CHAPTER 5

THE CHANGING FRAMES OF PERFORMANCE
IN ASIAN THEATRE
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The drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians, too, anyone who is there).

- Richard Schechner, Performance Theory

5.1. Change in the Formal Aspects of Theatre

The meaning that theatre engenders is invariably culturally specific. Theatre productions are a form of cultural space, events created within culturally accepted parameters. The culture creates the conditions, the ideologies, the genres, the styles and the discourses within which theatre practitioners work. The audience's interpretation of the production is dictated in large measure by the culture. As the cultural paradigms shift, often gradually, sometimes precipitously and drastically, the theatre's frames of performance also undergo change. This chapter explores some of the ways in which Asian theatre changed in its formal aspects as the cultural context underwent transformation.

The literary and the performance texts are complex entities to which accrues, over a period of time, a system of signs and conventions; however, these remain, ever vulnerable to
being contested, re-formulated or rejected. The written text, where it exists, is usually associated with a narrative or plot, characters and theme, the use of written and spoken language, literary genre and style. The performance text interweaves the actor (who uses voice, gesture, movement) with music, visual and spatial arts (performance space, architecture, sets, lighting, painting, costumes, masks) with the director and technical crew who are usually invisible and the audience who is watching and being watched. Since theatre is a cultural creation, it involves interpretative acts, encoding and decoding of meaning. Prevailing and shifting ideologies impact on this interpretation; varied discourses can roost in it; and intertextuality nuances it.

In the fifty years that delimit the present study of theatre, the cultures of China, India and Sri Lanka came under cataclysmic assault, and underwent complex transformation. Unsurprisingly, the theatre within these cultures negotiated its own stresses, aesthetic and material, and re-invented itself, not only in content but also in form, in a variety of ways. Though each of these cultures responded diversely, a number of areas of similarity and convergence are discernible and seem to indicate the wider response of Asian theatre to the profound challenges to its society. This chapter sets out to chart some of the significant routes that Asian theatre has traversed with reference to literary texts and performance practices in the latter half of the twentieth century.

5.2. Distinguishing Traits of Traditional Theatre in Asia

Traditional theatre in Asia has been so immensely varied in styles, genres, performance conventions and aesthetic principles that one hesitates to crowd these distinctive kinds of theatre under the generic rubric of Asian theatre. Theatres in China, India and Sri Lanka, for instance exhibit enormous differences and dozens of genres. South Asian cultures like India and Sri Lanka are extremely fertile in mythological themes and multifaceted dance traditions, and favour exuberant theatrical displays of colour, rhythm and emotion. In China, with its blend of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideals, the performing arts show a preference for decorum and
restraint, and structural simplicity. Whereas the aesthetic of the Indian theatre is founded on the congruence of emotions expressed by the actor and the effect, *rasa*, on the spectator, the Chinese principle of *yin-yang* tends to emphasize the oscillation between light-and-dark, opposition and balancing, with the performer aiming to achieve harmony. A critic remarks, "Different aims of performance are summed up in two expressions: in India a theatre-goer is 'one who sees' the play, while in China an audience goes to 'hear theatre'" (Brandon 9). Though both cultures have theatres rich in visual spectacle as well as music and song, they appear to prioritize these elements differently. Nonetheless, the term Asian theatre seems appropriate when one perceives that the theatrical performances in the Asia-Pacific geographical region have traditionally shared a number of significant traits.

For one, the 'classical' or the elite forms of theatre in Asia developed with the active support of the monarchy, voiced the dominant ideologies of the rulers and played to upper class audiences. The performances were generally connected with the seats of political, economic and religious power. Plays were staged in the palaces of kings, in the courtyards of temples and often formed part of civil or religious celebrations.

Another distinguishing characteristic of theatre in Asia, both in its classical and folk manifestations, is that it was deeply coloured by religious beliefs. Themes of plays in India and dance rituals in Sri Lanka were drawn from ancient myths and concerned relations between human beings and the gods. The performances were often intimately associated with religious festivals. The performer invoked the blessings and presiding presence of deities, and at times, the performer was seen as a medium for possession by the gods or demons.

Thousands of plays all through Asia draw for dramatic material on lives of gods and saints and are rooted on the religious world-views of their communities. Characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* populate innumerable dramatic performances in India through the centuries. Buddhist *Jataka* stories or stories about the Lord Buddha in former lives, form the material for plays all over the Far East. Confucian ideals of respect to ancestors, loyalty to family,
clan and ruler, permeate the traditional Chinese theatre. Asian theatre with its religious colouring
takes on the nature of a ritual.

Romantic literature was characterized with passion and sensual elements and stressed
the value of marital relations. But romantic literature was not held in high esteem by scholars.
The Yuan play *Chang Boils the Sea*, a love story of the daughter of a dragon king and a human
being is depicted in a humourous vein even as the lovers expiate their sin. Liu Jung-en
comments, "To the Chinese love between man and woman has always been acknowledged as a
debt or sin which has to be repaid or atoned for in whatsoever agonies and sorrows are requisite,
and there is no end to the anxiety, heartache, ruthlessness and even cruelty to be endured till
this is done. Only then will the gods appear and bring the lovers peace" (Liu 31). This is a
general literary convention that embraces various literary genres like poetry, the novel and
drama, though there is no lack in Chinese literature of love songs and love stories. But even in
the twentieth century plays studied here, the love story is subordinated to other themes.

Yet another striking element of Asian drama is its music, song and dance. The acting
itself may be said to be dance-like, in the sense that it follows well-defined movement codes.
Stage movements of feet, hands and face are carefully and minutely choreographed and
synchronized with rhythmic music and often with sung lyrics. Many of the theatre forms in Asian
countries can be aptly called dance—dramas. Actors are expected to acquire highly sophisticated
skills, and actor training involves dance, acrobatics, singing and speech. Theatre critic James
Brandon reflects on the rich and composite nature of Asian theatrical performance: "Most Asian
drama is 'total theatre' in which all performance aspects are fused into a single form. The nature
of each form is largely dependent upon the particular balance among its many components and
constituent parts, what element is emphasized and what element is subordinated" (7). Unlike
most performing arts in the Western tradition, which involve specialization and
compartmentalization, as for instance ballet or concert music without speech, Asian performance
tends to welcome multiple elements like masks, puppetry, acrobatics, dance, song, music and
spoken dialogue and fuse them into a rich spectacle. The written and spoken word is rarely privileged above all else.

Its performative nature is the key element of Asian theatre, as against the representative quality in much of modern Western theatre. In this respect, it seems closer in nature to the medieval European theatre. In his essay entitled, "An Epistemology of the Stage: Theatricality and Subjectivity in Early Modern Spain", critic William Egginton throws interesting light on the pre-modern theatre in Spain:

The stage for this production is the dance floor itself; the actors are everyone in the room; the story is a role-playing game around flashy spectacle; and the roles themselves are like positions in a field; they have meaning only for the present reality in which they are participating. Whether used to enhance the splendour of a king or noble at court, dazzle churchgoers with the glory of God or entertain townspeople at a traditional festival, theatricality in the fifteenth century was primarily a question of performance and spectacle, not of representation (395).

Likewise, traditional Asian theatre often used stock characters, some of them mytho-historical, gorgeous costumes, makeshift props and codes of movement to create a festive performance event.

The twentieth century has been the cross-roads for the convergence of many forces in the theatre which have radically modified the ancient theatres in various countries and occasioned the birth of a new or modern, mainly urban, theatre. These forces were, in large measure, unleashed by the encounter of the Asian civilizations with Western political powers, their culture in general and theatre in particular. Far-reaching trends have been set in motion and they have gradually led theatre to transform itself as Asian societies questioned, reviewed and recreated, their own identities.
5.3. Significant Changes in Asian Performance Today

Some of the changing directions are now highlighted, with special emphasis on theatre space (including language as space), body, actor and audience; styles of performance, the emergence of a dominant urban theatre, de-colonization and its manifestations. These are placed within the aesthetic generally defined as Eastern; and the trajectory of their transformation is traced as they interface with the Western aesthetic in the twentieth century.

5.3.1. Theatre Space

Theatre, as performance, requires and commands its own space. The performance must have a venue where it can "take place". Whereas earlier literary practice and critical theory privileged time over space, recent critical writing about spatiality refuses to see space as an empty container within which the real drama of history and human passion unfolds. Foucault notes the 'devaluation of space' that had prevailed for 'generations of intellectuals'. "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" (70). Phillip E. Wegner notes that such a paradigm had implications for the treatment of time and space both in literature and performance:

This privileging of temporality and history over space has its literary analogue in a critical tradition that, especially beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century with writers like Henry James, celebrates the portrayal of the complex psychology of characters as the highest achievement of narrative art. Characters are fundamentally temporal constructs that unfold in a space or 'setting', which, once established, seems to remain constant. Space is thus once again treated as the 'stage' upon which the drama of character development unfolds, and setting in such a tradition is viewed as distinctly secondary in importance to character. Moreover, in the increasing interiorization that occurs in certain strands of modernist fiction – which, in turn, have a marked influence
on how we read earlier literary works as well — any concern with setting or space outside
that of the monadic consciousness seems to all but vanish (180).

As nineteenth century writers downplayed the spatial problematic, the way literature was written
and received came to be deeply transformed. Wegner points out that these pre-suppositions
have been increasingly called into question over the last twenty-five years by an emerging
interdisciplinary formation centered on the problematics of 'space', 'place' and 'cultural
geography' (181). This new attention to the production of space has been enriched by
contributions from social theorists, architects, anthropologists as well as literary and cultural
critics. It has opened new vistas in the study of theatre through the work of cultural materialists
like Raymond Williams (The Country and the City 1973), social theorists like Henri Lefebvre (The
Production of Space 1974) Michel Foucault (Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison 1975 )
and performance theorist Yi-Fu Tuan ( "Space and Context" 1997 ). There is today an increasing
recognition that the place of performance inevitably affects the interpretation of the play being
performed. The geographical location of the venue is significant because it places the
performance within social, cultural and historical contexts.

