Chapter - VII

Destroying the Prison of Reading: Mutating Words into Expressions of Physical Being

Problems of Translation: Old Texts, New Bodies

This thesis is about theatre and the practice of creation; as a result it will have to exist in a liminal space between the lived experience and the written word, between formality and history, and improvisation and the future. Therefore, transgender studies, which exist in between genders, will be a crux through which we will examine this. Ideas of masculinity and feminity are dynamic and in the process of becoming. What they do is, translate ideas of masculinity and feminity into another series of codes. Therefore, along with gender, the question of translation is critical in modernism. Translation is not taking one text and referring to a dictionary and changing it to another text. Translation too is an active practice, an alchemy of becoming. Texts travel, theatres travel, genders travel.

This thesis, then, is about modernism, about gender, about theatre, but ultimately it is about translation and becoming – how gender moves, how tradition transforms itself and how culture is about movement. This movement of culture is something we have known since the silk route, during colonialism when “identity” had to be defined “against” the Other, and post independence, when identity had to be defined as “essential”, culture was used interchangeably with stasis – and this had a large impact on how we worked and created. Therefore, modernism brought movement, and in an atmosphere of movement – gender, practice, theory, history and words in motion – the theatre practitioners had to discover themselves.

Translation is not something you do when you want to make one language understood by another. This is merely substitution. Walter Benjamin famously argued

---

365 Walter Benjamin (15 July 1892—27 September 1940) was a German-Jewish Marxist literary critic, essayist, translator, and philosopher. He was at times associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory and was also influenced by the writings of his younger contemporary’s. Bertolt Brecht, who developed critical aesthetics of dialectical materialism. Over the last few decades, regard for his work has risen
that translation is much more than that. Reading his essay in the light of what we have
argued before, we come to an unexpected insight. Translation is an improvement, for
Benjamin's, of the source language - and should be judged through different frames,
beyond the point of whether it is a faithful reproduction or not. In the course of theatrical
practice, translating "foreign" texts into regional languages (Punjabi) does not suggest
that somehow we come from a tradition of literary inadequacy. What translation brings to
us is the narrative of an alien culture, but delivered, like a Trojan horse, into our minds
through a familiar language. As a result, the familiarity of the language evokes a familiar
cultural horizon for an audience, a safe space and time space, so they can enter and enjoy
the comfortable act of theatre and entertainment. However, this familiarity, much like the
Trojan horse, carries within it unfamiliar emotional sensations that are both familiar and
disorienting. The translated text, then, creates a sense of familiarity, but also active
participation of the audience as everything is slightly unfamiliar.

Having done a series of western plays in the Punjabi language, I would like to
say on the onset, that I have felt no compulsions towards political correctness while
transforming and translating plays from one culture to another and from other regional
languages into Punjabi. I am only concerned with illuminating a story in my own special
way and trying to avoid the huge pitfalls of stereotyping.

2 In his essay “The Task of the Translator”, Walter Benjamin elevates translation to a level of the sublime
that it has probably never since reached. This extraordinary piece, published as a preface to his own
translations of Baudelaire's “Tableaux Parisiens” in 1923, has highly influenced the theory of translation.
Its enigmatic and mystical character launches a religion setting translation into a crucial position. The topic
of translation and the figure of the translator always struggle with the marginalization they are driven to
within the literary scene. Translation is widely considered a secondary phenomenon, with the translator
mostly hidden behind the predominant author. This might be an explanation for the fascination Benjamin’s
uncommon and esoteric thoughts have. For Benjamin translation is a means to aspire to “pure language”. He
regards a process of supplement of languages as taking place through translation because of the difference
between source and target language. This inadequacy is in itself the source of an enrichment of the target
language: foreign, untranslatable concepts and structures are brought into a language and take part in the
process of an ongoing complement of languages with its climax in “pure language”.

