Setting the Stage

Nation exists in the dreams of the ruler, and memories of the subject. Precisely why, no colonial domination is complete unless memories of the invaded land are erased, or replaced with a new entity. So it logically follows that the decolonisation process involves reviving those lost memories. More than the political domination of foreign lands or reassertion of their rights by natives, wars fought over memories on realms of abstraction make postcolonial studies all the more complicated, and interesting.

As one of the vital postcolonial tools, theatre holds the potential of subverting the colonial canon. It handles the postcolonial project in a many-pronged approach, thereby addressing the impact of colonial subjugation at different levels. However, the impact of theatre as a potent postcolonial project can be taken up for detailed discussion only with a historical perspective of colonialism and its evolution.

Colonialism has always been a part of human history. Right from the Second Century onwards leading colonial powers like the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Aztec Empire had vast regions of the globe under their control. But what differentiated the modern European colonisation from the earlier ones was that “it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries” (Loomba 9). In fact, the usurping of political power by European nations and their domination of Asia and Africa attained a new meaning, which was different from the migrations and invasions of the past, as these developments in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries most often annihilated native cultures, and in cases where no absolute destruction was caused the subjugated cultures were tampered with significantly, and the end results of these campaigns
were formation of new or hybrid variants of culture. This makes the colonisations made in the Twentieth Century more penetrative in cultural sphere than just innocent settlements for monetary benefits.

In that sense, the European colonisation went beyond economic subjugation, which was the basis of earlier imperial campaigns. Even while providing slaves, indentured labourers and raw materials to the mother country, the European colonies also acted as profitable markets for them. The benefits of these transactions always rested upon the mother country which ultimately led to the birth of European Capitalism. At the same time, the coloniser claimed to return the benefits of economic gain they had from the colony for the welfare and uplifting of the native community. Looking back, it has been observed as a psychological tool to augment the political suppression employed by the coloniser. As Frantz Fanon notes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the coloniser attempts to subdue the rising of the national consciousness among the subjects by constant reminders of the economic benefits of colonisation. “…[I]n the first phase of the national struggle colonialism tries to disarm national demands by putting forward economic doctrines. As soon as the first demands are set out, colonialism pretends to consider them, recognizing with ostentatious humility that territory is suffering from serious underdevelopment which necessitates a great economic and social effort” (Fanon 167). From this point, the colonisation process moves on to assuming control over the psyche of the ruled. In a marked deviation from the earlier conquests, which were mostly economic and later on political in nature, the European colonisation thus becomes the assertion of psychological supremacy. “This colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonised societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalise the concept of the modern West from a geographical
and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds” (Nandy xi).

A distinction should be made here between Colonialism, which will be discussed in detail later on, and Imperialism. Though capitalist Colonialism is often referred to as Imperialism, there remains a subtle difference between the two. Colonisation is essentially aimed at political taking over of territory, which invariably leads to appropriation of resources and manipulating of cultural framework of the colony. On the other hand, imperialism is more abstract in nature and not restricted to geographical limits of colonies. Imperialism originates from the effort to dominate other nations. “Thus the imperial country is the ‘metropole’ from which power flows, and the colony or the neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls. Imperialism can function without formal colonies (as in United States imperialism today) but colonialism cannot” (Loomba 12). Imperialistic aspirations were driven by the urge to control capital and channel it to the betterment of the coloniser. Monopolising capitalism has always been the focus of imperialism, right from early annals of history. “The needs of the growing industrial-financial complex of the West, especially Britain, could only be satisfied through new investment in other parts of the world, ...” (Walder 38). The situation is made more complicated since colonisation makes some forced political mapping of the colonised area. Different linguistic communities (as in Indian sub-continent) or ethnic groups (as in Africa) were arbitrarily grouped or ungrouped into nations by the Western powers. This means that the problem of colonisation does not end with political freedom of the region.

This makes colonialism not just a political reality. It is a psychological climate as well. Those who are under the yoke of colonialism need to find a solution to both to be emancipated. The invasion which began from the insatiable greed for more
riches – gold, spices, oil, and power over the acquired territory gradually becomes a complex problem of sociology when two cultures, hitherto unknown to each other, come in close interaction. The invasion, as it manifests its power, is completed through the domination of the visiting culture over the indigenous one. The former tries to establish its superiority in the hierarchy of evolution over the other. On the other hand, the native culture tries to defend its logic and justify its existence. The pattern is common throughout colonial history, irrespective of the coloniser and the colonised. The chasm between the ruler and the ruled remains open, all through the regime and even afterwards. “Anti-colonial struggles therefore had to create new and powerful identities for colonised peoples and to challenge colonialism not only at a political or intellectual level, but also on an emotional plane” (Loomba 155). That explained many Anglophone African writers who appeared towards the end of the colonial era feeling it necessary to re-evaluate and revisit their past from their own point of view to realise what their community had been through in the past.

The Europeans always tried to justify themselves by presenting the natives as a group of people who lacked the mental and intellectual development to rule themselves wisely. In their eyes, the natives were a bunch of people full of superstitions and were uncouth and lacked civilization. And it was deemed the moral responsibility of the Europeans to uplift the natives from the void they were in. “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said 3). As Ashish Nandy points out in his work *The Intimate Enemy* that there could be two markedly variant modes of colonialism, each evolving at specific periods of the colonisation process. He observes that whereas the first phase is marked by “bandit-kings who conquered the colonies” in a violent political mode of colonialism, the second mode is led by
“well-meaning, hard-working, middle-class missionaries, liberals, modernists, and believers in science, equality and progress” (Nandy xi). The second genre has a lasting effect on the colonised community and is not easily resorted, as it is with the violent oppression. “In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category” (Nandy xi). For this simple reason, the effect of cultural subjugation is invisible and an obvious enemy is absent for the masses to plot against.

Similarly, the impact of cultural domination lasts even after the victory of the colonised over the violent, cruel means of oppression, which is mostly political in nature. The effort to wield control over cultural development continued even after the political freedom of the colony. For this, the coloniser employs tools that could be disguised as ways of emancipation and thus inaccessible to the effort of the natives to redeem the lost pride in their own culture. Leela Gandhi notes that Albert Memmi, the Tunisian anti-colonial revolutionary and intellectual, in his Dominated Man: Notes Toward a Portrait forwarded political pessimism that “delivers an account of postcoloniality as a historical condition marked by the visible apparatus of freedom and the concealed persistence of unfreedom” (Gandhi 6-7). One such example is the usage of the term Commonwealth.

The idea of Empire is a centred one, a version of authority (whether narrowly political or broadly cultural) that gives power to a single system (belief, code, structure, language) through assertions of norm and value. The idea of Commonwealth is inherently radical: resistant to lines of normative authority, though in practice it perennially constructs new norms and behaves (variously) as though they were always true and everywhere applicable. (New 3)
Commonwealth was first used as an attempt to group all writings in English arising from British colonies. “It rested purely on the fact of a shared history and the resulting political grouping. In its loosest form, it remained a descriptive term for a collection of national literatures united by a past or present membership of the British Commonwealth” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 22).