Theorists have differentiated between 'place' and 'space'. Place is "viewed as defined,
specific, occupied, whereas space offers the potential for occupation, which endows it with the
apparent quality of infinite emptiness" (Wilcox 543). Theatre critics also investigate ways in which
a play performed in one location may represent another place. This section explores the
problematic of performance spaces in the traditional theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka, the
transformations that occurred in the fifty years under study and the significance of the changes.
The term preferred in this study is 'space', with the potentiality it offers, the quality of mutability,
and "the ability to be particularized by being shaped, used, and endowed with meaning"
(McAuley 601). Also, what is discussed here is how people organise space for performance, not
how they organise theatrical space to represent an absent place.
Traditional Asian Theatre Spaces

Asian theatre spaces were diverse, but they seemed to favour the outdoors. Traditional Chinese theatre was so rich and varied, and it was so much a part of the lives of the people, that theatre organized space for itself almost anywhere. Performances took place in market squares and by the beach front in rural districts, or in town squares, in tea-houses and in the houses of the gentry as well as the banquet halls of the nobility. Such diversity points to the vitality of the theatre in China over the centuries and perhaps accounts in part, for the immense variety of styles of performance. The character of the spaces of performance must of necessity have interfaced with the nature, style and genre of the performance. As Richard Schechner points out, squares and other large open places draw festivals with unpredictable outcomes, they invite carnavalesque performances which may fuel revolutionary energy; on the other hand, thin and elongated streets invite processions and parades and tend to channel carnavalesque energies in ways that are socially accepted and predictable ("Street" 44). Chinese theatre by its ubiquitous nature penetrated every social layer and enjoyed immense popularity; whereas the public officials claimed that they distrusted the theatre and sought to police it, they nonetheless frequented it regularly. Performance spaces were as diverse as the demands of the public.

Though the spaces for performance varied — from areas within tea-houses to raised stages in the market place — the Chinese theatre did not observe a strictly demarcated separation from the audience. In the open spaces, people came and went freely, in the tea-houses they moved around as they pleased, bought and enjoyed tea and snacks, and offered loud comments on the performance. The proscenium theatre with an arch separating performer from audience did not exist, and stage lighting did not plunge the audience into a dark space. Though there are records of very large theatre houses in the cities of Beijing and Shanghai (Brandon 44), the element of interaction between performer and audience was high and added to reciprocal enjoyment. In some of the tea-houses the patrons could request the item from the actors' repertories that they wished to enjoy. The arrangement of space was not specifically hierarchical
and the ‘flow of knowledge’ was not, as it came to be later, one-way, from the higher stage to the lower-placed audience. The entire performance was a free-flowing continuum with performer and audience both valorized in the shared space. Though theatre performances were very frequent, they were usually associated with festivals and celebrations and the entire community was part of the celebration.

In the Indian traditions, too, performance spaces have been varied. Classical theatre spaces were generally connected with temple festivals and welcomed large numbers of devotees to the performance. Initially the performances were staged outdoors, but with the passage of time, closed theatres were built. No visual evidence is available of the ancient Sanskrit theatre and the only substantial source of information is the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Chapter II of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* deals with the theatre house. It contains specifications for the three main areas, the stage, the auditorium and the dressing room (Tarlekar 191). The theatre house should have a sloping roof, a raised stage supported by pillars, and a lower platform for musicians. Different styles and structures are mentioned for performances to be staged in temples, public open spaces and the king’s palace. No painted backdrops are referred to, and generally a curtain was held by two attendants as the actors entered the stage and then removed (Tarlekar 202).

There appears to have been a connection between the specifications for the shape and size of the stage and the dance movements of the performers. In the highly stylized performance each scenic movement had a ritual meaning. The performance space was meticulously prepared, each part of the stage taking on a specific significance, with the Sutradhara or narrator/presenter starting the ritual consecration. Commentators on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* point out some of the intricacies of the process. To cite an instance: “As we reconstrue the logics of the Sutradhara’s movements we can say that the sacralisation of the stage started with singling out its centre, ritually the most important point, symbol of the centre of the Universe materialized on the symbolic plane in the *Brahma-mandala*, where, according to the treatise, the god was present in person” (Lidova 10). These rites of playhouse foundation and consecration indicate the marked sacral function of the theatre in the Indian classical tradition.
No remnants of ancient theatre houses seem to have survived. Yet, theatre scholar Natalia Lidova ventures a plausible explanation:

To this day, we do not know a single extant playhouse – hence the doubt of whether the theatre construction practice existed at all. Nevertheless, we dare to ascribe their current absence to other reasons. Proceeding from contemporary ideas, archaeologists sought theatre buildings of a pronounced secular character, entirely designed for theatricals, while they ought to look for templar edifices, mainly serving the pūjā and only then, the mystery drama (100).

The Natya house then, may have been a “unique temple for rites in the drama form” (Lidova 102).

One rare instance of contemporary theatre performed for centuries in line with the ancient classical theatre is Kutiyattam. As around nine theatre structures or Kuttampalam have survived since the sixteenth century. They range in size from the tiny Gurivayur Temple Theatre to the impressive Vatu Kummarathan Temple Theatre of Trichur. They are rectangular in shape, with square raised stages and pillars that support the roof. The surface beneath the roof is sometimes embellished with sculptures of deities that depict scenes from the epics. The audience sits close to the front of the stage (Farley 454).

In contrast with these early classical performances, the later folk performances like the Bengali Jatra were generally held outdoors since the players were itinerant troupes travelling the countryside after the harvesting season. The etymology of the name Jatra itself suggests the journey or procession that the performers undertook. Darius Swann indicates the robust and earthy nature of this performance:

This suggestion of open-air performance is strengthened by the fact that the primary early accompaniment was the khol, a deep-toned drum more suitable for open-air activity than an enclosed theatre. [...] The traditional Jatra stage was a temporary affair. It consisted of a carpet or canvas spread on the ground. The audience sat on all four
sides, only leaving a narrow corridor through the crowd to allow the actors to come from
the dressing room to the playing area (Swann 241-2).
The makeshift nature of the performance, as well as the tradition of song and dance tended to
create an atmosphere of interaction and informality. The actors were generally drawn from the
common folk and acted in their free time. The performance area was level with the audience, the
themes from the life of Krishna presupposed a shared mytho-poetic value base. The style of
improvisation coupled with vigorous music and dance made for a fluid use of stage space as the
story developed.

Folk performances, to this day, usually define their spaces with bamboo poles connected
at the top with colourful decorations, at times a canopy. The absence of stage scenery offers the
actors and singers the opportunity to define locations and change of place through word, song
and movement. The simple properties used on stage are often borrowed from the homes of the
people living in the neighbourhood of the performance site.

In Sri Lanka folk performances emphasized the use of masks and dance and were
probably connected with the Indian Nāṭya (Tarlekar 312). There was no tradition in Sri Lanka of
enclosed performance spaces, and the folk performances, like their Indian and Chinese
counterparts, were enacted outdoors and created their signified locations with a minimum of
stage settings or properties. The spectacle was essentially performance, not representation, and
spaces were created and defined with narration, song and movement.

The ritual ceremonies conducted on the Island are abundant and situated in diverse
locations. The bathing ceremony of the sacred Bo-tree (believed to be a sapling of the Bodhi
tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment) is performed at Anuradhapura and
elsewhere as a temple ritual (Nanumura Mangalle) as well as a village procession (pan perahera);
the Elephant Perahera at Kandy around the Temple of the Tooth Relic is a grandiose street
pageant; the gam maduwa or fertility rite governing the harvest is held in a pandal. Pirat
ceremonies relating to healing or invoking blessings on an expectant mother are usually held
within the home. These rituals have marked dramatic components (Fernando, M.S. 31-85).
The folk 'dance-dramas' like the *Kolam* are held in a makeshift circular area, *karaliya* (Chopra 203). The popular *Nadagama* is a kind of theatre-in-the-round, and may be performed level with the audience, or, at times, on a makeshift raised platform without a curtain. Audience participation is lively. A researcher documents: "The actors in their theatre garb mingle at times with the audience to collect donations but even this action is cleverly and meaningfully integrated with the action of the play (Goonetilleka, M.H. *Nadagama* 18). In Sri Lanka, as in China and India, the emphasis seems to have been on performance in open spaces, with a minimum of stage properties, and active audience participation.

As Asian theatre became modernised, the spaces were drastically redefined, and the dynamics of theatre relationships were consequently altered.

**Changing Spaces in Modern Times**

Contemporary Asia has borrowed from Western theatre the pre-fabricated performance space that effectively separates performers from audience. Unlike the earlier performance which was ritualistic and dance-like, modern theatre veers in the direction of the mimetic representation of reality. It acquires an illusionistic status and the style it adopts is realistic. The symbolic space thus created is signified by spatial and architectural arrangements: raised platforms, empty areas between spectator and performer – all these " indicate that the time/space of the performance should be regarded as separate from the ordinary social space of the audience" (Counsell 18). As meaning is created in the theatre, one of the creators is the audience. In a sense, notes critic Colin Counsell, the audience itself is 'created'. Playbills often remind the audience not to use cameras or cell-phones. Various other proscriptions apply, with reference to body posture, movement and sound levels in the audience.

There are practical reasons for all of them, but, being social, such 'practicality' is always shot through with relations of power. The prohibition of non-theatrical activities, the alignment of the body and the gaze, the eradication of anything that might detract from
stage utterance — together these work to determine our relationship with the stage. At
the very least they indicate that we must view it as something with considerable cultural
prestige, a space which demands uninterrupted interpretative scrutiny. [...] Such
uniformity of behaviour, however, is always to some degree also a uniformity of
response. Sitting quietly, still and in darkness, for example, we effectively remove
ourselves from the readable whole of the event. That does not mean we overlook our
own and our fellows’ presence; rather, our behaviour signifies that the audience is non-
signifying, excludes the spectator from the frame of what is interpretative so that the
text consists solely of the fiction being enacted on the stage (Counsell 21).

This kind of space is bound to affect interaction and perception very differently from the way
traditional spaces did in pre-modern Asia.

