement, which Ch’u Ch’iu-pai and thousands of
others found so compelling, had two essential components: a militant nationalism
directed at foreign aggression, and a radical cultural iconoclasm that rejected the
Confucian past (18).

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

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

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

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

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

Mao laid heavy emphasis on the revolutionary role of writers and the utilitarian function
of art. The writer was required to “awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel
them to unite and struggle to transform their environment” (*Literature and Art* 58). Mao would
not tolerate for the arts any measure of autonomy from the State. He declared that literature and art are subordinate to revolutionary tasks and need therefore to be guided by the political party.

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

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

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

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

3.5.3. Four Plays from Modern China

By the mid-twentieth century, the Chinese people were deep in the throes of social transformation. In the context of this gigantic and confusing landscape what masks did theatre wear as Chinese society undertook to modernise? The four plays selected for analysis are representative of some of the avatars assumed by Chinese theatre from the 1950s to 2000.
There is no attempt here to hammer together one grand monolithic narrative. Many distinct voices were raised and it is intriguing to probe in what ways individual playwrights articulated the traditional worldview or questioned or departed from it, or re-defined it; and how they inevitably donned a political costume.

*The White-haired Girl* (1951)

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

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

Being directed against abusive social practices long familiar to village tenant farmers, it became a theatrical symbol of the revolutionary cause and was constantly performed in the late 1940s and 1950s. The fusion of song, music, chorus work and ordinary speech allied to a contemporary setting set *The White-Haired Girl* apart from either traditional Chinese or modern Western stage practices, though both had clearly offered some inspiration. It appealed to an audience for whom theatre without song and music was inconceivable and dialogue drama in the Western vein meaningless in the context of their
lifestyle. *The White-Haired Girl* was the first full-length representative of a new national genre named *Geju*, song drama. Flexible in subject matter and musical form, it was contemporary but adaptable to regional traditions. It was one solution to finding a long-standing problem of Chinese theatre (40).

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

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

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

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

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

> [...] after careful study, we came to consider it not merely as a ghost story or an attack upon superstition but grasped its most positive aspect – the portrayal of the contrast between the two types of society and the significance of the people’s liberation. Writing the libretto and rehearsing took more than three months, during which time we never
ceased experimenting and revising. [...] Most important is the fact that, apart from assistance received from experts, artists and cadres, this opera was composed mainly by means of the help and criticism of the masses. The people are our teachers, and it was they who taught us how to work (The White-haired Girl iv–vi).

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

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

Yesterday I attended a performance of the most famous of the new plays, The White-Haired Girl, beautifully produced and expertly acted by the Artist Workers Group of the (Communist) North China University. This semi-operatic drama is an elaborate production, written by four persons and requiring a cast of twenty and an orchestra of twelve. Seeing it was an exciting and memorable experience, despite its length of four hours and the fact that, as all tickets were unreserved, I had to come more than an hour early to insure getting a seat. [...] As I watched the sobbing heroine being dragged away from her father's corpse to serve the landlord, I could not help wondering: Is this artistically true to life? [...] It is obvious, however, that no such considerations disturbed the minds of the audience (among whom I was probably the only foreigner). Emotionally, they were completely one with the play and, during tense moments, roared their disapproval of the landlord, shouted advice to the heroine, and cheered the arrival of the Eighth Route Army. [...]The behaviour of the spectators, in fact, was in some ways almost as interesting as the play itself. They filled every seat and overflowed into the aisles. During the hour or so of waiting before the play began, some groups passed the
time by singing the new revolutionary songs at the top of their voices. True, the audience was predominantly youthful and contained many students and soldiers: yet there were many older people. [...] The whole experience of seeing it, in fact, gave overwhelming proof of the strength of the new ideas in revolutionary China. Let any man beware who glibly assumes that these ideas are the monopoly of but a few visionary fanatics beneath whom lies a sea of "growing discontent" (304-6).

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

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

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

The astounding popularity of the play for over four decades seems to indicate that here the Chinese people post-Liberation found a narrative that was their own, and an artistic medium that they vibrated to. *The White-haired Girl* indicates the grand narrative of the Chinese people in the 1960s, the *Zeitgeist* or the spirit of the age.
Teahouse (1957)

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

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

Spoken Drama: Teahouse, as ‘spoken drama’ is an instance of the influences of Western literature on Chinese writers. Lao She belonged to a generation of intellectuals who were keenly interested in world drama. Unlike traditional Chinese theatre, the huaju excludes elements of music and stylized song and dance, to the benefit of the written and spoken word.
The new genre had come into its own a couple of decades earlier with the publication and production of *Wang Zhaojun* (1923) and *Zhuo Wenjun* (1923) by dramatist, poet and historian Guo Moruo who had studied in Japan, and *Thunderstorm* (1933) and *Sunrise* (1935) by a leading playwright of the day Cao Yu. In the company of Lao She, Cao Yu had visited the United States to observe Western theatre. In Peking and more energetically in Shanghai, literary figures were calling for change in the theatre. The Creation Society and the Spring Sun Society together with the Shanghai Dramatic Association became enthusiastic sponsors of the new form. Cao Yu and his friends studied and admired not only Ibsen, but also Greek drama, Anton Chekhov and Eugene O'Neill. Realistic dialogue, credibility of characterisation, and the portrayal of the social tensions of the day marked the drama of the playwrights of this generation. Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm* took the Chinese public by storm, was staged hundreds of times in theatres, schools, villages, factories and army camps and was later adapted to local opera (*Thunderstorm ii*).