At this point, the word Commonwealth becomes inadequate to hold all literary expressions of the native in its structure. To begin with, the Commonwealth writing is restricted to writings in English, the language brought in by the coloniser and keeps all writings in native tongue out of its ambit. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin find this politically overcharged and bring in the word ‘postcolonial literature’. “The term ‘post-colonial literature’ is finally to be preferred over the others because it points the way towards a possible study of the effects of colonialism in and between writings in English and writings in indigenous languages in such contexts as Africa and India, as well as writings in other language diasporas (French, Spanish, Portuguese)” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 23).

Even though the desire to build up a totally new world urges these nations to move forward, they are weighed down by years of colonial oppression. And in order to move forward these former colonies need to shed their self-imposed forgetfulness of their historical past and purge these memories by boldly remembering them. Colonialism often flourishes by inculcating in the minds of the colonised an inferiority complex that they are bound to be colonised and subjugated. Thus both their territories and their minds are being colonised and naturally they look up to the coloniser as their master. The emergence of an independent nation state is often accompanied by a deliberate desire to forget the unpleasant experiences of the colonial past. This postcolonial amnesia, as Leela Gandhi puts it, triggers an insatiable
urge in these newly independent states for a new beginning – a historical reinvention by totally ignoring the painful memories of colonial subordination. But the mere repression of these unpleasant truths is not a solution to the problem faced. In fact these repressed memories manifest themselves in many political and historical forms. This manifestation of memory is vital, as Homi Bhabha observes, to bridge colonialism and the question of cultural identity. “Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha 90).

It has been the experience of former colonies that they could not leave behind the baggage of painful memories and emerge in the post colonial scene as a new, fresh entity. This necessitated the interpreting of one’s own past in a new light. “Post colonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Gandhi 4). A nation’s independence from the long lasting colonial rule is accompanied by a bundle of expectations – to free oneself from the colonial nightmare of subordination. This is a complicated process that involves a series of transitions and translations stretched over a long, agonising period of time. “The new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately...since decolonisation has demonstrated it: this is not the way it happens. The colonised lives for a long time before we see that really new man” (Memmi, *Dominated Man* 88). The entire population, once subjugated under the yoke of foreign rule, is fighting its tendency to bypass its collective amnesia and purge itself of painful memories. Commenting on the observation on the long wait for decolonisation by Memmi, Leela Gandhi says “the colonial aftermath is
fundamentally deluded in its hope that the architecture of a new world will magically emerge from the physical ruins of colonialism” (6).

Nation as cultural force rests upon the memories of a great past and the deeds of great men and the desire to dream and set common goals. As said earlier, the fight against colonialism draws energy from various resources to assume many forms. Since the resistance had to be on the political, spiritual and emotional level the idea of a nation gained acceptance as a powerful tool of anti-colonial resistance. The role of nation as a vital political integer in the contemporary times cannot thus be undermined. The spark of nationalism in colonies, which were kindled after the native intelligentsia was exposed to the world of Western knowledge, should be taken up for discussion in this context. “English historians had often suggested that Indians learnt the ideas of freedom and self-determination from English books, including the plays of Shakespeare. Nationalism is thus a ‘derivative discourse’, a Calibanistic model of revolt which is dependent upon the coloniser’s gift of language/ideas” (Loomba 158).

In a way, this supported the stream of thought led by theorists like Benedict Anderson defining nation as an ‘imagined community’, where communities are formed outside territorial and linguistic boundaries. In his seminal book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson notes that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Anderson also argued that the concept of nation-state was derived from the coloniser, as geographical and political borders were redefined as part of the neo-imperialistic drive motivated by the spread of Capitalism. He attributes the ability of the native intelligentsia to forge a national consciousness to their access “to modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and in particular, to the models of nationalism,
nation-ness and nation-state produced elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth century” (116).

To counter this shift in the sense of nationalism, to realms of abstraction, concrete images are created by forging tradition and history. This leads to creation of new cultural icons like the national flag and national song as well as reinventing lost pride in historical milestones. This brings the effort in conflict with its Colonial past, as colonialism always tries to create a void in the pre-colonial era by distorting and disfiguring their past. This enhances their role as saviours of the natives from ignorance, degradation and barbarity. Partha Chatterjee endorses this theory, when he notes that accepting Anderson’s argument would portray the colonies as unimaginative. “If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity” (Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments 5). To bust this myth, Chatterjee draws a distinction between politics and cultural constructs of nationalism, thus leaving a space for mutual exchange of ideas between the coloniser and the colonised. While theories, as forwarded by Anderson, focus on concrete political formations of nationalist movements as distinctive episodes in evolution of national consciousness, Chatterjee says that the cultural awakening of the nation dates much before that. Thus a clear distinction of the sense of nation is made by dividing it “into a material, outside sphere constituted of the economy, statecraft, science and technology, and a spiritual, inner domain of culture (which includes religion, customs and family). The supremacy of the West may be conceded in the former, whereas the latter is claimed as the essence of national culture” (Loomba 159). In other words, this
theory aims at establishing the cultural sovereignty of the colony and subverts the conventional historical enquiries that treat nationalism as a political construct. “In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power. The dynamics of this historical project is completely missed in conventional histories in which the story of nationalism begins with the contest for political power” (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 6-7).

As John McLeod puts it in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, “the invention of tradition” and “the narration of history” (70) are central to the idea of a nation. Thus many historical moments which bring out the past glory of the nation and many symbols and icons which represent the very spirit of the nation are celebrated to strengthen the feeling of oneness among the people of a nation and develop an urge in them to stay together for the safety of the nation. These traditions are part of their culture which gives a specific identity to the people. Nationalism thus creates a sense of belongingness, rootedness and a feeling of ownership in the minds. This inspires them to fight as a single whole against the onslaughts of colonialism. The very idea of a nation develops a deep sense of bonding among the people. Ernest Renan writes:

*A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present- day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.* (19)

Colonised people across the globe are bound together by the intensity of their suffering. The works of Frantz Fanon has been highly influential in conceptualising the construction of common identity and nationalist consciousness which acts as an
inspiration in creating unity among the oppressed people. For Fanon, the idea of the nation is the focal point for anti-colonial resistance. Since the mode of oppression practised by the colonisers varied, people in the colonies across the globe had different colonial experiences. But they were bound together by the intensity of suffering as the ultimate effect of colonisation was subjection – political, economical and emotional. Fanon in his essay ‘On National Culture’ urges the writers and intelligentsia of the colonies to put forward the idea of nation as a focal point of anti-colonial resistance. Anti-colonial resistance could not move forward without planting the awareness of national culture in the minds of the people. And the writers, artists and intellectuals should take up the task of assisting the people in imagining the nation by actively participating in the struggle against colonial rule.

Thus by creating a distinctly national culture Fanon urges the writers to create a bonding between the people and their land. This would develop in them a feeling of rootedness—a sense of belonging which drives them to fight for their country. Though the native culture acts as a tool for anti-colonial resistance it was not to be glorified or imitated as such. A modification of the rich cultural tradition was to be made so that it could create an impact upon the struggle against colonialism. Culture is always dynamic and is responsive to historical circumstances. The vital, dynamic nature of culture is to be made use of to find new paths to the future. So “rather than extracting from the past what is perceived to be their most valuable, timeless cultural treasures, the native intellectual learns from the people to modify, reinterpret, and reform traditional culture at the service of forging a new national consciousness which places the struggle of the people at its heart” (McLeod 87).