This is the kind of theatre space readily available to playwrights in the three countries
under study. The Bengali theatre was a direct inheritor of the conventions of the English stage
and a whole generation of playwrights had their plays thus performed. Chinese theatre under the
influence of new models — Ibsen, Stanislavsky — moved from the performative Peking Opera to
the realistic plays of Guo Moruo, Cao Yu and Lao She. One striking instance of the transition is
Lao She's *Teahouse*, ironically not performed in a traditional teahouse theatre, but in the new
proscenium theatres that were built in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Shanghai and Beijing. One
is tempted to consider in such a case Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and mockery of colonial
imitation by the colonised (86). In the case of Sri Lanka theatre leaped in one fell swoop from
ritualistic and folk forms performed in the open countryside to the urban spaces that housed
British and Parsi theatre in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Spectators are largely conditioned by the spaces in which they operate. Visitors to a
museum or art gallery move around at their own pace, readers of novels turn pages as a solitary
and private activity; in the cinema, it is only the fellow spectators who are aware of one another.
However, in the theatre, the audience is also watched by the performer. Counsell shrewdly
observes this special characteristic of theatre spaces and the relations they produce.
The watchers are also watched and social pressure to sit silently, or laugh and applaud at
the appropriate points, is very great. Theatre therefore provides a mechanism for group
discipline and unified interpretation whose efficacy outstrips that of any art form. Theatre
may not lend itself to detailed consideration – one cannot turn back the page – but it
excels at prompting audiences to adopt its viewpoint, because its behavioural decorum
brings with it a decorum of interpretation (Counsell 22).

As the theatre changes, corresponding changes are bound to take place in social processes and
relations. And these, in turn, affect the direction of change in theatre.

The changing spaces between actors and spectators have modified the relationship
between them, and they have redefined the literary text itself. As theatre director and scholar
Anuradha Kapur points out:

The proscenium arch is the reorganization of space in certain very distinct ways; and
these ways also in fact reorganize the knowledge that comes to the spectator via that
stage. The way in which the audience and the spectators are arranged makes sure that
the audience-actor relationship works at a different register altogether from that of
premodern forms. The new mimetic capacities of the proscenium, which are connected,
as we know, to the picture frame, and to the possibilities of reproducing perspectival
space, manufactured new ways of telling a story, new ways of making a character who
enacted the story, and created a new observing subject (46).

These modifications in the conception and use of space far transcended physical theatre spaces
and, as Anuradha Kapur reflects, designated differences between interior and exterior space. The
theatre person now ventures into metaphysical space, not just the space within a room, rather,
the space within oneself.

The entire craft of characterization undergoes a sea-change. Characters are drawn with
motivations, often complex and conflicting, which drive their actions. A few instances of such
characterization in the plays under study will illustrate this trend. In The Bearer of Woes
Prasanna Abeysuriya, the playwright, seeks to delve into the mind and soul of the Man who is intent on saving the Woman from her life as a prostitute. He cries out in frustration,

**MAN.** All you people are like rice seedlings growing in a small field. From the time I was young I saw how fences and hedges meant to protect the grain swallowed it up instead. It happened before my eyes and I didn’t know whom to tell or what to do. Everyone shut their eyes consciously or unconsciously, and allowed it to happen. Must it always happen so, I asked myself? I sought everywhere for an answer. This woman is one rice plant in that field among a hundred thousand others. They are all trapped between the fence and the hedge and so don’t understand me. Won’t try to understand. Even when they do understand they do nothing. What is left for us when the fence and hedge eat up the paddy plants in this way? Can I too look on as if I were deaf and dumb? This is a terrible crime, an injustice (191).

Here is an attempt to capture something of the inner forces that drive individuals. Though *Evam Indrajit* is not written in the realistic tradition, Badal Sircar follows his characters’ changing motivations as the years roll by. Lao She in *Teahouse* depicts his central character, Wang Lifa, turning from a young and well-meaning, if self-centered, proprietor of a prosperous teahouse, to a disillusioned soul driven to despair and suicide. The problematics of outer and inner space, and not infrequently the conflict between the two, engage the attention of the modern playwright.

**Outer and Inner Spaces**

Playwrights and directors in Asia, as elsewhere, are acutely aware of theatre spaces and experiments in theatre are often an attempt to redefine the nature or power structure implied in the construction of these space. Badal Sircar, the Bengali playwright, increasingly preferred writing plays that sought to stretch such boundaries. His theatre group, Shatabdi, consciously
strives, for the last three decades, to practice Sircar's 'Third Theatre' or 'Free Theatre'. Sircar's impulse was to work in a mode of portable theatre, synthesizing rural and urban elements and to cater to a wide cross-section of rural and urban audiences. Ipsita Chanda records Sircar's insistence on redefining theatre spaces and dynamics.

The concept of the angan (courtyard) mancha, as opposed to the proscenium or the open jatra space, began in 1971, with Badal Sircar's determination to evolve a theatre of direct interaction with the audience—physical, direct, accessible, critical, addressing social and political issues which were of immediate concern to the people participating in the performance, both as audience and performers. The term 'third theatre' designated a theatre different in aim, function and style from the 'first' or 'second' theatres—from both the elite commercial urban professional or semi-professional theatre and the mass folk or jatra performances. [...] As Badal Sircar points out, the availability of a circuit in which productions can be presented, coupled with the extreme flexibility and mobility of the productions themselves (he often talks of a 'theatre mounted on our shoulders') have encouraged more groups to join this wave (69).

Shatabdi and a ring of such groups are part of a movement that seeks out its audience, in the office para or neighbourhood, at city parks on a Saturday afternoon, in a room (angan manch) or in the open (mukta manch) or in a parikrama, a tour of villages. "The venue ceases to be simply that which contains the performance (as is frequently the case with performances occurring in traditional theatre buildings), but is involved in complex ways in the genesis of the work and even in its subject matter" (McAuley 599). The rejection of the popular proscenium space by performers like Sircar's Shatabdi may be seen as engaging in a critique of the constraints such spaces impose on performers and audiences, and an attempt to fashion different relationships and ways of seeing.

Asian theatre practitioners have been quick to explore alternative spaces. The IPTA theatre troupes in India and the yangge troupes in the People's Republic of China have always
known that flexible use of spaces would enhance their popularity and broaden their reach. Mention must be made of the innovative use of spaces by Street Theatre performers across the length and breadth of India. Deeply political in character, Street Theatre has functioned most energetically in an oppositional mode: for instance, in the 1940s, within the confines of jails; in the 1970s in colleges and picnic spots as an organized theatre form led by Mukti – regarded as the first organized Street Theatre group in India; in the Punjab in the 1980s by candle-light, late at night (Shirin 14-16).

An interesting instance is recorded by Shamsul, of the group named Nishant. The National Emergency proclaimed in India in 1975 banned all Street Theatre activity. However, performers quickly devised new tactics:

Our actors used to pose as buyers and sellers in the Sabzi Mandi or vegetable market of Delhi. The strategy was that these actors would suddenly burst into heated arguments, for example, over the price of vegetable or fruit. The argument would then turn into a huge discussion on issues ranging from inflation to the freedom of speech and expression. Everyone around, including the police, unaware that this was actually a street theatre performance, would immediately get involved. It looked like a big public debate in progress. The idea was to raise issues of common concern by involving the people into these arguments (Shirin 15).

This account captures something of the resourcefulness of theatre, as well as the capacity of spaces to shape interaction. Such theatre is sometimes referred to as ‘Invisible Theatre’ and is favoured by Augusto Boal. It witnesses to the fact that modern Asian theatre practitioners have not confined themselves to the typical Western proscenium location.

An important characteristic of modern theatre has been an interest in the inner spaces: this led to psychological realism and gave birth to characters of nuanced motivation; the space within their minds and hearts engulfed the modern stage. Anuradha Kapur analyses this new and very alluring path to characterization:
Psychological realism, for indeed this is what this is, sees a separate and radically distinguishable inner world, hidden or half-revealed when compared to the outer world; the outer world — within the terms of psychological realism — is of less importance than the inner world, as that is the locus where truth resides.

This truth is to be uncovered often with a struggle: a struggle between private and public realities and between contesting roles. [...] Inner life, psychological detail, interiority, become not just descriptive terms but evaluative ones (47).

A survey of the modern Asian theatre indicates that such psychological realism was eagerly embraced by twentieth century playwrights. In consequence, the director and actor, in the footsteps of Stanislavsky swore by the realistic style of acting. One reason for this new torrent of realism is probably that it offered great potential to dramatise the social and individual tensions prevailing in these troubled times.

However, conceptions of space have also been modified when playwrights like Gao Xingjian broke away from realistic representation to explore other experimental forms. Xingjian’s play *Bus Stop* depicts characters waiting for more than ten years at a bus stop for a bus that never comes. Reminiscent of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, *Bus Stop* indicates the playwright’s engagement with new techniques of symbolism, use of language as recitation, and generally a search for the writer’s own voice. *Nocturnal Wanderer*, set in a train, meanders in and out of conscious reality and the shadowy spaces of nightmare. Here space takes on new significance. In their essay “The Impossible Representation of Wonder: Space Summons Memory” Alfred Nordman and Hartmut Wickert take a look at the staging of *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*, a play by Peter Handke, an eminent second generation postwar writer.

The stage thus appears as the main character of the play, it is the centre of gravity, if not narrator of the performance: it summons actors to deliver their characters and it produces their stories. Entrusted to the trajectories which are inscribed in this space, characters will enter into relations with other characters, but these relations among passers-by consist only in passing by. As they pursue each their own paths, their
trajectories will brush or graze, they almost or nearly meet, and this 'almost' is full of unrealized possibility (Nordman and Wickert 38-48).

Though not precisely applicable to Nocturnal Wanderer, this critique evokes the quality of space playwright Gao Xingjian works with. Gao's Nocturnal Wanderer seems to endow space with just such a character, a pregnant void that calls forth and sets in motion persons and processes. The Traveller dozing in the train visits the violent worlds of nightmare, and of his own psyche. Gao, a playwright in exile, makes a break with conventional spatial horizons. He finds theatre space fecund with possibilities to explore outer-inner spaces.

Changes in the concept and use of space indicate some of the problematics of modern theatre in Asia. The next section goes on to explore how new experiments stretch the very concept of space, as for instance, the notion of language itself as space for explorations of self, interpersonal interaction and questions of power.