234
Certain plays from the classical tradition, like the epic Sanskrit theatre, or Shakespeare have characters that have become archetypes over the years, fixed in popular memory in terms of their look and the values that they embody. “Shakespeare’s words are records of the words that he wanted spoken, words issuing as sounds from people’s mouth, with pitch, pause, rhythm and gesture as part of their meaning. A word does not start as a word—it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behaviour, which dictates the need for expression. This process occurs within the dramatist; it is repeated inside the actor. Both may only be conscious of the words, but both for the author and then for the actor the word is a small visible portion of a gigantic unseen formation.”

That is why it is such a mystery when directors/actors try to pin down a meaning and intention in the most simplistic way. Unfortunately, the moment we say ‘Lord Rama speaks’ or ‘King Lear enters’, we immediately rush to give it labels and assume postures, gestures, tone and style: Lord Rama as the ideal son, King Lear as a noble king. The moment we do that, we have leached the blood and fire out of the character and reduced it to a cliché. Abstract terms, like ideal son and noble king are substances that are difficult to hang on to. The most that one can do is make an imaginary construction, from impressions that the actor may have received from films, from books, from paintings. But a living performance is only possible, when an actor plays a character without resorting to any theatrical memory of the character that is being portrayed. All characters portrayed by an actor have to be fed from the experiences that are part of an actor’s life. It is only then that the performance site becomes the space to explore the hidden story, by unsealing the characters and situations that have become fossilized through time and habit and allow for renewal. Only then can magic transform a performance.

---

367 Peter Brook: The Empty Space: The Deadly Theatre page 15.
368 Benjamin does not consider the reader. In the very beginning of his essay on translation, one reads: “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener. Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original? Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations.” The end of any consideration for the reader of a translation provides freedom.
Once again, the Freudian notion of the uncanny, describes one of the dimensions of the translated text. (It is like mercury, and we need to appreciate its nature, and try to not make it into a formula – this will keep the future full of surprise, and hopefully make us look at our own creations and feel, with a sense of freedom beyond fear – the uncanny. This word means no explanation, except that it is coined by Freud).  

However, this is not only for the audience. We have successfully transformed our actors’ bodies, our own languages and expressions and are frightened of repetition. In a matrix where theatre is always in danger of becoming irrelevant and the conventional main stream has created a range of sensations that easily substitute it, constantly creating the new is not an easy task. In a world where theatre is secondary and Punjabi theatre even more so, the depressing reality of the situation requires an extraordinary magic at every step. Why face so many practical challenges in order not to be repetitive? The challenges and pessimism the director faces can only be accepted and the personal quest can only go on, if the director too, beyond the audience, is surprised and challenged by the new sensations, created through translation. The performers can keep the flame of their profession alive if what they engage with goes beyond the “new”, but cuts to the heart of narrative, perceptions of realism and language, and touches the shores of an extremely potent truth about theatre – it has never been about narratives and entertainment, but about something that reminds us of the wonder and passion we have always had for the world, but have forgotten. Theatre is not a reminder of something forgotten, but a reminder of a fundamental orientation towards the world. That, for what its worth, is one of the consequences of translation as transformation and perceptual/linguistic mutation.

To the translator. The transmission of content is superfluous: if there is not receiver there is no demand for information. It is possible to focus only on aesthetics—as incomprehensible as the result might prove to be. Such a stance on translation justifies the existence and esoteric character of the society of translators inquiring the works of each other as well as their isolation from the widely ignorant sphere of readers. If the world is understood as language then it follows that aesthetics is the only thing that makes sense. Uncanny: This is a remarkable contribution from Freud that is almost entirely ignored by psychology on account of its lack of applicability. But that is a tragedy, because this is a work of first-rate thinking. Freud explores the ‘Uncanny,’ the no longer being at home, and traces its dimensions through literature, dreams, and childhood memories. He also contributes a brilliant speculation into Leonardo Da Vinci, later coined as an exercise in ‘psychobiography’, in which he magnificently uses a single memory to investigate the conflicts and dilemmas of Leonardo's childhood and subsequent artistry and genius.
We cannot separate an essay about translation on text from its ‘stage-ability’ and the actors that make it come ‘alive’. The challenge faced by most directors and actors working on translations and adaptations is to process and invigorate the encounter between an old text and a new performance in a new locale, using a different language. In this way, translation becomes a creative act in and of itself, and not just an intermediary, interpretive activity. It is a way of finding a resonance, not just between words, but between the hidden cultural codes that are carried across the narrative. An actor has to use the body as a resonator, which tunes itself to carry meaning and communicate it using sounds and movements which are located in very different cultural contexts. There is never a set formula for how to do this. Each project requires a different investigation and a different series of theatre workshops, in order to begin the process of translation. Because of this, translating old texts into new bodies is like embarking on a different journey, each time.