Fanon suggests that the creation of a distinctly national culture moves through three phases. The first phase, which he calls an ‘unqualified assimilation’, is where
the native intellectual imitates the coloniser and moves away from the indigenous culture. In the second phase, the intellectual gets dissatisfied with copying of the coloniser and in turn becomes interested in the cultural history of his people. In this phase, which he calls ‘just-before-the-battle’, the intellectual starts to turn backwards to own roots. After the final phase, ‘the fighting phase’, the intellectual realises the potential of his own rich cultural tradition to counter the political oppression by the coloniser. In this final phase, the community forms a solid defence mechanism against the colonial oppression by imbibing energy from its own culture, but this build up happens over a long period and through many phases. “Beginning with introspection about the strength and weaknesses of traditional institutions, it progressively encompassed within it the entire cultural existence, embracing the whole way of life and all ‘signifying practices’ such as language, religion, art and philosophy” (Panikkar 50).

Homi Bhabha in his essay ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’ describes the nationalist discourse as having two contradictory modes – pedagogic and the performative. Nationalism is a pedagogic discourse since it claims that the history of a nation is continuous thus linking the people living in the present with those of the past. They are also simultaneously performative which means that the nationalist icons and symbols must be repeatedly performed in order to maintain the sense of comradeship among the people. Thus the present and past of nations are linked with the continuing thread of national traditions and it also develops a sense of shared history and roots among people of the same nation.

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reinterpret and reform traditional culture at the service of forging a new national consciousness which places the struggle of the people at its heart” (McLeod 87).

Decolonisation is the most significant process that happened after the World War II. The struggle for freedom ranged from the non-violence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi to violent revolutions. New nations thus created politically gave rise to higher expectations for the native community. Just like colonialism that employed different methods of subjugation from country to country, the form of resistance also changed from place to place. After the World War I, resistance became more organised and focussed. However, the World War II helped to usher in a drastic change in the perspective about the West. In World War II, natives were actively involved in fighting for their mother country, whereas the White man was fighting the White man across different parts of the world. This led to the rise of a national pride in the natives and at the same time, the White man suffered a fall in stature as the supreme power. It also exposed the nature of exploitation that the colonies were subjected to. Fanon’s observation that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples” (102) turns the concept of colonial rule on its head. While the nationalism is a defensive ideology, the resistance movements in many nations during the post World War II scenario could imbibe energy from it and convert themselves to the decolonisation drive.

The evolution of culture creates an interesting pattern in the decolonising context. While there were attempts to return to the original glory of native culture, exposure to the Western notion of culture through their colonisers gave the natives another, different perspective about it. Merging of these two perspectives prepared the native culture to take on the Western culture, which in the post World War II was
fighting signs of erosion from within. Operations of the imperialistic state had worked through the moral power of culture, giving the coloniser domination over institutions of control. “...By the late nineteenth century, Europe had erected an edifice of culture so hugely confident, authoritative and self-congratulatory that its imperial assumptions, its centralising of European life, and its complicity in civilising mission simply could not be questioned” (Ashcroft and Ahluwahlia 88). As the colonial empire started to crumble across the world, this edifice was the first to be challenged. Along with this global development, the myth of cultural superiority of the Empire over its colonies was busted. The colonised people, imbibing energy from their own culture, proved that they were capable of adapting to the march of civilisation, without compromising their cultural identity. “It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it accepted the very intellectual premises of modernity on which the colonial domination was based” (Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought 30). New experiences of culture, which were a blend of native culture and aggressive strains of the coloniser’s culture, armed this drive. Just as imperial culture was the most important tool in the imperial hegemony, native culture spearheaded the postcolonial attempt to resist the colonial supremacy.

The hollowness of the claim of supremacy was easy to spot. “Colonial racism is built from three major ideological components: one, the gulf between the culture of the colonialist and the colonized; two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonist; and three, the use of these supposed differences as standards of absolute fact” (Memmi, The Colonizer 115). Once the colonies started forming perspectives of nationalism based on their own culture, the relevance of this gulf ceased to exist and the issue of West’s cultural supremacy was naturally subverted. The situation also forged a sense of unity among nations within the colony, as the
political borders were most often drawn by the coloniser for administrative reasons and with scant respect to the commonalities of native culture. “The internal differences among the administrators about the Indian civilization notwithstanding, they all shared this sense of purpose, they thought, was bequeathed to them by history” (Panikkar 3), which was also applicable to other colonies as well. While the West easily wielded control on the political side of the nation with their supremacy in economy science and technology, the colonised nations made fervent attempts to protect their culture, the very essence and spirit of their nation from external attacks. “Thus anti-colonial nationalism all over Asia and Africa was not modelled upon simple imitation but also by defining its difference from Western notions of liberty, freedom and human dignity” (Loomba 160).

However, the colonies continue their engagement with former colonisers, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define the term postcolonisation in their work *The Empire Writes Back* as “a process in which colonised societies participate over a long period, through different phases and modes of engagement with the colonising power, during and after the actual period of direct colonial rule” (195). This clearly indicates that the colonial influences continued to haunt even after attaining political independence and the colonised could not entirely free themselves from these influences. But they could definitely “appropriate and transform it in infinite ways, and the recuperation and re-acknowledgement of the pre-colonial is part of such a transformation” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 195).

Even though the colonised societies could not remain unchanged by the imperial ideology, the colonisers too could not completely destroy the pre-colonial culture which remained vigorous and persistent throughout the colonial period. The term postcolonial deals with the different facets of the relationship between the
colonised and the coloniser. So the literatures of all the countries – be it African countries, Canada, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Australia, Malaysia or Malta – which have been under the European imperial domination can be called postcolonial literatures. Apart from their distinctive regional characteristics, they are bound together by their experience of colonisation and they try to establish an identity of their own – an identity completely different from what has been thrust upon them by the coloniser. Postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonisation – the myths of power, the race classifications, and the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial writing, therefore, is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and diversion under the Empire. “... postcoloniality can be defined as that condition in which colonised people seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalised world” (Boehmer 3).

Postcolonial literatures developed step by step with the development of national or regional consciousness. Since the publication and distribution of literary texts in colonies were directly under the control of the imperial ruling class, the early postcolonial writers were not completely successful in making their distinctive voice heard. “The development of independent literatures was dependent upon the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usages” (Boehmer 6). Language, one of the major tools of colonial oppression and postcolonial writing, thus experiences a subversion of roles as the sense of superiority wielded by the European culture is successfully challenged by native culture. Imperialism results in ‘linguistic alienation’ by suppressing the pre-colonial cultures. Writers have to overcome the gap created by linguistic displacement of the pre-colonial language through the medium of English.
Since language is a significant symbol of power, the postcolonial writers had to replace the language of the imperialists with that which is adapted to express their concerns fully. This can be attained either by abrogating, which is total denial of the power and privilege vested upon English or by appropriation. “The abrogation or denial of privilege of ‘English’ involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks the separation from the site of colonial privilege” (Boehmer 37).