**Language as performance space**

Spoken language is generally one of the significant elements of a theatre performance. Some forms of theatre, like mime, do, of course, totally eschew verbal communication; nevertheless, in the vast majority of theatrical genres verbal language makes an appearance via the lyrics of song or the spoken word of dialogue; mime uses gesture, posture and facial expression as language. In pre-modern Asian theatre the spoken word was one, but not the major, constituent of theatre. In India, though the classical Sanskrit theatre did pay close attention to the literary text, it also underscored the aspects of theatre that mark it as a powerful performative text; and though playwrights' names, like Kalidasa (mid fifth century A.D.) and Bhasa (circa fourth or fifth centuries A.D.) have been carefully recorded, the significance of the actor was also highlighted. Indian folk theatre in its myriad folk manifestations rarely foregrounds the playwright or the literary text. Each performance makes plenty of room for improvisation in dialogue. In ancient China, the spoken word was entirely subordinated to song, and pre-modern
Chinese theatre did not really have a form of 'spoken play'. 'Huaju', the modern 'spoken play' is of recent origin, and evolved as Western models of theatre came to be adopted and adapted as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. In Sri Lanka, traditional folk forms also subordinated speech to song, and it is with the influence of the Portuguese 'passion play' or the traditional Nadagama that the spoken word came to be increasingly valorized (Goonetilleka, Nadagama 5). It would not be off the mark to say that pre-modern Asian theatre was essentially performative, rather than representative, and that it accorded language a role not exalted above the other elements of good theatre.

The encounter with Western drama, both in print and performance, had an incalculable impact on theatre in Asia. Reading the work of Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen and Chekhov, as well as the Greek classics, opened new vistas to Asian writers. Almost every single playwright selected as a sample for study from China, India and Sri Lanka was directly exposed to Western drama through foreign travel, exposure to European traditions of performance, and the reading of drama as literature. The possibilities of the sophisticated use of language in theatre came to be increasingly explored, and the play grew to be much more centred on the person of the playwright, as much as, or more than, those of the director and the actor. The 'playwright' came to be regarded as a highly skilled craftsman, deftly using language as a sign to re-present and re-create reality.

Language is one of the oldest and most fundamental of sign systems used by human beings in the formation of meaning. The study of language has recently engaged the attention, not only of linguists, philologists, anthropologists and sociologists, it has fascinated students of culture in general, like J.L. Austin (How to Do Things with Words 1962) and performance in particular. Culture analyst Mikko Lehtonen does not view language as a tool or an instrument used when people wish to communicate in words; he sees it rather as a faculty that enables them not only to communicate and relate to one another, but to be actually conscious.

Thus, language is an active element of human interaction. It is not some kind of transparent and passive medium which transmits meanings of entities that exist outside
language to people using language. On the contrary, language has an active role in the formation of meanings: it sets its own restrictions to meanings, determines human life through its own ways of sorting out what can be said of reality. [...] We compose our expressions to function interactively with the information, presumptions, attitudes and other such things of relevance we expect our audience to have (23-25).

This observation certainly applies to the nature of interaction in theatre through language with a live audience.

Dramatic dialogue is distinctive: it is written for the stage, listened to by an audience that does not usually, however, participate directly by replying or interrupting. It is remarkable, as Andrew Kennedy points out, that “The governing concept for all dramatic dialogue is verbal interaction” (Kennedy 2). This critic emphasises that 'dia-logue' (dia = through, and logos = one of the key words of Western culture connecting word and meaning, language and reality) can be seen “as a search for significance and as a flexible state of being-with-others through speech. [...] Dramatic dialogue then becomes the most significant vehicle of the interpersonal world” (Kennedy 3). He goes on to stress that the interpersonal concept of dialogue illuminates the essential link between the relational and stylistic features of all dialogue. Indeed, the dramatic performance is underscored by the interactive concept.

Language in theatre can be an instrument of power, a means to reinforce the dominant discourse. But language can also be an instrument of resistance, as when linguistic norms are broken. Changes in language can be an important sign of social change. Language is an intrinsic part of discourse and as people produce meanings in discourse, texts come into being. The politics of language can be observed at work in the context of the emergence of nation states. Language and national identity forge a tenacious link and raise their heads in various fields like literature, administration and education.

In the present study, almost every play selected has been written in the vernacular (Chinese i.e. Mandarin, Bengali and Sinhala) and is being analysed in English translation. Thus, linguistic analysis of the original work of the playwrights is beyond the scope of this study.
However, every one of the playwrights is located in a context where language is highly politicised and problematised. Each of these cultural contexts is here briefly sketched.

**China:** When China loosened the bonds of feudalism and imperial rule, it found itself with a small but highly literate class of administrative officials who had taken the civil examinations, and vast millions who were illiterate mainly because they lacked the leisure to master the intricacies of the Chinese script. By the end of the twentieth century, almost everyone in China can read, but in 1949, the illiteracy rate was around 85% (Coye et al. 325). The Chinese language has no alphabet and written Chinese used ideographs or characters. To be able to read a newspaper one needs to learn a minimum of one thousand to fifteen hundred characters, whereas if a scholar is to master the language he has to learn between forty to fifty thousand characters (Green 326 -7). However, the ancient Chinese were extremely prolific writers. John K. Fairbank records that "Inspite of its cumbersomeness, the Chinese written language was used to produce a greater volume of recorded literature than any other language before modern times. One sober estimate is that until 1750 there had been more books published in Chinese than in all other languages in the world put together" (11). This language of scholars effectively debarred millions from social advancement. When the Communist government came to power language reform was vigorously set in motion. An efficient system called *pinyin* was perfected and given currency in 1979. It simplified and standardized the characters and reduced them to about 2000. This has made learning the language far easier. The Wade-Giles system of indicating Chinese sounds was found unreliable. The *pinyin* was extended to represent Chinese sounds in Roman script. Communication with foreigners became increasingly important in the twentieth century and students at the University sought to learn European languages. Translation of Western classics was enthusiastically undertaken, except for the years of the Cultural Revolution when the mere possession of a 'forbidden' book was tantamount to treason.

The language reform coupled with the encounter with the Western written dramatic text, revolutionised Chinese theatre. The focus began to shift in emphasis from the actor to the
playwright; and from pageantry and performance to representation and characterization. Huaju or the new form of 'spoken drama' gained currency. Ding Luonan, Professor of Theatre, looks upon this new development as a landmark. He remarks that this "evolution did not only alter the form, it affected the very philosophy of Chinese theatre" (69). Certainly, the introduction of the realistic theatre opened new horizons to playwrights and intellectuals who now felt they should reflect social reality on stage and influence public opinion on the burning issues of the day. Though the traditional musical drama continues to have enormous appeal to the masses, the huaju has gained a considerable following, especially in the urban centres. Vigorous translation activities were initiated, with major writers in the 1950s and 1960s involved in the effort to make available world literature in Chinese translation (Feuerwerker, A. 179). As the literary text came to be foregrounded in Chinese theatre, the playwrights looked to the West for models for their new drama. The stage began to feature characters portrayed as individuals rather than mythopoetic stereotypes, and realism became the preferred style of writing.

India: In India language issues are currently highly politicized. The impulse towards preserving and enriching the regional culture finds a fertile field in the advocacy of the local language. The principle that guided the political leadership in demarcating administrative districts or states after Independence was linguistic. In a country that is the home of numerous regional languages, language has been a tool to assert cultural identity and political power. Enormous heat is generated when one cultural group resents what it sees as the imposition of an 'alien' language. The attempt to impose Hindi, a northern language, on the southern states of India was bitterly resented and violently opposed by the speakers of Dravidian languages like Tamil and Malayalam. Equally, there is great ambivalence about the use of the English language: even as it is often denigrated as the language of the colonial oppressor, it is also widely used as a link language across the nation, and is indeed, according to the Constitution, a national language.

In West Bengal, too, the English vs. Bengali language debate has inevitably surfaced, with the educated urban minority using English with fluency. Hence, English is often viewed as
the language of the privileged Westernised elite. Many decades before Independence the drive was towards equating language with national culture and the use of the English language was deplored as a sign of loss of 'Indianness'. Such sentiments were expressed, for instance, with reference to women's education. An article in the Bengali press in 1878 reads, "Women should, of course, receive some education [...]. However, we are against the kind of education now being given to women. [...]The books the women are asked to read are either translations from English or are English influenced. Consequently, our women become de-nationalised" (*Tattvabodhini Patrika*. Nov-Dec. 1878).

As the economic pressures in a globalized world mount, fluency in English is becoming an aptitude much sought-after in India. Also, a whole new body of Indian literature in English has emerged over the decades. The novel, the short story and poetry have found numerous adepts, but drama in English has been less prolific. However, playwrights sometimes translate their own work into English, as in the case of Mahasweta Devi and Girish Karnad, or it is later translated by others for wider access.

**Sri Lanka:** A similar ambivalence and discomfort with language issues plagues Sri Lanka too. In his article entitled "Sri Lanka's 'Ethnic' Conflict in Its Literature in English" D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, author and professor of English at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, observes:

Much of the world is unaware that there exists a sharp division of Sri Lanka into two sections not on grounds of religion or race or even of Sinhalese speakers and Tamil speakers. There are both Sinhalese and Tamils who are Christians. We have both Sinhalese and Tamils who embrace Islam, sometimes through conviction and sometimes frivolously in order to avail themselves of the convenience of a multiplicity of wives. Some Sinhalese, particularly those of Negombo on the West Coast, speak Tamil as fluently as many Tamils speak Sinhala. There are no absolute differences of attitude and perception between these people such as often exist between the bilingual (i.e. Sinhala or Tamil and English) and monolingual of both communities (450-51).
Sri Lankan playwright Ruwanthie de Chickera also comments on the unequal status of languages in Sri Lanka and regrets the fact that there is little or no funding for English language theatre with the consequence that this theatre seems to lack courage. Theatre persons who struggle to barely make ends meet tend to cater to popular tastes and may shy away from controversial themes. Language, then, has been - in its presence as literature, performance sign, or politics - a major player in modern times in the social scenarios of China, India and Sri Lanka, and of their theatres.

As theatre stretched itself, adapting, accommodating, amalgamating, styles of performance invariably also came under scrutiny and revision.