Translation has always been an important activity in Indian theatre; a result, no doubt, of the linguistic diversity of a sub-continent which has, nevertheless, strong common religious and cultural roots that connect each region with another despite linguistic differences. By the end of the nineteenth century, the texts for performance in urban India included plays that were translated from European plays through the English language, and indigenized in the regional language in which the play was performed. Simultaneously, there were translations of Sanskrit plays into modern Indian languages, and a host of modern Indian directors performed both in the language in which the plays were written and in their translated versions.

In 1991, performing my play Naga Mandala in Punjabi in major cities of Karnataka - Mysore, Udipi, Dharwad and Heggodu, apart from Bangalore, would have seemed like taking coals to New-Castle. A play written in Kannada by Girish Karnad, one of the most eminent playwrights of the state with a backdrop and a milieu far removed from Punjab, seeped in the folklore of Karnataka, could be perceived as foolhardy, But the review in The Deccan Herald newspaper had a very evocative title. Theatre Transcends Language, assuaged all my initial fears and gave way to a degree of
validation that when a play speaks a universal language it can travel and translate into any milieu and situation.

“Theatre does not belong to one language or state, and Nagamandala for one, has proven this with successful translations into Hindi, Marathi, and even German.”

Punjabi Theatre and the Mise en Scene

Since the 70’s contemporary theatre in varied cultures has become more and more engaged in adapting and translating plays from different parts of the world as well as adopting elements from varied theatrical traditions into local productions. In my plays I have taken text from different parts of the world, as well as from India and performed them in Punjabi. In India, due to its multilingual traditions, we view translation from two perspectives- interregional, and international. When we translate a play from one regional language into another (Punjabi), many layers of the text are shared due to historical similarities, forms, influences, value systems and myths – all these links many regions to one another. When we translate between Indian and international languages, however, many of these layers are not shared.

The translation and adaptation of a play from one culture into another is determined by various factors; mainly the purpose of the translator who undertakes the translation and adaptation of the play and its transmission along with it, and the translator’s inclinations and ideological position. Having worked in this field of Punjabi theatre for almost three decades, my experience has been that when you translate a play

---

370 “What does one get if one mixes the north and the south? A not really unpalatable combination of theatre. An imaginative artist grabs the play Nagamandala, shapes it to suit her sensibilities and comes out with a winner. Kanchan Kaur”: reviewing Naga Mandala in a Punjabi performance in the Deccan Herald in 1991 in Bangalore.
from English into Punjabi (or any other regional language) - the goal is not to do a straight transfer of the content and form from one culture into another. It has to do with how the translator recognizes the way in which content determines the form. Both are so linked with each other that it would be difficult to try and de-link them, and present them as two separate entities. The content is also part of the form of the play, and conversely through form, the content is revealed. Most plays are translated for performance and the new trend has been that a director collaborates with a translator to not only translate the play, but also translate the play in accordance with the requirements of its staging. The shift is not only in language, but also in meaning, tone, texture. Through these shifts the translated text recreates its own location and history of performance.