Abrogation rejects everything that the imperial culture stands for – its aesthetic sense, its illusory standards of correct usage and its belief in the assumption of a fixed meaning inscribed to a particular word. It is a vital element in decolonising the language and writing in English. But the process of appropriation is vital for abrogation, for without appropriation the privileges of the colonial language might be taken over by the new usages. Postcolonial writers, by the process of appropriation, adapts the colonial tongue to bear the burden of one’s own cultural experiences or as Raja Rao puts it, “to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (vii). This, in other words, meant that the postcolonial creative writing was using the textual offensiveness of the colonial authority to define their own space as different from what has been outlined by the coloniser. As Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson note:

Just as fire can be fought by fire, textual control can be fought by textuality...The post-colonial is especially and pressingly concerned with the power that resides in discourse and textuality; its resistance, then, quite appropriately takes place in—and from—the domain of textuality, in (among other things) motivated acts of
The use of language as a tool of colonial subjugation has an inherent flaw. It showed that the element of ‘counter discourse’ was embedded in texts created during the acme of colonial period, though it could be not a deliberate or conscious attempt. A couple of the most repeated examples of these are the character Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and Caliban in William Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. In the famous dialogue between Caliban and Prospero, which went on to become the signature of decolonisation movements, the former tells that his introduction to English only helped him to curse his coloniser. The postcolonial writer and theatre practitioners took off from this point to further explore the postcoloniality of canonical texts from the colonial phase by reworking European classics and adapting it to local aesthetics and sensibilities and thereby dismantling the text’s cultural supremacy. The attempt, termed as canonical counter-discourse, involves developing a counter text that retains identifying signifiers of the original text but creates sub-texts, visually and textually mostly in allegorical terms, to upset the power structures intended by the original text. This is based on the assumption that text is not sacrosanct and that it should be open for new interpretations. “The concept of intertextuality requires that we understand the concept of text not as a self-contained structure but as differential and historical... Texts are therefore not structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness” (Frow 45).

Theatre provides the artiste with creative space to experiment with the multiple possibilities of using different layers of narration through different theatrical tropes, unlike the written text and also establish the presence of this otherness identified in the original text. The numerous layers of meaning thus created and their coded information prove to be of great use in counter discourses in the decolonisation
process. In the postcolonial context, theatre assumes multiple cultural roles. It starts off as a literary form that is many-pronged and capable of “shaping the practices and languages of collective memory and identity” (Peyma 6). Theatre plays a more direct role in forging independent national identity and moulding cultural consciousness of an emergent nation, as “unlike most literature, drama has been composed for performance, confronting the audience in public, sociable confines of theater” (Worthen 3).

In what is called ‘performative counter discourse’, canonical texts are given contemporary political shades of meaning by reworking them on stage. This will take the text beyond what it meant originally and attribute what the performer wanted it to mean. “What is thus called for in performative counter-discourse is a praxis which goes beyond the reworking of representational systems to take account of the wider relationship between the source text and its redefined target culture” (Gilbert and Tompkins 30). The postcolonial theatre always falls back on myths and rituals to sharpen the decolonisation process and hence most often target classical Greek Theatre, along with Shakespearean texts, for canonical counter-discourse. This proved to be effective in foregrounding the issues of colonisation in theatre, the form of which was introduced to the colonies by the then masters. It should also be noted in this context that contemporary theatre practitioners from the former colonies also tapped the indigenous performing art forms to redefine the performative sub-text, even while dealing with canonical texts.

The same is applicable to the reworking of Biblical themes. This has a major sociological relevance as well, in the light of mass religious conversions made by the colonisers. Similarly, Bible preceded the evolution of English as a tool of colonialism. That could have been another reason for the postcolonial theatre artistes to reinterpret
Biblical themes to expound their political motives. It was easy for the postcolonial theatre artistes to find enough material among Biblical texts to write back to the authority of hegemony imposed on them. As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins note:

Most post-colonial texts which (mis)use the master narratives of Christianity to illustrate imperialism’s effect on native cultures ‘translate’ the Bible’s content and rework its forms so that the word of God is transmitted through oral story-telling rather than liturgical readings. This process establishes ... the codes, conventions, and cultural associations of the canonical text with those of a distinctly different local one. (44-45)

This is done with the deliberate intention of upsetting the axes of power and knowledge established by the coloniser. Over the history of postcolonialism, there had been many and much diverse attempts to do this, to the same effect. All attempts in this direction aim at subverting the existing social pattern and creating a new identity for the colonial subject, which is free from the bias of the coloniser. Even though the literary worlds created by the classical texts, be it Shakespearian or Biblical, could circumscribe the European literature, it is not applicable with same ease to the postcolonial literature. “Canonical counter-discourse is one method by which colonised cultures can refuse the seamless contiguity between a classical past and a post-colonial present that the empire strives to preserve” (Gilbert and Tompkins 50-51).

There is no question about the impact that theatre had, and still has, among common man. In an age that preceded the invention of electronic entertainment, theatre reigned supreme. No wonder, it became a vital instrument in the decolonisation drive. In the postcolonial theatre, performance functions as an
important anti-imperial tool. It is now properly documented that the Western art forms witnessed a marked change in development, both structurally and thematically, in the Twentieth Century and that this change has been attributed to free drawing of inspiration from non-Western cultures. However, it is also relevant to note that the host cultures did not gain much from the interaction with Western art forms, as the inspiration was unidirectional, at least in the initial stages. “Interculturalism and postmodernism intersect at the point of ahistorical, acultural synthesis that can also be perceived to be neo-colonial ... it often involves the parasitical activity of taking that which seems useful and unique from another culture and leaving that host culture with little except the dubious opportunity to seem to have been associated with a powerful and influential nation(s)” (Gilbert and Tompkins 10).

It was only in later phases of postcoloniality that non-European art practitioners started using the structures formed by the European artists to make their voices heard. Postcolonial theatre tried to reinterpret a historical monument or character or an imperial text or even a theatrical building. By employing tools like plays or other literary genres, or even films, postcolonialism is attempting to engage impacts of colonialism in a direct reaction. This operates in twin planes of interpretation. One, it attempts to elucidate the inherent postcoloniality in texts and secondly, it deconstructs the continuing colonial constructs to support the decolonisation attempts. Out of these different artistic expressions, theatre stands out for its direct interaction with society and its intended impact on it. “Post-colonial theatre’s capacity to intervene publicly in social organisation and to critique political structure can be more extensive than the relatively isolated circumstances of written narrative and poetry” (Gilbert and Tompkins 3).
Along with the visualisation of the written text, which magnifies its impact on the audience and enhances the penetrative power of the word among masses, theatre also employs other signifiers like properties, sets and lighting that encrypt the cultural connotations subtly, as these signifying systems “contribute not only to a production’s atmosphere or the practical needs of the action, but also encode socio-economic status and symbolic qualities” (Llewellyn-Jones 22). This unique strength of theatre is exploited to its maximum potential by almost all postcolonial dramatists – be it Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, Girish Karnad of India, Athol Fugard of South Africa, Jack Davis of Australia, Vincent O’Sullivan of New Zealand, Kee Thuan Chye of Malaysia or Derek Walcott of West Indies. Works by all these playwrights capture the spirit of challenge posed to the cultural supremacy of traditional English and American canon and interrogate the stereotypes of colonial representation of their respective cultures. Between them, all these postcolonial playwrights use theatre as a political tool in the postcolonial context and this is done with a historical perspective.