5.3.2. Styles of Performance.

Ancient theatre in India, as well as most of Chinese theatre and Asian theatre, by and large, were highly stylized in terms of the actor’s voice, movement, costume, et cetera. The performers in the classical theatre underwent rigorous training in voice and movement, so that they could master the long-established codes and conventions. From the codified eye movements to the intricate gestures of hands and feet, the actor performed within a highly ritualized framework. The costumes were prescribed, as were stage properties. The performer and the audience shared an artistic universe rich in symbols and codes well understood and accepted.

Such a theatre offered little scope for innovation, and novelty was not in demand. In his theory of the “aesthetics of reception” the German critic Hans Robert Jauss writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s maintained that the historical essence of an art work cannot be elucidated by merely examining its production, but must be understood as a dialectical process of production and reception. Elaborating on this 'reception theory' Robert C. Holub comments:

The emphasis on novelty seems to be part of a modern prejudice, probably related to the penetration of market mechanisms into the aesthetic realm. Originality and genius were late comers to the roster of favoured evaluative categories, and it is quite possible
that the sweeping change in the system of production — from feudalism, with its emphasis on hierarchy, regularities and repetition, to capitalism with its ideology of ingenuity and its demand for constantly revolutionizing production — played a large part in the creation and reception of art as well (63).

Though Holub's comments refer basically to European art in the nineteenth century, they ring true as well in the context of Asian theatre, when Western literature and performance came to impact India in the early nineteenth century, China in the early twentieth, and Sri Lanka in the mid twentieth century. The new theatre carried with it new styles of writing and staging and the acceptance of the value of continued experimentation and change.

The structure of the written play began to be modified. In China the plot construction, the traditional episodic structure with an emphasis on an over-arching harmony gave way to the Greek concept of conflict, the *agon*, shaping the course of the dramatic action. These Aristotelian precepts rose, of course, from the soil of Greek culture, which some social scientists would argue to be quite distinct from the culture of the Asian people in general and Chinese culture in particular. Psychologist Richard E. Nisbett claims that Asian and Western patterns of thought and behaviour exhibit basic differences. The Greeks, he believes, lived by spirited contest:

The Greeks, more than any other ancient peoples, and in fact more than most people on the planet today, had a remarkable sense of personal agency — the sense that they were in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose. One definition of happiness for the Greeks was that it consisted of being able to exercise their powers in pursuit of excellence in a life free from constraints.

A strong sense of individual identity accompanied the Greek sense of personal agency. [...] The Greek sense of agency fueled a tradition of debate. Homer makes it clear that a man is defined almost as much by his ability to debate as by his prowess as a warrior. A commoner could challenge even a king and not only live to tell the tale, but occasionally sway an audience to his side. Debates occurred in the marketplace, the political assembly, and even in military settings. Uniquely among ancient civilizations,
great matters of state, as well as the most ordinary questions, were often decided by public, rhetorical combat rather than by authoritarian fiat (2-3).

The Chinese, however, had a quite different view of how life ought to be lived:

The Chinese counterpart to Greek agency was harmony. Every Chinese was first and foremost a member of a collective, or rather of several collectives — the clan, the village, and especially the family. The individual was not, as for the Greeks, an encapsulated unit who maintained a unique identity across social settings. Instead, as philosopher Henry Rosemont has written: "... For the early Confucians, there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others. [...] The Chinese were less concerned with issues of control of others or the environment than with self-control, so as to minimize friction with others in the family and village and to make it easier to obey the requirements of the state, administered by magistrates. The ideal of happiness was not, as for the Greeks, a life allowing the free exercise of distinctive talents, but the satisfactions of a plain country life shared within a harmonious social network (Nisbett 5-6).

These perceptive remarks are quoted here at length because they indicate distinctive cultural patterns: these may help one to understand some of the reasons why traditional Asian theatre, too, was originally distinct from theatre derived from the Greek tradition.

As 'modernisation' captured the imagination of Chinese artists, and modern drama began to pattern itself on Western models, can one presuppose that the Chinese world-view itself had undergone a total change? Not necessarily. Certainly, the breach of isolation, the encounter of cultures, was bound to problematise questions of identity, power and prestige. However, in the process, Chinese society was also able to appreciate and appropriate elements of Western theatre which rang true to their Asian ears. Richard Nisbett relates the reception of an American play by a Chinese audience.

I was in China in 1982 at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. The country seemed extremely exotic— in both its traditional aspects and its Communist-imposed aspects. [...]
The first Western play to be performed in Beijing since the revolution was mounted while I was there. It was Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. The choice seemed very strange. I regarded the play as being not merely highly Western in character but distinctly American. Its central figure is a salesman, “a man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine.” To my astonishment, the play was a tremendous success. But Arthur Miller, who had come to China to collaborate on production of the play, provided a satisfactory reason for its reception. “The play is about family”, he said, “and the Chinese invented family.” He might have added that the play is also about *face*, or the need to have the respect of the community, and the Chinese also invented *face* (71).

Apparently, some elements of what they saw in the ‘foreign’ theatre resonated with the Chinese. In the process of appropriated Western models, the Chinese theatre adapted them; for one, they adopted the form of the *huaju*, or spoken play, which they began to explore most enthusiastically, giving hitherto unknown breadth and depth to the use of the spoken language in theatre: but they also introduced native traditional elements like music and song, which had always held immense appeal for Chinese audiences.

Under the pervasive influence of the culture of the dominant West, Asian theatre began to modify its performance style in the twentieth century. As Bertolt Brecht noted, the theatre in China, for instance, had been primarily symbolic.

It is well known that the Chinese theatre uses a lot of symbols. Thus a general will carry little pennants on his shoulder, corresponding to the number of regiments under his command. Poverty is shown by patching the silken costumes with irregular shapes of different colours, likewise silken, to indicate that they have been mended. Characters are distinguished by particular masks, i.e. simply by painting. [...] A young woman, a fisherman’s wife, is shown paddling a boat. She stands steering a non-existent boat with a paddle that barely reaches to her knees. Now the current is swifter, and she is finding it harder to keep her balance; now she is in a pool and paddling more easily. [...] Among
all the possible signs, certain particular ones are picked out, with careful and visible consideration (492-3).

Similar conventions of highly stylized and symbolic movement, gesture and costume, and by a complex integration of music, singing, dance and acrobatics characterized most of Asian theatre. Now, as the Asian cultures entered the twentieth century various factors contributed to a process of gradual change. Modern theatre came into existence with the growth of cities, the European presence in the cities, the spread of Western education and the English language, and the perceived need by the new educated middle class to modernize.

The new emerging theatre developed a style generally realistic, with touches of melodrama. In India the melodramatic strains of nineteenth century European theatre, coupled with elements of melodrama in the traditional Indian folk theatre shaped much of the early twentieth century style of acting, whether in the Parsi theatre, the Marathi, Bengali or Gujarati theatre (Dhir 15). By the mid twentieth century, the start of the period under study here, the influence of writers like Ibsen and directors like Stanislavsky was powerfully felt, in China as well as in India and Sri Lanka. Throughout Asia, waves of nationalism occasioned a change in what people expected of culture. The urgent demand to modernize led to openness to Western cultural and literary patterns and a rejection of the traditional 'reactionary' past. In India, playwrights like Arun Mukherjee and Mahasweta Devi found realistic and naturalistic conventions convenient to highlight social problems and contemporary issues. In China, Lao She, Cao Yu and Guo Moruo fell in with the socialist demands that the arts in general and theatre in particular should serve the state as a vehicle of propaganda. Realistic 'spoken drama' was used as a vehicle to question the Confucian past and indicate a progressive future. This new form of drama appears to have come to stay. Theatre critic Richmond Farley indicates its lasting impact:

The spoken drama has played a highly political role in China throughout the twentieth century. One authority aptly calls it 'the most assertive form of innovative literature in modern Chinese society', with writers mostly regarding it as an iconoclastic statement,
designed to convey broader views for social reform and revolution ("South Asian Theatres" 476).

This development is broadly true also of Sri Lanka where the new theatre, beginning with the Nurti form, highly influenced by the Parsi theatre, moved away from its religious and ritual forms to turn into a space for the construction of a national identity.

As theatre in the West launched energetically into an exploration of modes other than realism under enormous influences like those of Brecht and Epic Theatre, Grotowsky and Poor Theatre, Meyerhold and Biomechanics, Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty, Beckett and Absurdist Theatre, Asian theatre too was deeply tinted by these influences. The new insights and innovations offered possibilities to Asian playwrights to perform new and troubling realities that they found themselves facing in the tensions of their modernising worlds. Some instances of playwrights in Asia who ventured into experimental modes, very probably influenced by new Western trends, are Badal Sircar (Evam Indrajit) in India, Ernest MacIntyre (A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy) in Sri Lanka, and Gao Xingjian (Nocturnal Wanderer) in China. In Sircar and MacIntyre's work one can discern clear traces of Brechtian Alienation and of the Absurdist techniques, and Gao Xingjian, writing in exile from China, reminds one of the Artaudian methods of 'Cruelty'.

An interesting fact, worthy of note, in the work of some of the European innovators who were most influential is the attraction that oriental theatre held for them. The liberating impact of Chinese theatre on Bertolt Brecht and of Balinese theatre on Artaud, are, of course, well known. Brecht's intense commitment to a theatre that acts as an agent of social change, led him to reject the Aristotelian concept of catharsis. He had no use for a theatre that appeals to the emotions of the audience only to purge them of these emotions and reduce the spectators to a state of passivity. Brecht's search was for a redefinition of the paradigm of spectator, theatre and society. In 1935, on a visit to Moscow he watched a Peking opera and began to understand that he had found the alternative he was looking for. Brecht was fascinated with the performance of the great Chinese actor Mei Lan-Fang.
Brecht used the German word *Verfremdung* (making strange or distancing, or 'alienation') and now sought, even more than before, to demystify the mechanics of a performance. The theatre of his day, a theatre of illusion, sucking the spectator into a dream world where problems are all resolved, was anathema for Brecht. Inspired by the acting of Mei Lan-Fang he wrote an article entitled "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" in which he commented upon the actor's ability to 'stand aside from his part'. "The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are hereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic" (Brecht 492).