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

**Leisure and Politics:** At the start of the play, in the autumn of 1898, the Yutai Teahouse is an inviting place with people streaming in and out to sample tea, snacks or meals.
The proprietor is a courteous and shrewd young man; the clientele is cosmopolitan indeed --- among others, a soothsayer, a 'flesh merchant', a landlord, a palace eunuch, a gang of toughs, a couple of police agents, an army deserter, a starving peasant woman selling her daughter.

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

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

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

One thing is in common. A board stares down from every wall in large characters: "Don't discuss state affairs" (23). By Act Three it is the period following the defeat of the Japanese when Kuomintang special agents and American troops run rampant in Beijing. At the end of the Act the teahouse is about to be transformed into a den with a dance floor and bedrooms, and a place to track political enemies. It is the end of the teahouse; and of the proprietor — he hangs himself. The idea of work and leisure and with it, social relationships, are re-defined as modernity elbows out tradition.
The very performance space for the performance of this play is ironically eloquent. *Teahouse* is performed not in the old style teahouse theatre, but in more modern theatre auditoriums for an audience that sits still and serious. It is a far cry from the setting of the old Beijing theatre and its rather boisterous mood of celebration. Critic Yi-Fu Tuan comments, “A critical distinction between “traditional” and “modern” theatre is that whereas the former is a celebration of life, the latter is a criticism – a deconstruction? – of life and a cold look at death” (240). By the time Lao She’s *Teahouse* is produced, the teahouse theatre culture has all but broken down. The audience sits in semi-darkness to watch the passing of an age.

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

Unlike the resolution in most ancient Chinese drama, the ending of *Teahouse* does not induce a mood of acceptance and harmony. The conventional Confucian devotion to morality which in the past always demanded poetic justice by the dramatist, appears almost perfunctorily in the ‘clapper-ballad’ epilogue: Oddball Yang, the ballad-monger, returns to find Ding Bao, the young ‘come-on hostess’ in tears, and he consoles her with the thought of a “bright new hope, a hope to wash away our grief” (81). The “bright new hope” that the New China would redeem their suffering sustains the people. The brevity of this note in the play begs a few questions. Is this the playwright’s concession to the conventional expectations of his audience? Is the touch of
hope and poetic justice to come a residue of the Confucian world-view, which the dramatist assimilated all his life, and exposure to foreign drama cannot displace? More plausibly, here is perhaps a deliberately light touch, so that the note of hope does not counter-balance the mood of dark anger against social degeneration and the need to arouse awareness and public opinion. After all, Lao She was writing *Teahouse* in Communist China.

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

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

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

Lao She is careful not to append a fourth act to the play depicting the new 'liberated' society once it is established. Possibly the author may be only too aware of the shortcomings and internal contradictions of this new society during which he is now writing his play, and may find an inclusion of such a reflection too problematic. It is a notorious fact of the first three decades
of Communist rule that socio-political interpretations and views could turn often and quite unexpectedly, leaving writers to explain that they were not national traitors. Hundreds of artists were proscribed in the wake of such reversals of the Party line, with dire consequences ranging from hard labour to publicly being 'struggled against' (interrogated and punished) to execution. On the contrary, Lao She's play gained great popularity, as it did not raise the hackles of the censors, and as the new educated audience of the genre of the spoken play were able to watch and safely enjoy aspects of their lives being performed on stage. Lao She went on to win many public accolades and hold high posts like that of Chairman of the Beijing Federation of Writers and Artists.

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

_Cai Wenji (1959)_

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

The Playwright: Guo Moruo (1892–1978), a dramatist, poet and historian, had been in the 1920s among the leaders of the Creation Society. Guo had been an archaeologist and had written books on ancient Chinese society and Oracle bone inscriptions, the earliest known written inscriptions in China (_Feuerwerker_, A. 175). But now his stance was basically anti-traditionalist. He played a major role in the resistance at Shanghai during World War II. "Under the P.R.C. he was given numerous government and cultural posts and was one of the very few artists and
intellectuals to remain in favour during the decade of the Cultural Revolution” (Mackerras and Scott 47). It is revealing to note that his last play, *Wu Zetian*, was written in 1960 and revised in 1962. Though he “remained in favour” during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) he wrote no more plays. Guo Moruo generally wrote historical plays which reflect his concern for contemporary events in Chinese history, believing, like Mao Zedong in “making the past serve the present.” In appreciation of his achievements, Mao Zedong wrote on 21 November 1944, in a letter to Guo Moruo, “Your historical articles and historical plays are a great contribution to the people’s cause. The more of them, the better” (Mao, *Letter ii*). Guo’s historical plays received considerable public attention in his day.

**A Woman as the Protagonist: Cai Wenji** is set at the time of a turbulent period of Chinese society (196–220 A.D.) when the Han court was under threat from the revolts of poor peasants and the greed of the aristocracy. It dramatises a story well-known to the Chinese: the return of Cai Wenji to the Han court after twelve years’ marriage to a tribal chief on the northern border. As a historian and poet, the character of Cai Wenji presents points of interest that throw light on the playwright’s view of history and art. Unlike most protagonists of Chinese drama, this one is a woman. Like Mao himself, Guo also believed that “women hold up half the sky”, and was a strong fighter for women’s rights. This was not a passing concern. Not only were his early plays *Wang Zhaojun* and *Zhuo Wenjun* (1923) named after women, but also his very last play, *Wu Zetian* (1962) deals with the only woman in the history of China to ascend to the imperial throne (684–705). Women characters – both heroines and villains – have been abundant and interesting in traditional Chinese theatre, but save for rare exceptions like the famous Madame Cassia³, they do not hold such central positions. Guo depicts intelligent, strong, even defiant women from the past and often places them in influential political roles.