When the Europeans settled in a colony, one of the prominent signs of the establishment of their culture was the presentation of the European drama, which overshadowed indigenous forms. The theatre productions in colonies followed the European models and the plays were to be the reproductions of the imperial models in theme, content and style. Elements from the local milieu were included, but the native characters were almost always portrayed as ridiculous and intolerable, as someone outside the main stream of narrative. But there were times when the local element transcended the theatrical space attributed to it and became resistance discourses. Theatre not only defined equations on human relations but also did it about one’s position in the society. This has been so since time immemorial in history. “It allowed for covert opportunities whereby subordinated groups could act out contrapuntal,
nonhegemonic, and dissident alternatives to hegemony” (Sponsler xvi). May be that was why Frantz Fanon put the reciprocal recognition vital in an emerging social scene to ascertain what he called ‘the certainty to oneself’. Fanon goes on to put language as vital in this step of mutual recognition and cultural relationship. Just as history is used by the coloniser to dominate the psychology of the colonised, language too assumes a position of domination. During the decolonising project, this should also be challenged and subverted.

Theatrical manipulations of the English language can significantly amplify the political effects of a play, since, according to Bill Ashcroft, post-colonial adaptations of English have managed to ‘relocate the “centre” of the English language by decentring it’.

Other modes of communicating, such as song and music, also destabilise the political position of spoken English as the dominant transmitter of meaning. (Gilbert and Tomkins 12)

The postcolonial playwrights make deliberate attempt to dislocate the centrality attributed to English, one of the most visible signs of cultural domination. “While some postcolonial dramatists deliberately avoid using the imperial language altogether, many more use it as a basic language which is necessarily modified, subverted or decentered when indigenous languages are incorporated into the play” (Peyma 50). Along with language, theatre also provides the playwright to draw extensively from elements of indigenous culture, like music and dance, and incorporate it to the totality of the art and thus attribute a political shade to the work.

“There is a repeated use of indigenous song and music or hybridized forms recalling pre-contact ways of communication, proving the validity of the continued oral traditions, helping to dismantle conventional western representation” (Peyma 55).
Another characteristic of the postcolonial theatre is a deliberate attempt to move away from the mechanism of Western stage and imbibe essence of native performances. This is based on the theory that the aesthetic yardsticks employed by the Western arts catered to the sensibilities of the coloniser and not the colonised. Once the colony moved to the second phase of decolonisation, as identified by Fanon, where he started realising the futility of mimicking the White man, they also realised the potential of their own rituals and art forms. At this point, the Western theatrical devices fall way short of dealing with the artistic quests of the native community in the colonies. “Hybridity is an important cultural strategy for the project of decolonization. The meshing of performance conventions, as a way of appropriating received forms of drama and adapting them to fit the indigenous experiences, is one form of cultural resistance against Eurocentrism” (Peyma 23). In their search for a new theatre diction, the obvious direction the majority of artistes turned to was their own rituals. This, in a way, was caused by the apparent parallels that theatre and rituals had in their transformative and translational qualities as well as their potential of establishing direct interaction with a wider public when compared to fine art forms. “The performative elements of a society’s secular festivals, alike to those of its religious rituals, provide a major archive for a postcolonial drama, which aims to articulate the specifications of local experience and to explore and articulate their postcolonial identity” (Peyma 31).

Together, these different cultural strands merge to create the aspect of theatrical syncreticism for the postcolonial project. This is based on the argument that “the ‘decolonization’ of the stage can be examined through a number of formal strategies which involve the combination and amalgamation of indigenous performance forms within the framework of the Western notion of theatre” (Balme 1).
This has been pointed out as one of the most effective tools of decolonisation projects, as “it utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other” (Balme 2).

However, blending of visual and spiritual elements of rituals with theatre language often created another interpretative angle to the counter-discourse. Ritual, once taken out of its theistic context, could easily transform itself to a spectacular visual, an overwhelmingly capable medium to transport political messages. For the postcolonial theatre person, ritual and theatre are not two phenomenologically distinct and exclusive activities. On the other hand, it helps to treat them as complementary. This is made possible when the artiste reinterprets the visual layer of the ritual on the creative platform of contemporary theatre. “While this does not necessarily deny the sacred quality of the ritual, it does force it to interact with the secular. The resultant coexistence of ritual and drama preserves and disseminates traditional forms and practices” (Gilbert and Tomkins 60-61). On one hand, the visual of the ritual helps the native audience to associate with the theatre presented in an automatic and natural manner, just as they associate with the ritual in its original context. At another level, this helps the artiste to break up the rigid structures of stage laid out by the Western aesthetics and take up the challenge of posing questions about the capacity of the Western theatre to address genuine issues of postcolonial realities. “The integration of such cultural texts into the framework of a theatrical text involves a process of cultural and aesthetic semiotic recoding which ultimately questions the basis of normative Western drama” (Balme 4).

Subverting the existing belief in history as true, immutable and objective, history is widely accepted as a discourse in the postcolonial scene, just like any other
narrative discourse – untrue, changeable and subjective – and hence open to interpretation. As Greg Dening comments, “history is not the past: it is a consciousness of the past used for present purposes” (170). This is in sharp contrast with the notion of history during the colonial period, which was based on the belief that the present is a natural outcome of happenings in the past. “[A] colony’s history frequently ‘began’ when the Whites arrived: any events prior to contact with Europeans were irrelevant to the official record, which became the history, a closed narrative designed to remove traces of alternative histories” (Gilbert and Tompkins 106). Hence any history outside the official recorded one was dismissed as myth or legend, as less significant and lacking credibility. This is mostly because the European notion of history was linear in nature, as compared to other structural variations in regional histories of colonies where they established their political control. Hence overriding the regional histories was not just meant to appeal to the European sensibilities; it was also a vital tool in obliterating the memory of the native past and ascertaining the colony’s authority even there. Countering this overbearing colonial gaze into their own history, postcolonial playwrights redeploy and re-evaluate history, thereby presenting the hitherto untold, and unrecorded, variants of regional history. “Postcolonial studies re-examine the history and legacy of colonialism; their relation to cultural representations, and to the formation and institutionalisation of knowledge” (Peyma 36).

The postcolonial phase of theatre also coincides with the attainment of political freedom for many of the colonies. It also gave rise to many genres of postcolonial theatre. By the middle of the twentieth century, the European hegemony over Asian and African colonies started losing its grip and the shift in political equations coincided with the literary periodization. However, “Indian theatre of post-independence period...remains largely outside these theoretical and critical constructs
and continues to appear on the margins of contemporary world theatre...” (Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence* 2). The linguistic plurality and its strong connections with traditional roots have always kept the distinctive character of Indian theatre, markedly different from contemporary world theatre.