It is worth remembering that Brecht too lived at an extremely turbulent time in history (1898–1956) which encompassed two world wars and exposed him to sights of suffering and death, as also to persecution by the Nazis. He grew increasingly committed to changing society and changing theatre in the West, in fact, to changing society through theatre. He announced:

In setting up new artistic principles and working out new methods of representation we must start with the compelling demands of a changing epoch; the necessity and possibility of remodeling society loom ahead. [...] Among other effects that a new theatre will need for its social criticism and its historical reporting of completed transformations is the A-effect (497).

Brecht found in Chinese theatre a confirmation that his ideas were on the right track. Brecht had become, by the end of his life, a world figure in theatre, and continues to influence directors today. Peter Brook remarks, "Brecht is the key figure of our time, and all theatre work today at some point starts or returns to his statements or achievement" (80). Completing full circle, then, Brecht's work, influenced by Asian theatre, in turns forms part of the influence of Western theatre today on its Asian counterpart.

Other noted theatre personalities, world-wide, have looked to Asian theatre for inspiration or insight. Among these we count Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowsky, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook. In France director Ariane Mnouchkine introduced since the 1960s, in the
performances of her group, Le Theatre du Soleil, a physicality and musicality that she discovered during her extensive travels in Asia. She is credited with founding a neo-folk-theatre: her actors are members of society at large who stage plays for fellow members (Brown 512). The actors are highly skilled performers: speakers, mimes, dancers, singers, puppeteers. Mnouchkine re-interpreted the Greek and European classics in novel ways. Her work combined a blend of Asiatic and European dance and declamation with moments of intense feeling directly expressed, in a non-Asiatic way.

In a variety of ways these directors have studied Asian models of theatre, generally in their classical or folk forms. This interest has provoked accusations of cultural appropriation and superficial adaptation without a grasp on the local cultural and social context. In *Theatre and the World*, Rustom Barucha presents a bitter critique of these attitudes:

> Our history is simply of no concern to Euro-American interculturalists. It is our "tradition," our much glorified "past," to which they have turned to find revelations (if they happen to be mystical), or to extract material (like the *Bhagavad Gita*, which served as the libretto for Glass’s *Satyagraha*, not to mention the *Mahabharata*, which provided Brook with a "story"). Last but not least, India has provided interculturists with a wide range of techniques including Yoga, the mudras, and eye-exercises of Kathakali, and more recently, the martial arts techniques of Kalaripayattu. [...] Nothing could be more disrespectful to theatre than to reduce its act of celebration to a repository of techniques and theories (5-6).

This critique, though passionate, seems to disregard the enormous hybridity that characterizes theatre today, world-wide. Granting that interculturalists may not, at times, delve deep enough into the cultural context of a particular theatre, it is equally apparent that some of them, like Eugenio Barba, are moving away from the mainstream Western tradition and seeking other, non-naturalistic and non-psychological styles of doing theatre. The interest in exploring other theatre traditions seems not only inevitable, but at times highly creative, in a migratory and diasporic world, and in the climate of global communication.
In Asian traditions of performance directors like Artaud have discovered a clue to a 'new language', a 'bodily language', not based on words but on signs. Having watched Balinese dancers performing at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931, Artaud was hugely excited and began to move steadily towards a formulation of his Theatre of Cruelty. In his manifesto *The Theatre and its Double* (1938) Artaud expressed his statement of intent:

I am well aware that a language of gestures and postures, dance and music is less able to define a character, to narrate man's thoughts, to explain conscious states clearly and exactly, than spoken language. But whoever said theatre was made to define a character, to resolve conflicts of a human, emotional order, of a present-day psychological nature such as those which monopolise current theatre? (267)

Directors like Artaud discovered that Chinese actors and Indian dancers have utilized visual codes for centuries and have fully explored the actor's body as a language. Artaud co-opted these for Western theatre. "In Europe no one knows how to scream any more, particularly actors in a trance no longer know how to cry out, since they do nothing but talk, having forgotten they have a body on stage, they have also lost the use of their throats" (263). All these experiments went on to become part of theatre practice, not only in the West but also once again, in Asia.

By the mid-twentieth century the primacy of the literary text as an 'artefact' had been questioned and the element of performativity was reclaimed by Western theatre. The actor's body takes on intense significance. In "Performance Art and Ritual: Bodies in Performance", theatre critic Erika Fischer-Lichte highlights the function of the performer's body:

Since the 1980s, performers increasingly use the body in violent ways, both in dance and theatre groups. Injuries and pains are inflicted on the performer's bodies. [...] Thus, the performance, in a way, turns into a scapegoat ritual. The performer exposes her/his body to risks and injuries against which the spectators aim to protect their bodies; the performer causes her/himself the pains which the spectators seek to avoid. The performer, in this sense, suffers in place of the spectators. [...] Their imagination 'saves' them from the anxieties of violence and pain directed towards their own body by
imagining the performer's pain and by attempting to sympathise with it and to sense it themselves (33-35).

Perhaps it is such 'anxieties of violence and pain', that people in countries like China, India and Sri Lanka encountered in the turbulent decades of the latter half of the twentieth century which surface in theatrical symbolic language. What is otherwise unspeakable finds violent images and symbols on stage to give it voice.

Thus, Chinese playwright Gao Xingjian creates images of violent death in a nightmare street scene in *The Nocturnal Wanderer*.

(Ruffian enters to inspects the doorway with the gun in his hand. Sleepwalker fishes out Thug's gun from his shirt and whacks the killer's head from behind. Ruffian falls. Sleepwalker bends down to listen, rises.)

SLEEPWALKER. Thank God you've gotten rid of that swine. You didn't mean to kill anybody, but under the circumstances you were forced to do it, you had no choice. You were driven against the wall, anyone would have done the same if they were in your shoes. (Grabs Ruffian's feet and drags him in front of the cardboard box.) That was a real nightmare. At the time, you really wanted to swear at somebody or something. You'd rather kill someone first than waiting for that someone to kill you. Better kill than to be killed. Only now did you realize that there's also pleasure in killing. (...) (Drags the body and stuffs it into the cardboard box) (...) Nobody saw you, nobody will tell, so you too can carry on with your evil deeds like the others. If everyone acted the same way, we could all live in peace and harmony, couldn't we? As long as you keep away from disasters, as long as you can overcome your own cowardice, you'll be able to continue with your game, feeling happy about other people's misfortunes (169-70).

The unspeakable gains voice in nightmarish scenes of this type.
In India, Utpal Dutt heaps torture and death-by-trampling by elephants on his central characters in *Hunting the Sun*. The cataclysmic violence that the Bengali people faced during this century can perhaps only be watched masked in this way on stage. In Sri Lanka, the spiralling ethnic violence is in *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* symbolized by the body of Upali whom his brother Ranjit has rammed into the oven and murdered. These gruesome scenes may stand as correlatives, in artistic performance, of the events of pain in the ‘social drama’ of reality.

The twentieth century brought to theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka sweeping winds of change. These need to be scrutinised to yield an understanding of how the frames or boundaries of performance in Asian theatre were transformed.

### 5.4. Major Trends of Change

Through the last century theatre in Asia has been continuously re-shaping itself. Nor could it have been otherwise: were it to remain static, it would have suffered fossilization or annihilation. In actual fact, the social and political turbulence of the times offered the theatre the opportunity to be a site of contestation and argument. As Sri Lankan theatre critic A.J. Gunawardana suggests, the performance context was a major determinant of the transformation of theatre here:

In Asia today, the performance context is the irreducible fact of change – change on a scale unprecedented in the annals of Asian societies and national identities. This change is neither casual nor fortuitous; often, it is methodically planned and implemented from the centre. Necessarily, the pace and the magnitude of change differ from country to country, and from culture to culture. Yet every single Asian society, irrespective of its operative social philosophy and political ideology, is in a state of mutation. [...] Within the Asian framework, the term *modernization* generally glosses the ongoing transformation. [...] At its most basic level, modernization implies a critique of the past. The impulse to modernize stems from the assumption that, in order to meet the challenges of the
emerging world, certain values, attitudes, social structures and other aspects of the 
inherited culture have either to be discarded or suitably modified. Or else new elements 
have to be introduced into the existing culture.

Modernization's impact on theatre is potentially multifaceted. First, modernization 
may negatively affect those cultural formations, socio-economic structures and value 
schemes that support and sustain pre-modern theatres. Likewise modernization creates 
new needs, and introduces previously unknown imperatives into the domain of theatre 
(“Asia’s Modern Theatres” 73-74).

In the three cultures under study here, theatre has vigorously launched into the process of 
modernization: it gains a very urban presence; it comes under constant and vigorous pressures 
from Western cultures; it often responds with the adoption of nativistic stances; and it may 
develop an inclination towards the indigenous, the contemporary and the realistic.

5.4.1. Urban Theatre

The new emerging theatre in all these cultures has come to be an urban commercial 
theatre. The trend can be seen as part of the increasing urbanization in Asia in response to the 
pressures of the globalizing Western capitalist economy. This is a trend that favours the educated 
urban elites but is also seen by various analysts as causing structural inequalities. In their study 
of finance and modernisation entitled, interestingly, *Theatres of Accumulation: Studies in Asian 
and Latin American Urbanization* Warwick Armstrong and T.G. McGee see Third World urban 
systems not only as theatres of accumulation, but also as centres from which are diffused the 
culture and values of Westernization (41). The analysis may seem apt in the context of the 
countries being studied here. Thus, modern theatre could be looked at as both a product of 
urbanization and often a vehicle of further modernization. However, urbanization in the context 
of Asia is not entirely a replica of this process in the West. Large Asian cities, in India, for 
instance, have been rich cosmopolitan centres making room for complex “overlapping universes
of culture and of structures of meaning, drawn from language, caste, class and religion; a cultural babble of the means to cope with the world” (Goonatilake 236).

It must be noted that the traditional theatre has not been quite upstaged among the urban poor and the rural populations in Asia. In India the folk forms continue to flourish each in its own region, and in China the musical theatre is hugely popular still. The modern in theatre does not necessarily spell the complete rejection of the traditional. Traditional forms are increasingly being viewed by Asian theatre enthusiasts as a useful resource in terms of performative aspects. Playwrights like Utpal Dutt were able to recognize the value of, and utilise, the *Jatra* format. Elements of the traditional theatre are sometimes used to embellish and “to add cultural identification marks” (Gunawardana, “Asia’s Modern Theatres” 79). In Sri Lanka Ediriwira Sarchchandra richly explored the possibilities of the *Nadagama* for adaptation to the modern stage.