Along with this, we can combine individual proclivities, ways of working, the human material available, as well as the interpretation of the text, in accordance with one’s creative thrust. In fact all these come into play when one takes artistic decisions on which elements of the play from a ‘foreign’ culture resonate with your own artistic compulsions. It seems a trifle idealistic to search for universal leitmotifs that transcend geographical and cultural barriers. One has to have respect for the differences while keeping an eye open for the details that resonate.

“Even before speaking of cultural transfer, one must locate the foreign elements present and determine from which context these particles in suspension have been extracted. The identification is not automatic, given our incomplete knowledge of these forms and the considerable distortions they may have undergone. Whatever our distance from the culture that has to be reconstituted may be, a few traces, often can always be recovered. Often metonymic, and elliptic: a narrative mode, a dramatic structure, the presence of themes or metaphors, indexes on the reality of stereotypes, a structure of feelings”371.

371 The intercultural performance reader By Patrice Pavis page 16.;Raymond Williams-1921 –1988 a Welsh academic, novelist and critic. He was an influential figure within the New Left and in wider culture. His writings on politics, culture, the mass media and literature are a significant contribution to the Marxist critique
History of Translating Theatre Texts In India

Between the 1870s and 1930s, there was a prolific output from Indian writers writing for the stage - such as Girish Chandra Ghosh\(^{372}\) (1844-1912), D.L. Roy\(^{373}\) (1863-1913), Agha Hashr Kashmiri\(^{374}\) (1879-1935), Sisir Kumar Bhaduri\(^{375}\) (1889-1959) who wrote directly for performance rather than for the print media. Similarly, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri were not only the writers of the plays that they staged, but were also their director/ managers. Agha Hashra Kashmiri and Naryan Prasad Betab\(^{376}\) (1872-1945), were playwrights attached to specific Parsi\(^{377}\) theatre companies and wrote exclusively for the companies they were attached to and in accordance with the demands of the performance. In the colonial period, plays were merited not due to their literary or aesthetic value, but due to their stageability. Hence performance was what attracted the audience to the stage and the text drawn from both western and Indian plays was translated and adapted for the stage. Plays of Kalidasa\(^{378}\) and Shakespeare were conjoined with Indian myths, folktales and social issues. On the other hand, playwrights like Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-85)\(^{379}\), Rabindra Nath Tagore\(^{380}\) (1861-1941) and

---

372 Actor, playwright, director and producer, by common acclaim the father of Bengali theatre.

373 Dwijendra Lal Roy: Bengali playwright.

374 Hashr Kashmiri, Agha: among the best known playwrights of Parsi theatre. Writer, director, actor.

375 Bhaduri, Sisir Kumar: Celebrated actor, director and producer of Bengali theatre. Irrespective of partisan views, his successors see him as the first director in Modern Indian theatre.

376 Betab, Narayan Prasad: one of the most influential playwrights of the Parsi theatre and later a movie scenarist.

377 Parsi theatre: highly influential movement between the 1850's and 1930's, an aggregate of European techniques, pageantry, and local forms, enormously popular in the sub-continent and beyond. It may be seen as India’s first modern commercial theatre.

378 Kalidas: the most eminent Sanskrit poet and playwright. A few legends about him are told in later sources, but we have no reliable account of his life. His date is one of the most discussed problems in Indian literary history. It is clear that he came after Agnimitra Sunga (2nd century BC) about whom he writes, and before Vatsabhatti (5th century AD). About the most plausible time frame, according to Indian tradition and Modern scholars may be the 1st century BC. However Eastern Indologists place him in the Gupta period, in the 4th century AD.

379 Harishchandra, Bharatendu: the father of Modern Hindi theatre, and author of a vast body of poetry, essays and letters. His significance as a dramatist lies in his close understanding of the art of theatre, and his experiments with structures. He is accredited with the introduction of khariboli Hindi as a valid literary and dramatic language, bringing a poetic sensibility into playwriting.