**Historical Plays:** Traditionalists by culture, the Chinese devoted themselves to the study of history like few other people. Their historians were eminent literary personalities who wrote in a sober and scholarly style. The love of history found its way into theatre and historical plays were extremely popular. Whereas the large majority of characters on the Chinese stage
are drawn as more or less universal types, it is in historical plays that we encounter more rounded three-dimensional portraits. Guo turns to this genre to subtly comment on the contemporary scene and reinforce values he holds significant.

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

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

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

**Writing in Times of Censorship:** By the time Guo set out to write *Cai Wenji*, the Communist Party had consolidated its power, won the civil war against the Kuomintang, and the People’s Republic of China (P.R.C.) had been established under the leadership of Chairman Mao.
Censorship of theatre activities was firmly in place, and practice was required to be strictly in line with Mao's ideas. Refractory writing would invite severe reprisals. The Marxist ideology of the Communist Party and the policies of Chairman Mao were apparently germane to the mind and heart of Guo Moruo. Still, the political climate being extremely volatile and Party officials being enormously powerful, Guo had to ensure that his writing left no room for mis-interpretation. *Cai Wenji* then, loses some of the fire and passion of the earlier *Qu Yuan*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Nocturnal Wanderer* (1993)

**The Playwright:** It was only in the 1980s, after the fall of the Gang of Four and the death of Mao (1976) that theatre experimentation regained some vitality. Gao Xingjian emerges as the foremost name in playwriting. Gao Xingjian was born in 1940, even as the Sino-Japanese war raged, and grew up in the Communist regime. He studied French literature at the Peking Foreign Languages Institute, as an avid reader grew aware of European literature, mainly the work of Stanislavsky, Brecht and Meyerhold. At one point during the Cultural Revolution he was a leader of a Red Guard brigade; he was later banished to the countryside to work with the peasants. He was early exposed to violence and cruelty in society and driven by a desire to
"decipher the meaning of the cruel reality around him" he took to writing. His manuscripts had to be wrapped in plastic sheets and buried, sometimes burnt to avoid detection. Writing was for him above all an exploration of his own self. His translator Gilbert Fong notes:

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

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

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

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

Plays like Nocturnal Wanderer certainly do not aim at being specifically Chinese drama; however, questions do cross one’s mind about the role that the playwright’s memory of his experience in the troubled socio-political context in China may have played in shaping his dominant themes. Equally, the very consciousness of the writer, geographically and culturally in exile, throws up intriguing questions about the ‘pastness’ of the past and the ‘presence’ of the contested order and world-view.
Political Stance: In China Gao's work came to be banned, his plays shut down. His insistence on the individual voice rather than a 'hymn to the nation' was seen as subversive and politically unacceptable. This play, as other plays by Gao, can be viewed as a peremptory refusal of the role of playwright as political propagandist or even as a voice of the collective.

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

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

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

Gao unequivocally rejects the Maoist view of literature prevalent in the China that he was exiled from. He declares that literature is not concerned with politics but is purely a matter of the individual: his emphatic declaration, however, can be read as a political statement, the location of the writer's power within himself, for himself, and not the State. Gao's work is an indication that
this playwright, too, is interested in questions of power. Rebelling against the loss of the individual voice in a totalitarian regime, Gao's characters seek the source of power within the self.

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

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

3.6.1. Political Theatre in West Bengal

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bhatia goes on to draw attention to the fact that such statements "collectively [...] form an archive that reveals the authorities' fears about drama's ability to influence via methods that were not easily accessible to them - linguistically, theatrically, or spatially" (Bhatia 7). The plays,
the opinions expressed in the press, as well as the regulatory acts all testify to the acute awareness of theatre as a potentially subversive voice. Thus, the politicization of the theatre in Bengal was inescapably recorded and institutionalized.

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

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

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

Historical themes pervaded the stage, with history taking on the mantle of a thought process to promote nationalism. Titles of plays are revealing: *Rana Pratapsigha, Chatrapati Shivaji, Mewar Patan, Shahjahan*. Playwrights like Girish Ghosh make attempts to voice secular sentiments. Siraj, a character in *Rachanabali* has the following lines to speak: "Should there be a blessed day when Hindus and Muslims give up their selfish interests and look to shoulder the common exploited man's cause and feel their insult as their personal humiliation, only then can the foreigners be tamed, or else unfortunate Mother Bengal is bound to be in chains" (Ghosh 364).
As the struggle against colonialism intensified theatre turned to history for parallels and symbols. Historical confrontations were re-enacted and re-interpreted and one unfortunate outcome was the intensification of the Hindu-Muslim communal divide. Chatterjee points out:

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

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

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

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

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

The IPTA responded to the exigencies of the contemporary situation: they preferred outdoor stages for audiences of many thousands in Bombay; they performed on a revolving stage for a Calcutta audience; they experimented with the use of peasants’ dialect, *Jatra* songs and props. It can be claimed, as Nandi Bhatia does, that the IPTA is responsible for inaugurating a theatre of collective resistance and liberation (78). Its strength lay in its heterogeneous nature, allowing it to adapt easily to geographical, cultural, and linguistic differences in the country. It is to their credit that they not only produced vibrant political theatre and staged contemporary social problems, but that they theorized important issues such as language, space, geography and culture.
Plays like *Jabanbandi* and *Nabanna* were path breaking efforts. *Jabanbandi* focused on the peasant question and the tensions within the rural world. Here is a conscious attempt to replace a middle-class hero with a peasant hero — a significant departure from accepted theatrical practice. Bijon Bhattacharya’s *Nabanna* depicts the horrors of famine, and highlights the man-made problems of black-marketing and hoarding, and offers an implied critique of colonialism. *Nabanna* was staged before packed houses, and very often on makeshift stages. About the significant place of *Nabanna* in Indian theatre, Kironmoy Raha writes, “The play and the production had the germinal ingredients of a new theatre movement. The moment was ripe” (155). It was to be a short-lived movement.

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

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

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

**Under the Left Front Government:** After Independence, the thrust of resistance underwent change, and internal differences within the IPTA surfaced into a split. Utpal Dutt, the best-known left-wing playwright rebelled against the compulsion for his plays to echo every
modification in party philosophy. He was expelled from the party and eventually formed the Little Theatre Group (LTG) in 1947; another breakaway group, Bohurupee, was founded by Shombhu Mitra in 1948: the latter shook off all political traditions; the former staunchly claimed the political legacy of the left. Dutt's theatre was progressively anti-establishment. In December 1962, the Government introduced a Bill in the Assembly subjecting theatre to police control (Pal 117). Dutt staged frontal attacks on what he saw as a betrayal of the mass revolution by the bourgeoisie. However, with the rise of the Left Front Government to power, Dutt had to lay down his aggressive anti-establishment weapons. In a Colloquium held in 1998, actor-director Bibash Chakraborty (1937 - ) verbalized the predicament of many left-wing theatre writers in Bengal in the decades after Independence:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One seminal insight yielded by early Indian theatre aesthetics is that the effect of art on the audience consists, not really in the fostering of individual emotion, but in a generalized aesthetic experience, a state whereby the audience contemplates and attains the highest joy. Critic C.N. Patel is of the view that “In moments of artistic enjoyment the consciousness of the individual transcends its sense of separate identity, becomes *sadharana* or pure human consciousness in a state of being, watching the world of becoming without being involved in it. This apprehension is an act of the imagination through which both the artist and the spectators participate in the divine power of creation” (Patel 97). By this aesthetic empathy, what is presented by the artist's creative power acquires a quality of clarity far beyond what is directly perceived. In the moment of deep artistic response both involvement and detachment are aroused. In the Indian’s view of the world, then, the artist is engaged in an activity recognised to be of a very high order.
In the Indian scenario in modern times, questions on the nature of literature gained great currency, since they came to be interpenetrated with new constructs of nationhood and cultural identity. Literature and politics formed alliances. In Bengal, from the mid-nineteenth century, a yearning for freedom and reformist fervour found expression in journalism, drama, poetry and the novel, in the work of writers like Debendranath Tagore, Aksay Kumar Datta Rajnarayan Basu, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Madhusudan Dutt and Dinabandhu Mitra. Exposure to Western literature through English education and travel opened a window to world literature. A renewed pride in the regional language led to prolific writing and experimentation. By mid-twentieth century the playwright, as an artist, had assumed a growing political stance, in the face of censorship and intimidation. Plays like Nildurpan (1860) by Dinabandhu Mitra reflect the clear self-awareness of the playwright’s calling to contest and challenge. As the nationalist struggle intensified, the formation of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (1943) formalized the politicization of theatre throughout the country. The IPTA playwrights, linked to the Communist Party, rejected the nineteenth century Westernised proscenium commercial theatre with melodramatic stories, and sought to devise a contemporary theatre rooted in socio-political reality. The playwright was now a political writer.

3.6.3. Four Plays from India (West Bengal)

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

Evam Indrajit (1962)

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

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

**The Playwright:** Parallel to his professional work as civil engineer, Badal Sircar nurtured his skill for rendering the speech of the common person on the street. In his posting away from the city of Calcutta he tried his hand at a few comedies. His encounter with world theatre seems to have firmed his interest and creativity: he came face to face with English and European theatre when he studied town planning in England and then in France. His first serious play was *Evam Indrajit*, published in Bohurupee's journal in 1965, when he was away in Nigeria at work on a town-planning project. It is now regarded as a major turning point in Bengali theatre, and
continues to be, to date, the Bengali play most widely translated into other Indian languages (Raha 177).

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

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

If for Karnad, Dubey and Karanth [...] Ebong Indrajit served to open up an area of freedom that allowed them to experiment with open-ended, skeptical forms, Sircar assumed the questioning/doubting Indrajit role himself, and pursued it to the point where he could identify the forces impinging on his freedom of theatric expression, and
then broke away from the theatre that he had known till then to construct a different paradigm of theatre altogether. Uncomfortable with the first appellation he had chosen – the Third Theatre – he soon came to call it Free Theatre, free both economically (neither charging for entrance nor depending on nor asking for funding/sponsorship support) and politically. The major issues that Sircar has since explored/projected in his Free Theatre plays have been those of violence, ranging from antisocial to state to nuclear; exploitation, particularly as practiced in the perpetuation/enlargement of the rural-urban divide, and the deliberate ‘denial’ of the village in the persistent valorization of the metropolis and the cataloguing of its ills and problems; and the evil of religious obscurantism and intolerance. Sircar, alone amongst his contemporaries, has defined for himself a total project – in which the play, the theatre, and society in change come together in an area of conscience (“Theatrescapes” 71).