However, it is also arguable that the traditional forms with their rigid codes of performance are too restrictive to lend themselves to in-depth characterisation or discussion of complex social, cultural and political issues of interest to modern audiences. Also, some theatre practitioners would reject the traditional forms as being too close to the sacred to be germane to the modern temperament which may be read as more secular.

The modern urban theatre in Asia largely uses the proscenium stage on the lines of Western theatre. It has generally veered from stories of ancient kings and gods to contemporary social issues, with some emphasis on psychological realism. Myth and legend are, however, looked upon as treasure-troves of stories to be reinterpreted so as to throw light on contemporary issues. The written text and the spoken word have tended to be valorized above spectacle or pageantry. And as the modernizing societies began to distinguish between the cultural and the social, the sacred and the profane, “differentiation also brings about a crucial shift from the symbolic to the representational in the arts” (Gunawardana, “Asia’s Modern Theatres” 74). Contemporary Asian theatre, is then, like most urban theatre world-wide today, representational in character. And though in some cases, it may serve as a mere provider of
laughs, more often than not, theatre in Asia as elsewhere in the world today, has claimed for itself a space for serious reflection and sublime emotion.

This gradual process of the transformation of Asian theatre has not been free from debate and controversy. As indicated by Martin Esslin, theatre in Asia came to be employed as a method of cultural colonization:

As in the Victorian era, throughout the British Empire touring companies spread the gospel of Shakespeare, whether performing to the expatriate community or (particularly in India) to native audiences; and where there were home-grown acting companies, they generally performed popular hits from the West End. From a Eurocentric perspective, nothing else counted as theatre. In countries where the colonized populations remained in the majority, a parallel drama continued to exist. Tamil or Bengali companies performed stories from their own cultures in buildings constructed on the lines of European theatres, which thus corresponded to standard European expectations (439).

This cultural colonization which beset the Asian theatre was an over-arching process which coloured every sphere of life of the colonized cultures and in a special way, the arts. Predictably, a reverse process followed. This process is the focus of the next section.

5.4.2. Cultural de-colonization?

The relationship of art with culture has come in for intense reflection in developing countries in the postcolonial years. The traditional culture is widely seen as having been challenged. Mikel Dufrenne examines the ensuing confrontation and is of the view that "the basic influence affecting all reflection on art, is, in fact, the confrontation of cultures between the West and everything that is not Western." The national culture is seen as the instrument of an impassioned self-assertion. Dufrenne comments:
If we consider this culture as a value, the West may, all unwittingly, have contributed to it, not simply because it has illustrated the value of its own culture, but because — after the devaluing of the indigenous culture by its conquerors, missionaries and teachers — it has, through its artists and scholars, succeeded in revaluing it. When Picasso becomes an enthusiast for Negro art, when ethnological museums accommodate it and ethnologists pore over it, the African redisCOVERS his art. He sees it with a stranger’s eyes but not as a museum exhibit regarded with lukewarm interest or requiring, if it is to be understood, a special effort of adjustment: he sees it as his own art and that is what he wants it to be (536).

Largely, awareness of art in Asia today is linked to a wider search for national or cultural identity.

As the indigenous traditional culture has been threatened, Western culture is regarded with ambivalence: the ‘other’ which has been imposed by ‘force’, yet it clearly possesses prestige and power. In theatre, as in other arts, various responses have arisen. There are those who believe in accepting, and living with, the existing dichotomy. In Japan, for a while actors either specialized in the traditional Noh, Kyogen and Kabuki or in the New Theatre and never performed in each other’s theatre. In India, language tended to mark the division, with English theatre catering to the Westernized elites, and local language theatres, e.g. Marathi and Gujarati, being patronized largely by an audience more resistant to Westernization. A similar divide was also visible in Sri Lanka, with language as the line of division. Ruwanthie de Chidikera, playwright and actress, laments the escapism of English theatre in Sri Lanka, unlike its more courageous cousin, the Sinhala theatre, and attempts to account for it:

English-language theatre has been out of sync with the volatile backdrop that the country represents today. There has been apparent apathy on its part to the contemporary political and social realities of Sri Lanka. [...] The stage-fright that directors seem to have developed with regard to staging political drama is tied up with the bleak funding prospects available for this type of theatre. English theatre is low priority and receives no financial support from the state. Producers depend either on their own funds
or on corporate sponsorship, which is of course driven by the box-office ("Aspects of the English Theatre" 4).

Such tension is woven into the ambivalence with which the colonial legacy is viewed.

In China, the conflict between local and Western languages does not seem to hold the same kind of purchase as in India and Sri Lanka, since the official language is Mandarin and Western languages have not yet taken deep root. The driving impulse in China has recently been economic in character, and here too we see the face of ambivalence, as the country deploys all its resources to compete with the capitalist economy, yet is unwilling to discard its communist political ideology.

In India, there is a realization on the part of playwrights like Mahasweta Devi that the challenge to the present inequalities in the modernizing economy must grow from within each society. Alternatives will only emerge when the internal conflicts of interest are squarely faced: the interest of the minority which gains from the surplus produced in society, and the majority which loses. In plays like Water, Devi dramatises the need for those who suffer from the present forms of development to break free from the structures of exploitation and powerlessness which cripple them at present. Modern urban theatre can thus also take on the role of challenger of the status quo.

Underneath all their distinctive tensions, what the people in all these cultures do seem to share is the intense preoccupation with identity, sometimes manifested in a conscious reclaiming of their older traditions. This is discernible in the nativistic stance taken by a number of writers.

5.4.3. Nativism

An important trend in theatre in Asia has been 'nativism' or a return to one's traditional roots. An eminent practitioner of theatre in India, Girish Karnad, has brilliantly fused indigenous myth and symbol with elements of modern theatre. More and more playwrights and directors all over Asia are finding a comfort zone as they bridge traditional and modern theatre traditions. Many of the theatre scripts written in local languages are also available in translation or some
form of new hybrid language that creates cross-connections. Girish Karnad has translated his work into English, and most of the texts being studied here are analysed in English translation. It appears inevitable that the local artist must, in the view of Jean Paul Sartre, sing in an ‘international’ language if his voice is to carry across frontiers (358). Still, lingering resentment often runs deep, leading to accusations that such a voice is not truly the artist’s own and that all that is not written in a Western tongue is still ignored.

Through the conflicting pressures and sentiments, theatre has turned to its immediate environs and consciously seeks to draw contemporary maps of meaning.

5.4.4. The Indigenous, the Contemporary and the Realistic

Modern theatre in Asia, then, has steadily been transforming itself. Nor is this malleability an exclusive feature of Asian theatre. As Raymond Williams points out in *The Politics of Modernism*, European theatre underwent persistent change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He indicates some directions taken by it:

We can identify five factors of an immensely influential kind in all subsequent drama. First, there was the radical admission of the contemporary as the legitimate material for drama. [...] Second, there was an admission of the indigenous as part of the same movement; the widespread convention of an at least nominally exotic site for drama began to be loosened, and the ground for the now equally widespread convention of the contemporary indigenous began to be prepared. Third, there was an increasing emphasis on everyday speech forms as the basis for dramatic language. [...] Fourth, there was also an emphasis on social extension: a deliberate breach of convention that at least the principal personages of drama should be of elevated social rank. [...] Fifth, there was the completion of a decisive secularism: not, in its early stages, necessarily a rejection of, or indifference to, religious belief, but a steady exclusion from the dramatic action of all
supernatural or metaphysical agencies. Drama was, now, explicitly, to be a human action, played in exclusively human terms (83-84).

In a general way, Williams’ observations apply to Asian theatre as well, as it proceeded to interface with Western theatre; and equally as it responded to social needs in a milieu transformed by the processes of modernization and globalization. Commenting on the fact that “the modern theatres of Asia have firmly adopted the ‘realistic’ aesthetic of verbal meaning and formal signification that is integral to the modern dramaturgy of the West”, A.J. Gunawardana observes:

From an Artaudian perspective, this is practically, a total reversal of the unique forms of articulation found in Asia in pre-modern theatres... What should strike us is the fundamental manner in which Asia’s modern theatres have moved away from the pre-modern and the traditional. This must not be regarded as a mere act of imitating the West. It is, on the contrary, a response to a felt and palpable need. Incantation and chant did not, and probably cannot, meet the demands of a theatre which sets out to explain the world in dialectical terms rather than to portray it symbolically ("Asia’s Modern Theatres" 77).

Indeed, in each of the three Asian cultures being considered here, theatre has in various ways moved away from the pre-modern in both thematic concerns and in aesthetic and formal territory. In China, the hugely popular new ‘spoken drama’ such as Lao She’s *Teahouse* or Guo Moruo’s *Cai Wenji* are instances of the modernization of theatre. Gao Xingjian’s *The Nocturnal Wanderer* could perhaps be mistaken, some might say, as the work of a modern French playwright rather than a Chinese playwright in exile in France. Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* is clearly a departure in form and content from traditional Bengali theatre, as are plays from Sri Lanka such as *A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy* by Ernest MacIntyre and *The Bearer of Woes* by Prasannajit Abeysuriya. Each of these last three plays bears marks of more recent
Western influence, in some cases of Brecht, or the Absurdist theatre or Artaud. This extensive borrowing across cultures may prompt some critics to conclude that Asian theatre is a mere clone of Western models. This question comes in for discussion next.

5.5. Is Asian theatre a clone of Western models?

Symptomatic of the growing resistance to globalization of culture, is the fact that many playwrights all over Asia have been 'returning to the roots' and adopting nativistic stances. For instance, in Japan we encounter a distinctive 'return to the Gods', a theatre that consciously reacts against excessive dependence on Western forms of 'new drama' (Goodman 418). Theatre directors began experimenting with concepts and practices of traditional Japanese theatre like Noh and Kabuki, so as to creatively test and accommodate Western theatre notions within a Japanese framework (Farley “South Asian Theatres” 480).