All through its evolution, the Indian theatre retained its umbilical connection with tradition, which is “preserved in the *Natyashastra* the oldest text of theory of the drama,[that] claims for the drama a divine origin, and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves” (Keith 12). The Indian theatre exhibited a marked phase in its evolution in the postcolonial period as theatre practitioners, mostly in Calcutta and Bombay where commercial theatre was much vibrant, chose to sever links with the colonial legacy. Interestingly, this was achieved by returning to the pre-contact traditions, once again. “Practitioners of the new drama have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization” (Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence* 2).

Another development that happened in Indian theatre at this time was the evolution of English theatre. Even though it had masters like Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo and Harindranath Chattopadhyay writing plays, the English plays did not hit the mainstream as did the vernacular ones. It does not mean that the Indian English theatre lacked native characteristics. “Though Tagore kept himself alienated from the professional theatre of Bengal and had hardly any association with the Calcutta stage, he assimilated in his plays several features of Bengali folk drama and Sanskrit drama along with some Western theatrical devices” (Rai 14). Playwrights like T.P. Kailasam, who wrote prolifically in English and Kannada, Bharati Sarabhai and J.M. Lobo Prabhu were prominent names before the new generation of writers like Asif
Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan took over.

Like his postcolonial contemporaries, Karnad achieves a fine balance of the past and the present of the nation in his works. “His plays are steeped in Indian culture for the themes are taken from myths, legends, folk tales and history, but his approach is modern. He combines classical, folk, and western theatrical traditions in his plays” (Shukla 6). Karnad not just employs the theories from the West but also links them up with the theatre of his own roots, thus mapping a new stream of postcoloniality. “Karnad was influenced by certain important aspects of Brechtian theory such as ‘alienation effect’, ‘interruptive devices’, ‘complex seeing’, and ‘anti-cathartic effect’ but discovered them in his own theatrical tradition” (Rai 19).

Karnad takes the role of re-identifying national psyche to another level by returning to history and myths. The interdependence of true and fictive histories is a main point of discussion among new anti-orientalist and subaltern critiques of colonial and neo-colonial histographies. As a representative of the generation that first came of age after India’s political freedom from the colonial yoke, Karnad is made to face directly the tensions hitherto implicit in Indian society; ‘tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved” (Karnad, Introduction. Three Plays 1). Thus he could re-engage theatre with other performance arts, mostly traditional and create a new convention of postcoloniality. This trait remains the stamp of all plays by Girish Karnad. As Tutun Mukherjee notes:

It is remarkable that whatever be the physical or behavioural embodiment given to the mythical, historical, social or
psychological horizons of his plays, the issues that build the plots are drawn from and remain firmly grounded in the experiential world of the readers/spectators but bearing larger implications capable of transcending cultural specificities to reach out towards a universality of human knowledge. (17)

Even when dealing with characters drawn from national history that is not dated so back in time, Karnad engages these many layers of interpretation – in both characterisation and denouement of the theme. Aparna Dharwadker rightly notes that Karnad’s play *Tughlaq*, a contemporary Kannada play about a fourteenth-century Islamic ruler in India, could be used to delineate the interdependence and thus demarcate the textual, political, and cultural contexts of postcolonial historical fictions. *Tughlaq* successfully develops a resonant parallel between the history and contemporary political realities of the nation and also brings back the question of secularism in the contemporary context to the forefront by placing memories of tension over religious differences at the crux of the play. In his repertoire, *Tughlaq* is the most directly political play. As Karnad himself noted, “In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India; the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence, and the coming to terms with cynicism and real politik” (Karnad, Introduction. *Three Plays* 7).

Girish Karnad’s plays reflect the conflict of identities that Indian society had once they faced freedom. But his perspective as a post-colonial writer was clear, right from his choice of language. He wrote in Kannada, his mother tongue, till recently. His first play in English was written as late as 1997. The politics of Karnad’s plays existed in the connection he established with the present times. In his World Theatre
Day message given to the International Theatre Institute on March 27, 2002, Karnad made an allusion to the Indian myth on the origin of theatre and noted that in theatre, the playwright, the performers and the audience form an unstable and potentially explosive continuum.

Born in 1938 at Mathern, Maharashtra, Girish Karnad made a mark as playwright, poet, actor, director, critic and translator. He earned the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Mathematics and Statistics in 1958 from the Karnataka University, Dharwar. Upon graduation, he went to England and studied at Oxford where he got a Rhodes Scholarship and went on to receive Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Right from his childhood, Karnad got a chance to get exposed to different types of performative arts – mostly the Company Natak plays and the Yakshagana performances and this seems to have left a lasting impact on him as evident from the technical aspects he employs in his plays. Along with this, his exposure to Western theatre techniques early in his life and later being in close and direct interaction with it during his education abroad, completed the structural evolution of his art. He started his career with the play *Yayati*, which was followed by *Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Driven Snow, Bali: The Sacrifice, Naga-Mandala, Tale-danda, The Fire and the Rain, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, Wedding Album, A Heap of Broken Images* and *Flowers: A Dramatic Monologue*. In his plays, Karnad brings in a whole spectrum of perspectives to complement the wide range of themes, thus enabling them to cover topics relevant to contemporary times.

In his plays, Karnad employs elements of the folk theatre to great effect. He treats the folk theatre as the main stream, which was disrupted by the introduction of Western theatre in India by the colonial rulers, linking his plays to the roots of Indian theatre movement. He ascertains the feeling that the post-independence India should
evolve a strong theatrical idiom of its own based on its rich performance traditions, without blindly imitating the European dramatic mode. “Evidently, his interest in the performative styles of Yakshagana and Bayalata inspired the choice of plots which would enable the use of masks and puppets, snakes and dogs, as well as folk styles of enactment with ‘framing tales’ or the ‘Bhagavat’” (Mukherjee 19). Karnad, thus, joins the group of theatre persons trying to react politically to the contemporary political realities, which according to Darren C. Zook faces the challenge of “trying to find ways to ‘out-farce’ a political arena that already has become inherently farcical” (174). Karnad uses myth as the starting point for his exploration into the contradictions inherent in the Indian society. *Yayati* was a self-consciously existentialist play on the theme of moral responsibility. Though based on an anecdote in Mahabharata, Karnad moved away from the base theme enough to highlight his point – that of remorse and repentance arising out of the mad chase for worldly desires and thus making it contemporary.

Karnad’s *Tale-danda* has been hailed by aficionados as an excellent analysis of the ills that plague the Indian society. The play is about efforts made by Basavanna, who assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers to establish an egalitarian society that shunned caste system and was based on equality of sexes. However, the ideal world crumbled when a Brahmin girl married a low-caste boy and bloodshed ensued.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad stretches this theme further. Placed inside the cultural milieu of priesthood, the play deals with the urge of a man to break free from the bondage set on him by the social system. By drawing heavily from the palette of native cultural symbols, Karnad reiterates the subtle links between myth and history in Indian culture. “In Indian languages, the analogous term for ‘myth’ is
‘ithihasa’. It is ‘ithihasa’ as a kind of collective historical conscience that is conveyed through the oral traditions and the performative traditions,” (Mukherjee 19) which is used in transmitting cultural traditions through generations. This rebellion against the immediate world also marks the play *Naga-Mandala*. The play is a woman’s understanding of the reality around her, of the restrictions defined by the society against the free will of an individual to have choices. Rani, the protagonist of the play, is straddled between two extreme manifestations of one identity – that of her husband as a stranger during the day and a lover in the night. To narrate the tale of how Rani manages to shuttle between these two worlds, Karnad employs the non-linear narrative structure of Indian folk theatre. “In his re-presentation of the myths, Karnad telescopes onto those selected moments of cultural and historical crises when individual choices had to confront ‘the burden of culture’ and the way those choices effected social-cultural-historical transformations” (Mukherjee 19). So it is clear that Karnad, through his plays, successfully transcends the pain of the past. Karnad’s works can thus be seen in a new perspective, as attempting to retrace Jawaharlal Nehru’s regime in *Tughlaq*, treating *Hayavadana* as an allegory of India rising from its travails of history and *Naga-Mandala* as an effort on female sexual liberation. For Banfield, many of Karnad’s regal characters indicate “the centrality of responsibility in the exercise of power between rulers and ruled, responsibility on both sides, and in all its forms” (Crow and Banfield 160).