**Dramatic Symbol: Evam Indrafitis**

is peopled with characters belonging to urban society, the middle class intelligentsia. Amal, Vimal and Kamal go through the motions of living through their monotonous predictable existence. Indrajit too, does the same: he is incapable of breaking out, though he is plagued by his own anguish of awareness, by his own urge to discover some meaning in his life. Another character in the play, the Writer, confesses to his desire to write a play. “But... I know nothing about the toiling peasants. Nothing about the sweating coal-miners. Nothing about the snake-charmers, the tribal chieftains or the boatmen. There is no beauty in the people around me, no splendour, no substance. Only the undramatic material – Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit” (Evam Indrajit 6). However, from this ‘undramatic material’, Sircar creates significant images of routines and relationships. Manasi, the woman who is the inspiration of the Writer and the Mother, bewildered at the Writer’s neglect of things as important as eating and sleeping, are two female characters with archetypal overtones. And central to the play are questions of power and its fall-outs, questions of unresolved relationships and the predicament of a whole generation. Sudesha Banerjee correctly views Sircar’s play as a landmark:
The skepticism and the anguish, the fate of a post-world-war generation – living with hopes that have remained distant dreams, aspirations that have not materialized, emotional bonds that have been severed somewhere – built up to an overwhelming sense of waste for the enlightened middle-class youth of the 60s. Indrajit became a point of identification for all who live through this turbulent phase. The play became a constant source of reference and counter-reference for people who thought intensely and looked upon the problems of humdrum existence with care and concern (64).

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

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

The intellectually alive middle class regards itself as the backbone of the country. Their so-called middle class values have been glorified and yet their genuine and deeper values have always been attacked by those who swear by fashionable Marxist dogmas. The middle classes have been made to feel guilty for opting for stability, aspiring for culture and believing in a national identity. In Bengal, the contradiction was resolved at a certain level with the middle classes aligning themselves with the left forces. In other parts of the country, the best elements in the middle classes were opting for the armed forces or the administrative services. *Evam Indrajit* is in some ways about the residue; the residue
consists of those who have failed to adjust, align and ceased to aspire, and also those who are enmeshed in the day to day struggle for survival (90).

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

VIMAL. Bishi loads his plays with politics.

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

AMAL. Come, come. Literature should embody all that’s true, good and beautiful. It has nothing to do with politics. Politics is dirty.

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

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

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

The direction taken by Badal Sircar’s political thought later moves him away from the formality of the proscenium theatre in urban circles, into the theatre-in-the-round and the midst of the masses. His group Satabdi and their Third Theatre or Free Theatre, as it is called, rebels against the commercialization of theatre, and offers theatre without a fee to a variety of audiences in a variety of locations. Sircar’s theatre career is by itself a political statement and the expression of an evolving political ideology.
Hunting the Sun (1971)

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

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

The Playwright and His Work: Utpal Dutt found theatre when he joined Geoffrey Kendall’s touring troupe from England which was producing Shakespeare’s plays in India and Pakistan in the late 1940s and early 1950s. From the Kendalls he learnt a professional approach to theatre that served him all his life. In 1947 Dutt founded the Little Theatre Group (LTG) in Calcutta and went on to write plays, translate from the German, act and direct with boundless energy. The group secured an eleven year lease of Minerva Theatre and dedicated itself to founding a politically conscious, professional theatre. His interest in history led him to seek
themes in revolutions like the French and the Russian and in events around persons like Hitler, as also conflicts in Cuba, Vietnam, America and Africa. His deeply political inclinations encouraged him to align himself with the Communist Party and he became a member of the Indian People’s Theatre Association which was the cultural wing of the Party.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Political colour has always been a feature of the *Jatra*, as the characters comment on local leadership and in the decades after Independence, on Hindu-Muslim relations and the plight of the downtrodden masses. In *Hunting the Sun*, Utpal Dutt chooses as his theme the age old use of religion and superstition to suppress scientific truth and oppress the populace. His central character Kalhan, a Buddhist monk, is persecuted and has his tongue gouged out as punishment for proclaiming that the earth is round, and for dismissing the sacred scriptures as poetry and not scientific truth. The story is a take-off on Galileo’s life, and denounces belief in God and rituals, and social evils like slavery and deification of the ruler.
In the end, Kalhan must die, of course; for the Buddhist monk “has swept the sky clean of fiction and chased the gods back to the primitive twilight when they had sprung” (612). Just as Emperor Samudragupta questions the right of anyone but himself to hunt the sun, the playwright questions the right of the political or religious establishment to suppress the truth and hunt the sun.