A similar trend can be discerned in the theatre of China, India and Sri Lanka. In Chinese theatre, we discover that even as playwrights and directors did modernize, they firmly retained certain widely accepted elements of traditional culture. One of these is the centrality of song and dance, which one does not usually find in Western theatre, except, of course, the full blooded 'musical'. In Chinese plays such as Teahouse, as well as The White-haired Girl and Cai Wenji, each act is punctuated with songs that reaffirm the theme. Without the introduction of song and dance into the 'spoken drama', the new theatrical form may probably never have caught on, or gained popular acclaim. Song is equally central in Mahasweta Devi's Water and Arun Mukherjee's Mareech, the Legend, with musical elements being borrowed from the popular Jatra format. Even as the Jatra itself sought to modernize with the use of popular film music, the use of raised platforms, theatrical lighting and sound effects, and even performance inside a playhouse, the urban theatre in turn borrowed Jatra theatrical traditions like the song and the character of the Sutradhar or the Ustad or stage manager-cum-narrator. Ancient myths and folk lore has found creative space on the stage, as in the plays of Girish Karnad.
Another instance of the resistance to the typical 'globalized' proscenium theatre production, is the attempt by certain playwrights and directors to perform away from the playhouse and close to the masses. As noted earlier, such a trend is predominant in the work of Badal Sircar's 'Third Theatre' or 'Free Theatre', staged by the theatre group Shatabdi for the last three decades, without charging tickets, in spaces called 'angan manch' (courtyard) as opposed to the proscenium or the open Jatra space. The discomfort with an elitist, urban middle-class theatre has prompted theatre persons to seek alternatives and to give voice to the concerns of marginal sections of the population.

In contemporary Asian societies, the theatre is a clear site of negotiation between the pre-modern and the modern. It is the location of confrontation between the old and the new, a confrontation that takes varied avatars: it may come as a rivalry between languages for cultural space and public funding — such as English, Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka; or English and local Indian languages like Bengali or Marathi; it may be a confrontation revealed in the choice of theme and characters as, for instance, when questions of 'national identity' are explored, as in the plays of Ediriwira Sarachchandra; it can include the politics of the geographical location of the performance, as in the case of Badal Sircar's Shatabdi. Since these negotiations on stage flow from similar negotiations within society at large, they are fraught with emotion, even passion, with distrust smoldering between stern guardians of tradition and equally obstinate advocates of modernity.

Various writers for the theatre in Asia seem to have taken less intransigent positions, somewhere midway in the range of arguments. These positions may take the shape of a well-considered hybridity as in the work of an illustrious earlier Bengali playwright Rabindranath Tagore, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had warmly welcomed various new Western genres of writing like the novel, the journalistic essay and new forms of drama, and deftly explored their potential to serve contemporary needs. Or the position may be in the nature of an accommodation as when Mahasweta Devi, the staunch advocate of tribal traditions
weaves tribal stories and lore with naturalistic writing, and translates her plays into English in the hope of reaching a larger and more diverse public in the cause of social justice.

One instance from each culture among the plays analyzed here, will serve to briefly illustrate and reiterate the myriad ways in which the theatre has offered scope for complex and creative readjustment: The White-haired Girl, from China, Mareech, the Legend, from India and The Golden Swan from Sri Lanka.

**The White-haired Girl.** At the height of the Communist revolution in China, the Party, under the leadership of Chairman Mao, discovered the potential of theatre to propagate revolutionary values. These values were shaped by a passionate rejection of Confucianism and the traditional feudal system and an equally passionate antagonism to Western culture. Theatre was seized upon by the Politburo to propagate Party values. In line with the ideology of the participation of the masses in cultural affairs, thousands of peasants and army cadets were organized into theatre troupes and performed all over the country. A new form of drama emerged, the *geju*, which combined elements of a traditional harvesting song and dance with the form of the new ‘spoken drama’, including a conflict-centered plot. The story was borrowed from a local ‘ghost story’ or legend, and is shaped by the writers in consultation with members of the public to fit within the dominant discourse; the decadent old society must be rejuvenated with the assistance of the Red Army – “the old society changed men into ghosts, the new society changes ghosts into men” – legend turned to the service of contemporary reality. Thousands upon thousands of performances were staged in every possible location, in factory yards and large theatre halls, and whatever judgement critics from elsewhere may be tempted to pass, in China, *The White-haired Girl* voiced for many years the ground-swell of the sentiment of the people, and did so with considerable artistry: a hybrid theatre form rising to the occasion.

**Mareech, the Legend.** In India, Arun Mukherjee’s *Mareech, the Legend* can also be viewed as theatre in the process of self-renewal. As a member of the Indian People’s Theatre
Association the playwright is part of a mass-based theatre movement. Whatever his later differences with the Communist Party and its theatre arm, the IPTA, Arun Mukherjee veered towards the folk tradition of the *Jatra* for inspiration. *Mareech, the Legend*, however, juxtaposes traditional mythology with contemporary world news headlines and stories of next-door social injustice to put together a play of a distinctly 'folksy' nature — including drums, cymbals and song — but with self-conscious artistry and a combination of the realistic style with a Brechtian 'alienation' effect, and in theme, a telescoping of the local with the global. A mythological story of demons, a tale of exploited peasants and a news-clip about an American reporter, all coalesce. Resistance against exploitation, which the playwright takes as his central theme, finds on the stage a congenial space to target a heterogeneous audience.

**The Golden Swan.** The Sri Lankan playwright Ediriwira Sarachchandra is held in very high esteem by the Sinhala theatre public, probably because his theatre incarnates the process by which the Sinhala defined their identity in a newly established nation. In *The Golden Swan* the playwright delves for material into traditional Buddhist lore and a *Jataka* tale. The play incorporates legend and song to present a critique of contemporary Sinhalese society in the race towards modern commercialism. Here we find a version of the story of the goose that lay the golden eggs, but there is a difference. Significantly, the Sinhala tale achieves greater effect because it introduces the element of religion and myth on the one hand, and, on the other, the crime of the murder of the father of the family, symbolizing the violence against traditional values. The play articulates important moral and ethical issues in a modernizing society. Sarachchandra's work received immense acclaim in the country. However, after the initial unconditional applause, some dissenting voices were heard and doubts were raised as to the suitability of the traditional tale to respond to contemporary needs. Such critics “took up the position that the modern stage required less formalized, less codified and more 'realistic' forms which could deal with characters and situations from daily life, employing an appropriate
language" (Gunawardena, "Latest Play" 79). Here, then, is a theatre fully immersed in the dialectics and tensions of the process of modernization.

5.6. Continuing Metamorphosis of Asian Theatre

To conclude this analysis of the changing frames of Asian theatre, one must emphasise that the process of transformation is ongoing and far from complete, simply because theatre is a cultural text. And the transformation is seen as inevitable when we recognize that culture "is a process of constant adaptation of people to historical circumstances which require them, as a condition of their own survival, to engage sympathetically with new ways of understanding the world and responding to it." (Watson 109) However, it would be erroneous to come to a facile conclusion that modern Asian culture in general and theatre in particular are in the process of turning into clones of Western models. Francis Fukuyama in his influential essay "The End of History" (1989) proclaimed fatalistically:

The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the exhaustion of all viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism. In the past decade there have been unmistakable changes in the intellectual climate of the world's two largest communist countries and the beginnings of significant reform movements in both. But this phenomenon extends beyond high politics and it can be seen also in the ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture in such diverse contexts as the peasants' markets and color television sets now omnipresent throughout China, the cooperative restaurants and the clothing stores opened in the past year in Moscow, the Beethoven piped into the Japanese department stores, and the rock music enjoyed alike in Prague, Rangoon and Tehran. What we may be witnessing may not be the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history, as such: that is the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (11).
Reacting to such views, Samuel P. Huntington put forth in *The Clash of Civilizations?* (1993) his equally influential and equally pessimistic theory that "the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (22-49). Whether history will bear out such dire prognosis for 'non-Western' culture in general and theatre in particular, only time will tell.

However, one finds reason for hope in the knowledge that culture in China, India and Sri Lanka has never been monolithic, and it has been porous for millennia – on the one hand, choosing and absorbing the valuable from the cultures it encounters: on the other, influencing other cultures. The Chinese are a rich amalgam of the Han, Manchu and many minority cultures and have widely impacted cultures as far as Korea and Vietnam. The Indian subcontinent has accommodated Aryans, Dravidians, Arabs, Greeks and other European peoples and elements of their cultures. Indian culture has, in turn, deeply shaped the ethos and art of regions like Malaysia, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Bali, Thailand and Laos (Chopra & Chopra 316-323 and Rubin 483). The Sri Lankans have encountered wave upon wave of cultural influence from North and South India, as well as Europe. As author D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke indicates, "Sri Lankan drama in English is a product of metamorphosis through migration" (*Migration* 493) Writers have also regularly migrated beyond the shores of their own island and Sri Lankan-born novelists like Michael Ondaatje in Canada, and playwrights like Ernest MacIntyre in Australia, have enriched the arts in their lands of adoption. In such a scenario, it is easy to understand that Asians have always had to redefine and revalorize their complex multiple identities. As an illustrious Bengali and world-renowned economist, Amartya Sen, cogently argues in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, acknowledging our multiple identities and choosing the importance we attach to each is of the essence. The modern stage in Asia has been, and continues to be, the site for just such a choice – with a greater or lesser degree of self-awareness by individual playwrights.
Notes

1 The art of Kutiyattam emerged on the Kerala stage between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries. It did not create a literature of its own, but took Sanskrit plays and adapted them for performance. Though it broadly follows the Nātyaśāstra, it leaves the actor a wider margin for improvisation. See Paulose, K.G. Improvisations in Ancient Theatre. 17-36.

2 In Japan's medieval period (1185-1600) the theatre form Noh and its companion comic form Kyogen grew immensely popular with the samurai generals who captured power from the imperial court and ruled under the title of Shogun. Noh is characterized by sonorous singing, restrained movements, refined painted masks; it dramatizes stories from history and legend. Kabuki emerged in the seventeenth century from popular urban dances and sketches of contemporary life. See Brandon 145-147.