At the other end, African English writers are faced with the task of inventing a new tool, the use of the coloniser’s language and hence the colonised breathes in elements from his culture and look for new imageries to adapt the language. This is one way of purging painful memories and transcend to a new found freedom of expression. The roots of African theatre are ancient and complex. It is entwined with
community festivals, seasonal rhythm, religious rituals along with the work of travelling professional entertainers and story-tellers. Since the 1950s, the theatre grew in strength, parallel to the political emancipation of the nations across most of the continent. Contemporary African theatre reasserted its function and realised that its responsibility to the society is much greater than its entertainment quality. Centuries of European dominance, both economic and political, has no doubt influenced African culture and thereby its theatre. During the first half of the Twentieth Century, indigenous theatre movements often reflected Western models. But the generations that followed made effective measures to subvert or replace these European influences, thanks mostly to works by those like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Wole Soyinka. The theatre in Africa has played a major role in anti-colonial struggle and continues to do so in the post-independent world. The strength of the contemporary African theatre depends largely on “…the continuing vitality and relevance of the genuinely communal theatre manifested in festival, ritual and masquerade with its sophisticated use of dance, mime costuming and music, and its integral relationship between performers and observers…” (Banham, Hill, and Woodyard 3).

As Chinua Achebe observed in an essay titled “The African Writer and the English Language”: “I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (384). Writers like Achebe also stand for a clear politics of African theatre, which is about defining their national identity. The postcolonial writers do not idealise their roots or past. On the other hand they tend to treat their identity in a realistic manner, which gives them an added edge to take on the tactics of deceit often employed by the
coloniser. In the preface to their play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Thiong’o and Micere Githae Mugo say:

African Literature and African Writers are either fighting with people or aiding imperialism and the class enemies of the people. We believe that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weakness, gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation. (qtd. in Kumar 314)

Using English is thus an attempt towards forming a sense of identity using a tool taken from Western culture. These writers acknowledge that foreign culture has made inroads into indigenous one. By translating African culture to English, these writers are working on a cultural transplantation. Post-colonial African writers resorting to English strengthen a sense of identity by proving that indigenous values and ideas transcend the barrier of translation. By doing so, they strive to make the language one’s own or in other words, they incorporate the language to their cultural setting rather than allowing themselves to be incorporated.

Wole Soyinka, born Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka in 1934, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 and is Africa’s most distinguished playwright. A Yoruba, he studied first at the University College of Ibadan, then at Leeds University of England, where he came under the influence of the brilliant Shakespeare scholar G. Wilson Knight. The Fifties were a period of great experimentation in the theatre, both in France and England, and Soyinka was involved with various productions in Great Britain before returning to Nigeria.

Although African writers had traditionally viewed English, French and other European languages as the tongue of the colonial power, a tool of cultural stigma and
imperialism, Soyinka made the decision to write in English to reach out to a wider audience. He urges the postcolonial writers to make thorough use of the English language and “stretch it, impact and compact, fragment and reassemble it with no apology, as required to bear the burden of their experiences, even if such experiences are not formulated within the conceptual idiom of that language” (Soyinka, Art 107). In 1960, Soyinka returned to Nigeria and founded The 1960 Masks, a theatre company that presented his first major play, *A Dance of the Forests*. In this play, the ethereal world and the living world clash over the future of a half-born child. This was Soyinka’s first attempt at finding a lyrical blend of Western experimentalism and African folk tradition, reflecting a highly original approach to theatre. In the play “instead of ascribing Africa’s ills solely to colonialism, he turns his attention to the corrupt and immoral authorities in independent Nigerian state, which has substituted the colonial masters in ushering a new reign of terror” (Roy 20).

Soyinka also made much use of traditional African forms and ideas, mostly from the Yoruba culture, for creating the structure of his plays. “It is the large body of Yoruba myths, tales, songs, proverbs, chants and, most of all, ritual, embodying a specific ontological and epistemological system, which frames Soyinka’s writings” (Roy 17). Like other African post-colonial writers, Soyinka is also trying to create new reference points for African culture from within the culture itself. Soyinka’s narrative breaks the continuum of time freely, giving it a heavy tint of folklore nature. He creates rich layers of images and symbols, drawn from his root culture, to address contemporary issues. He freely breaks the syntax and diction by using “Yorubised English”, rich with Yoruba expressions, songs and myths. This journey back to the roots is the artist’s attempt to counter the evils of present times. For Soyinka “writing is inextricably linked with the effort to create a just and democratic society in post-
colonial Africa” (Msiska 1). Although *A Dance of the Forests* exhibited a fairly serious tone, much of Soyinka’s early works satirise the absurdities of his society with a gently humorous and affectionate spirit. As the struggle for independence in his country turned sour, Soyinka’s works began to take darker tones. Soyinka’s theatre is firmly built on a reverse critique of the craving for power, as it brings the indigenous values and myths to play as counteractive force for the colonising societies.

Soyinka was a political figure, right from the beginning. During the Nigerian Civil War, he was put into solitary confinement for two years for not towing the government line and was released only after an intense international campaign. This experience was movingly recounted in his book *A Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*. His plays *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* explored the value of traditional Yoruba ways versus European innovations. Soyinka served as the head of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan (1969-’72) and head of the Department of Dramatic Arts at the University of Ife (1975-85). In 1978, Soyinka founded another theatre company, The Unife Guerilla Theatre. Based at the University of Ife, this company presented plays and sketches in parks, markets, and on street corners, attacking corruption and political oppression. Soyinka’s other major plays include *The Strong Breed, The Swamp Dwellers, Kongi’s Harvest, The Trials of Brother Jero, The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite, Jero’s Metamorphosis, Opera Wonyosi, A Play of Giants, The Road, Requiem for a Futurologist, Childe Internationale, From Zia, with Love, A Scourge of Hyacinths* and *Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope*. He is also known for his novels, autobiographical works, poetry and criticism.

Soyinka’s attempt at other genres of fiction expands on the themes expressed in his plays, thus becoming the narratives of personal and political turmoil in Africa.
This is true about his novels *The Interpreters*, and *Season of Anomy*, while his non-fiction works and essay collections are based on his own life and personal political convictions. He has also composed a trilogy that reflects on his life and the life of his family – *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, *İsarà: A Voyage around Essay* and *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir*.