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

*Mareech, the Legend (1973)*

*Mareech, the Legend* (*Mareech Sambad*) was written and directed by Arun Mukherjee and was produced by the theatre group Chetna. Mukherjee, like many other playwrights, actors and directors in West Bengal, had grown under the umbrella of the Indian People’s Theatre. In the latter 1960s politics in the state was marked with uncertainty and upheaval. The Congress Party which had been in power in West Bengal since Independence was crippled by internal squabbles. Its main rival, the Communist Party of India was equally torn by dissent, and a splinter section, calling itself the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] came into its own and captured power. Yet another split resulted in a breakaway group that was violently
repressed. The so-called Naxalite movement was connected with a rash of violent armed clashes all over West Bengal. The movement was ideologically in tune with the Maoist line and the Chinese revolution. The internal instability in the State was compounded by the war with Pakistan in 1971, the waves of refugees entering the country from East Pakistan, and the creation of Bangladesh later that year. The Congress Party regained power. The social stress was now deepened by the declaration of a state of Emergency in the country in 1975.

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

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

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

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

**Political Stance:** *Mareech, the Legend* borrows elements from the *Jatra* but transforms them through a clever and innovative structure. A traditional Ustad (or Director) ushers in characters from the legend of Mareech from the Ramayana, interspersed with incidents from contemporary rural life and the American intervention in Vietnam. With a Brechtian kind of alienation techniques, he steers away from realism to telescope together various zones of time and space and dramatize changing forms of exploitation. Mukherjee refers to *Mareech, the
Legend as a 'poster play'. At a directors' colloquium on Bangla Group Theatre, Mukherjee takes up cudgels for this form:

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

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

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

We are the losers, this is our song.
We were not able to stand our ground.
We didn’t know whom to call our own.
That’s why we lost, remained all alone.

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

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

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

*Mareech, the Legend* reaffirms the significance of the theatre as a vehicle of political thought. Arun Mukherjee unequivocally stresses the moral right and duty of the self-respecting citizen and collectives to question and resist any form of oppression by the State.
Water (1977)

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

**The Playwright:** Mahasweta Devi was born in Dhaka, east Bengal, and grew up during the turbulent decades of the Independence movement. She studied at Shantiniketan, the experimental school founded by the poet/dramatist Rabindranath Tagore. As a result she volunteered to help with relief work during the severe famine that devastated Bengal in 1943: this was her initiation into the political and cultural movements among the Bengalis. In 1947 she married Bijon Bhattacharya, dramatist and author of the famous play *Nabanna* dealing with the Bengal famine. She worked at the Postal Department and tried her hand at various other jobs. In 1962, she divorced Bhattacharya and married the writer Asit Gupta. On receiving her Master's degree in English literature, she took up a teaching position at a College situated in a working class district (Satyanarayana 15). In 1984 she resigned, to become a full-time writer, socio-political commentator and a deeply political social activist. Her best-selling novel *Aranyer Adhikar* won her the Sahitya Akademi award (1979) and her prolific and challenging literary career has been accorded recognition with the Jnanpith Award (1995). The Government of India honoured her with the title of Padma Vibushan (2006) for her social commitment to the tribal areas in West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.
Cultural Representations: *Water* is the longest of Mahasweta Devi's plays, running into some fifty pages and fourteen scenes. Set amidst the Dome tribal community by the river Charsa, it dramatizes the exploitation of the poor peasants by the local landowner and petty government officials. Central to the play is the slow and painful transformation of Maghai Dome, the traditional water-diviner in the village, to a leader of men, courageous enough to act and protest. Deeply enmeshed into the structures and textures of the play is the inescapably historical network of relationships from which the people in the village derive their identity: the caste hierarchy, the familial bonds, the age-old myths and rituals linking the human and natural worlds. Maghai, the water-diviner, has an instinctive connection with the movements of nature: his failure to ensure a regular water supply to his people in summer when the river dries up and the wells are monopolized by the upper caste Santosh is the source of much agony. The idealistic teacher, Jiten, discovers the possibility of building a dam. Excitedly, the tribals pool their resources and set about the task. Samik Bandyopadhyay reflects on the subtext in the play:

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

As this critic suggests, this 'life and death involvement' is the subtext of the play and other plays by Devi. At the end of *Water*, Maghai evolves into a leader, more fully aware and defiant of
earlier uncontested caste hierarchies. He pays for his involvement with his life. As the police officers summoned by the landlord begin to demolish the dam and shoot at the protesting villagers, Maghai is wounded and the waters of the Charsa carry him away in a torrent.

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

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

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

Mahasweta has been criticized by literary purists who feel that she is merely a chronicler of social reality. But even a superficial reading of her fiction will establish that this is unjustified. She transcends the boundaries of material concerns, and highlights the value of a universal consciousness of exploitation and the strength to protest against it. Dr. Nelson Mandela, handing her the Jnanpith – the highest literary award – in Delhi
recently, said that 'she holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium' (x).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Throughout the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, one is aware of the tension between the highly individualized form of the religion as it was expected to be practiced by monks or individuals seeking salvation, and the continuous ongoing pressure for it to be transferred into a practical religion of this-worldly support for the laity in their day-to-day activities (87).
For instance, one needs to take note of the influence of Hindu religious rituals on Sinhala courts: South Indian forms of music and dancing in procession percolated Sinhala festivity and the rituals at the Temple of the Tooth Relic at Kandy are a good example of this influence. Obeyesekere believes that after the tenth century music and dance had entered the court and even infiltrated monastic culture. She opines that "The fact that King Parakramabahu 11 (1236 -71 C.E.) is recorded as having issued an injunction to monks to refrain from 'poetry, drama and such despicable arts' (kāvyanātakādi garhita vidyā ) even though he was himself a reputed poet, author, and a noted patron of the arts at court (Folk Drama 9), suggests that even monks had begun to engage in these arts" (87). However, there are no records of this performative activity. Since the Buddhist restrictions permitted the monks to engage only in more solitary arts like painting, sculpture and writing, the monks did not record secular theatrical activity. The theatre traditions that did survive were the folk forms like Sokari, Kolam, Nadagama and Pasku.

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

It is revealing to note that the donors of funds for the productions of John de Silva's Nurti plays, as recorded in his diary, ranged from the local aristocracy to timber merchants; their addresses cover the entire southern and north-western provinces; and they belonged mainly to the Buddhist and Christian communities (de Mel 65 -66). This heterogeneity indicates the growing sense of cultural nationalism cutting across caste, religious and professional divides, and
building a common front against the colonial government. Equally revealing is the fact that certain communities were not represented among the supporters of the new theatre. Neloufer de Mel points out significant trends:

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

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

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

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

The Sinhala hegemony survived well into the post-colonial present in Sri Lanka. There exists, even half a century after political Independence, a total absence of Tamil published play-scripts, at least in English translation. The long-drawn ethnic conflict seems to have completely
stifled Tamil theatre. An anthology entitled *Modern Sri Lankan Drama*, (1991) edited by D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke features twelve plays by Sinhala playwrights. In the 2005 edition of his seven-hundred-plus-page book *A History of Sri Lanka*, K.M. de Silva refers to the reanimation of Sinhala drama in the twentieth century and dismisses Tamil theatre with a passing remark: "In Tamil drama too, there was this same trend towards a more sophisticated theatrical taste, drawing its inspiration from western drama" (598). And in *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror*, Ranjini Obeyesekere deals solely with Sinhala theatre. She concludes her preface with the following remarks:

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

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

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

To put it into a nutshell, it must be the stand I have taken against the anti-Tamil war, which is not to the liking of the chauvinist elements. After the successful premiere of *my* drama, *The Trojan Women*, in December 1999 in Colombo, I staged it in many cities in the south. Then I decided to stage it in the North and the East, as it is an anti-war drama. [...] To me, the enslaved, persecuted women of Troy so many centuries ago, are no different from the modern day women who have become victims of war-ridden Kosova, Kashmir or Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, the North and East suffered the most due to
the war. The sufferings of the Tamil women in those areas, at the hands of the security forces, are reflected in The Trojan Women. [...] Staging this play and taking its unique dramatic message to all corners of the land, I believe, is the most powerful service and contribution that I can make as an artist to the efforts to end war" (2-5).

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

3.7.2. The Sri Lankan Playwright as Satirist

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

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

And the writer comments, "Many of the dialogues and suttas were permeated by this reflexive, ironic, skeptical voice of the speaking Buddha. It was refracted by generations of Buddhist monks in their sermons, and filtered down to the village level through these sermons, stories such as the Jatakas (Birth Stories) and popular Buddhist writings" (Obeyeskere 23). She states her view of the space the culture made for satire: "This critical tradition was given dramatic expression in the
ritual performances and folk dramas of the village where divine and secular authority was implicitly as well as explicitly satirised and parodied. The ritual arena thus became a 'permitted space', a public arena where political and social criticism was expressed and tolerated" (23–24). This astute observation indicates that the artist then, makes free with this 'permitted space' to encourage discussion and criticism, and the performance takes on a cathartic function that is ultimately healing to the social fabric.

3.7.3. Three Plays from Sri Lanka

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

A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy (1973)

A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy by Ernest MacIntyre shows the influence of Absurdist drama, innovative and arresting to this playwright’s generation. This one-act-play enters the contemporary world of violence, linking it to the prototypical aggression between Cain and Abel of the Old Testament, but also proscribing it for its modern day casual trivialization. It is hardly surprising that theatre depicts, though as miniature portraits, the violence and
criminalization of mundane life and the State in a country like contemporary Sri Lanka, endemically mined with ethnic strife.

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

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

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

FATHER. How did he do it?

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

It is the half-deaf Grandmother who keeps singing off-key "Oh come and mourn with me a-while." The boy tries to wheedle out of his parents a promise to have another child. Simultaneously the grandmother reads an article in the paper where, "they say that the miracle
of Indo-China is not their will to survive, but their ceaseless power to reproduce. For every Vietnamese who dies in the mud, three others with roughly the same features are born in the slime.” As the parents are about to embrace, the boy’s eyes roll, his mouth twists as if “the mark of Cain is emerging again” (223).

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

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

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

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

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

MOTHER. No, no, the same thing happened last month when Ranjit smashed up the Pyrex dinner set. You postponed it for the morning, and Ranjit got off without even a telling off. That’s why he’s going from bad to worse... Killing Upali – My God, I shudder to think what awful things he’ll do the next time.
If you don’t deal with him immediately, he might do something really serious, really terrible (214).

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

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

The Golden Swan or Beyond the Curtain (1989)

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

The Golden Swan attains a lyrical quality, with terse prose and melodious song by the Chorus and two of the characters, alternating to dramatise a story of family relationships and offer social critique. It is set in the cottage of the Brahmin Somadatta, who has passed away, and centers around the Brahmin’s widow and his two beloved daughters Sundarinanda and Nandavati. The Brahmin, apprehensive about the declining financial situation of this family,
returns after his death in the shape of a golden swan and leaves a gold feather after each visit as a source of income. The avarice of the widow prompts her to allow greedy merchants to brutally bind the swan and snatch all its feathers, thus causing its death.