His first collection of essays *Myth, Literature, and the African World* is a combination of his criticism of specific texts and his own search for a literary perspective. To this enquiry, Soyinka adds the role that politics and literature play in modern Africa in his next essay collection *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. His other collections of essays include *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* and *The Climate of Fear*.

Soyinka has also published several collections of poetry, including *Idanre and Other Poems*, *Ogun Abibiman, Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems* and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*. As in his plays and novels, Soyinka uses liberally words, images and idioms from the Yoruba terminology in his poems too. He returns to stories associated with the Yoruba mythological figures like Ogun, Atunda, Sango, and Oya in his earlier poems, while his politics is more explicit in newer poems where he deals with themes like the Apartheid movement in South Africa and his reflections on modern politics, his exile from Nigeria.

Even though the disruption of African history caused by the imperial powers created a lot of political, economic and cultural problems, the native performance traditions remained unharmed. It even flourished at the community level such as in the celebration of seasonal rituals and in folk theatre. The African writers, like any other dramatists of the colonial or subordinated culture, tried to recuperate or
reinterpret their own histories. In Africa, the inherited Western dramaturgical and performance models have been quite often fused with their own traditions taken from ritual and popular theatre. Soyinka made prolific use of such fusions to produce great intellectual and aesthetic effect. His formal education at Nigeria and England made him familiar with both cultures and he was generally influenced by both his native African and Euro-American theatres. At the same time, he was aware of the West’s disruptive effect upon the African continent, especially on his own country.

The theme about which Soyinka spoke and wrote eloquently was on the different manifestations of the desire for power. According to him, power proved a durable and autonomous partner in the transformation of history, cutting across the imperatives of race, creed, class and ideology. “The function of literature is to contain and control this ‘anti-humanistic malformations’, which are produced by the will to power” (Crow and Banfield 86). He saw colonialism as the omnivorous, deforming will to power on the African continent. In his early plays the exercise of power was associated with the embodiments or representatives of their communities and their orthodox wisdom, who were challenged by youthful rebels. In The Bacchae of Euripides, Pentheus is the representative authority in its secular essence. Dionysos, on the other hand, is the representative of unwritten laws – a non-secular essence. This play, in a way, marked Soyinka’s efforts to blend the Western logic of conflict between the opposites to the African notion of coexistence. In African cosmology, two opposites are supposed to operate in balance. In Soyinka’s play, the two men are not in balance, they confront each other. They belong to diametrically opposite worlds – that of release and oppression, that of submission to power and control to rule. In his play, Dionysos represents the hyper reality that remains above the obvious reality, which is represented by Pentheus.
In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Soyinka is more direct in dealing with the politics of conflict, as he juxtaposed the different sensibilities that existed within the colony. Here, Pilkings, the British colonial officer could not imbibe the spirit of the ritual taken out by Elesin Oba, the King’s horseman who is preparing to sacrifice himself for the welfare of the community. The former intervened to stop Oba’s dance to the other world, by incarcerating him. But his son, Olunde whom Pilkings had sent to England for higher education, goes ahead with the ritual and dies. By using these confrontations between logic and belief, Soyinka is highlighting the metaphysical level of colonial power’s intervention into the indigene culture. “Crucial as Pilkings’ intervention is, it is not what most concerns Soyinka. What does, is the capacity of colonialism to undermine psychologically those charged with ensuring the well-being and continuity of the culture” (Crow and Banfield 84). In *The Road*, perhaps the most enigmatic plays of Soyinka, the interruption of the ritual seems to be due to mere chance. Kotonu, having escaped death at the rotten bridge by a miracle, drove his mammy wagon into the driver’s festival in honour of the God Ogun and knocked down Murano as the latter was dancing possessed. “Many if not all these forces, which in some way prevent or impair ritual potency, may be grouped together as manifestations of the desire for power” (Crow and Banfield 86). Through his plays, Soyinka reflects the dichotomy of race, which was the cornerstone in justifying a colonial regime. The rebellion against the racial excellence of the ruler was always there in the psychology of the colonised, though various strata of the society responded variously to it. Soyinka’s plays punctured this myth or irrational nobility.

Soyinka’s assertion of the traditional African religion springs from a deep respect for the Yoruba culture and a strong belief “that its world view offers a valid and adequate ground of metaphysical location for the Yoruba subject” (Msiska 5).
Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and the road whom Soyinka considers as his guiding deity is a constant presence in Soyinka’s works. His concept of art and drama is based on Ogun’s journey across “the chthonic realm” to unite the gods and men. “Ogun’s character and journey function as both metaphorical and metonymic of the structure of human experience and subjectivity” (Msiska 21).

The binary nature of Ogun as a deity, which stands for both emancipation and destruction, suits the postcolonial condition of hybridity so well that Soyinka could easily adapt this mythical presence of Ogun to the realm of contemporary realities. Ogun also exhibits the unique moral courage to cross the ‘transitional abyss’ between divinity and human beings and reach out to the latter. Soyinka’s characters, be it Olunde or Eman or Demoke, are moulded with obvious shades of Ogunian characteristics. Soyinka’s unique ability to look at things from an unexpected point of view brings in a new perspective to the conventional and the familiar. Msiska aptly sums up his qualities as “...quintessentially a poetics of defamiliarization, employing satire and tragic comedy as well as tragedy itself as discursive sites from which to engender a renewed awareness of the nature of the post-colonial reality in its full historical and continuing encounter with other cultures, particularly and significantly those of the West” (Msiska 84).

Both Karnad and Soyinka approached the colony from different points. While Karnad focussed more on the impact of the colonial rule on an individual, Soyinka took his theatre to the streets. Except in Tughlaq and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, where the theme is overtly political, Karnad worked in detail about the subjective responses to the imposition of control on natural instincts – be it on artistic expression as in The Fire and the Rain, on sexuality as in Naga-Mandala or Hayavadana. On the other hand, Soyinka worked on the controls imposed on the society as a single unit.
However, both the playwrights remained connected by the common element that they were firmly rooted in the history of their respective lands and could communicate to an international audience by raising their art to the realm of universal understanding. More importantly, by doing so, both Karnad and Soyinka could establish their works as beacons of the postcolonial aesthetics. Another trait of commonality between Soyinka and Karnad is that they place the action of their plays not as realms of conflict between the coloniser and the colonised. They remain closer to the politics of postcolonialism posited by Homi K. Bhabha when he said:

As a mode of analysis, it attempts to revise those nationalist or ‘nativist’ pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition. The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres. (248)

Both Soyinka and Karnad portray characters, who are exposed to the coloniser’s culture, as better equipped to handle the present situation rather than those who often blindly adhere to their own traditions. At the same time, their engagement with their respective traditions and myths in theatre arises not out of fascination or a uni-directional motive to return to the roots. Tradition and myth are potent tools for these playwrights for subverting the colonial past and they do it in the postcolonial spirit of appropriation, as they adapt or even distort the myths to suit their purpose. Plays of Soyinka and Karnad hold on to these myriad aspects of postcoloniality as they reflect different facets of human behaviour and capture the ethnic symbols, firmly rooted in native traditions, through their characters.
Works cited