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

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

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

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

Exploring Identity through Art: As elsewhere in Asia, the postcolonial impulse in Sri Lankan theatre has been to define and refine a Sri Lankan sensibility, both in literature and performance. Since ancient Sinhala culture did not really possess a classical theatre tradition, the work of Ediriwira Sarachchandra and some of his contemporaries laid the foundation for the edifice of modern Sri Lankan theatre rooted in its own cultural identity. Here we encounter a playwright totally absorbed in creating a theatre culturally genuine and exploring essential human values. The immense popularity of Sarachchandra's plays and the high respect he is accorded in
Indeed, critics elsewhere would claim for this playwright a grasp of the universals of drama, or perhaps more definitely, of Asian drama. In his intriguing essay entitled “Bharata Today: An Analysis of a Sinhala Play” the Indian critic Krishna Rayan investigated the appearance of dramatic tenets propounded by Bharata in the Nātyaśāstra in Sarachchandra’s play Pemato Jayati Soko (Rayan 125-128). Sarachchandra does reveal an over-riding concern with isolating and plumbing whatever is most basic and essential in human nature, an impulse that takes him beyond the merely topical or political.

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

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

His plays quite definitely represented in their own sphere a decisive phase in the ‘struggle against imperialism’. They expressed potently the national sense of identity, reassured it, perhaps, and certainly transfigured it – a function of abiding significance in post-colonial society. That they performed this function without themselves subsiding in a nationalist hysteria is a vital factor in explaining their continued effectiveness and
validity. For though the playwright derived his stimulus from the intensification of nationalist feeling around 1956, he was not himself trapped within its confines. [...] Consequently, his plays do not address themselves to the transient mood of a nation but to its permanent experience, and with it to the experience of all mankind; they contrive to be national without losing their claim to be universal (30-31).

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

**The Bearer of Woes (1990)**

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

**Questioning the role of theatre:** In Abeysurya’s play the Man is one who sees himself as the bearer of woes, a writer agonizing to alleviate the burden of his people; simultaneously, the Woman too, in a different way, bears the burden of her poverty, the anxiety of supporting her children, the indignity of living the life of a sex worker, and the burden imposed upon her by
the Man and his ideals of rescuing her. The plot cleverly weaves realism with alienation techniques as the drama of the quarrel between the Man and the Woman disrupts the troupe of actors about to enact a 'romantic performance' popular in Sri Lanka at the time. The cast, the director and the sponsor find themselves in the 'real-life drama' and attempt to find solutions to their predicament. *The Bearer of Woes* then, is a comment on the capacity of theatre, or the lack of it, to touch upon the 'real world'. It also provokes thought about the function of theatre in times of social crisis. Further, it places centre-stage the paradox of a writer in society who finds his strong social commitment ridiculed and questioned by the Woman who is merely trying to manage to survive.

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

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

Sri Lankan drama, then, was enormously re-vitalized in the twentieth century. Arguably, this was the outcome of a felt need by the artist to reflect on social issues and processes, and contribute to the climate of thought. With no funding at all, but only a small ticket fee, the young playwright went out to stage his own original play. This was despite intense political upheaval and personal risk. Abeysuriya remarks:
It was a time of great tension. It was the time of the *bhisana* (terror); of political killings and witch hunts for young men believed to be JVP (Nationalist Freedom Party). My parents were very scared. The mere fact that young people were meeting in a house at night was dangerous. My mother would send my friends away when they came for rehearsals saying I was out of town. I was very angry and we quarrelled a lot over the play. But I was determined to continue with it. I was obsessed with my play. Day and night I could think of nothing else (75).

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

MAN. I wrote two books. Both were banned.

2nd ACTOR. Why? Do you write pornography?

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

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

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

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

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

...
and draws some understanding from an actor:

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

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

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

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

### 3.8. Conclusions

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

How do the plays reflect stretched horizons? In varied ways: the Chinese take a new and penetrating look at the artist’s role in a changed social, economic and political paradigm. They explore realism and under Maoist influence view the arts in the service of the State. Labouring under more severe constraints imposed by the State they pour their energies into experimentation in form and technique rather than in overt subversive political stances. The Bengali playwrights ride on the crest of a wave of experiment in political theatre and create a
body of unprecedented socio-political critique. They are the boldest of the playwrights in the three cultures in offering social critique, in exposing oppression and in exploring new relationships with their audiences. Sri Lankan plays try to re-inscribe Sinhala identity, explore the fair amount of 'permitted space' in theatre for social satire, and in rare and notable instances, dramatise, unlike their Indian and Chinese counterparts, clearly volatile issues. In all three cultures playwrights test the waters of experimentation. In all three locations many social tensions surface: between the professional and the amateur, between the city and the countryside, between raising cultural standards and popularizing art, and between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Theatre, as performative art, is placed under severe stress and challenge. And playwrights variously discover and test their agency in new modes.

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

To a significant extent, the historical origins of this evolving tradition of texts and performance practices lie in the genres, discourses and institutions of theatrical modernity that emerged under European influence in such colonial cities as Calcutta and Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century. But to an equally significant degree, practitioners of the new drama have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other pre-colonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization (2).
Though China's encounter with Western powers was not strictly 'colonial', similar processes of self-reflection and practice have been at work in Chinese theatre, just as in the Indian and the Sri Lankan.

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

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

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

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

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

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