380 A Bengali dramatist, director, actor, composer, educationist and literary guru of modern India. Born into an aristocratic Bengali family, his household came to symbolize the so-called 'Bengali renaissance' of 19th century Calcutta.
Jaishankar Prasad (1890-1937) were very vocal about the need for a vibrant theatre in India and introduced text as part of a literary theatrical tradition. In colonial India, plays either were read for their literary value or for their stageability, but could not manage to inhabit both the spaces—of the print media and the performance space.

As most plays that were staged were viewed more for their spectacle rather than for their literary content, the above mentioned playwrights, whose work had a strong literary base, were considered ‘un-stageable’, and it was presumed that their writings could not connect with the general audience. It is only now, in post-independent India, that the plays of Bharatendu Harishchandra and Jaishankar Prasad have been staged and recognised, for both their literary value and their unrealized potential for theatricality in many regional languages.

The First Commercial Theatre

The first commercial theatre in India was the Parsi theatre (1850-1930) and the form in which they performed it was highly eclectic—taking stories from the Mahabharata and the Arabian Nights, along with Shakespearean tragedies and comedies, as well as Victorian melodramas. These companies worked at the national level in a multilingual way, using Gujarati, Marathi, Hindustani, and even English in their productions. The performance style was a mixture of European realistic styles of acting, along with the singing, dancing tradition of Indian courtesans, and folk traditions with a visual sumptuousness that is associated with the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). The style that they followed was a simple narrative plot, strong emotional

Prasad, Jaishankar: eminent Hindi author and dramatist- Idealism and nationalism governed his choice of plot, their treatment and their Indian world view.

Raja Ravi Varma:- (1848-1906) was an Indian painter from the princely state of Travancore who achieved recognition for his depiction of scenes from the epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana. His paintings are considered to be among the best examples of the fusion of Indian traditions with the techniques of European academic art. Varma is most remembered for his paintings of beautiful sari clad women, who were portrayed as very shapely and graceful. His exposure in the west came when he won the first prize in the Vienna Art Exhibition in 1873. Raja Ravi Varma died in 1906 at the age of 58. He is generally considered as one among the greatest painters in the history of Indian art.
melodrama, moral posturing, rhetorical flourishes and spectacle that contributed to its huge popularity. The social and mythic dramas that were enacted had less of story and more of spectacle and emotional effects. Within that were also adaptations of the plays of Shakespeare, *Khun-e-Nahaq* (from *Hamlet*), *Shahid-e-Wafa* (Othello), *Dilfarosh* (Merchant of Venice) and *Safed Khun* (King Lear). The performing conditions went through a sea change due to the entry of the proscenium arch brought by the British to India in the 1750’s this, in a way, transformed viewing patterns of the audience and redrafted the way a story was told in the conventional performance.

As we cannot separate play writing from the understanding of its performance potential we need to set up a grid of references that will help in understanding the role of translation in making text available to people not familiar with the ‘foreign’ or ‘regional’ language in which the play has been written. Along with the translation of text is the staging requirement, the interpretation, the visual imagery, the regional impulses and so on and so forth. The last couple of decades has demonstrated how new plays get circulated in different regional languages with a rapidity that was unheard of earlier. This not only helps to keep the new play into circulation, but also helps in establishing the existence of a National theatre movement.

**Official patronage for translation work**

It is only in 1956, that a formal recommendation was made to the Sangeet Natak Akademi383 to institute a special translation program of plays from one regional language to another and also simultaneously into Hindi and English. It is only in the 60’s when this activity came into fruition, due to the huge surge of theatre activity that showed in its choices, a desire to forge links and creative collaboration between one region and another. The significant outcome of such a collaboration was that major playwrights translated each other’s work — Vijay Tendulkar384 (1928-2008), translated Girish

---

383 Sangeet Natak Akademi: apex, autonomous academy to promote Indian music, dance and theatre, established in 1953 and funded by the department of culture, government of India.

Karnad’s Tughlaq into Marathi, and Girish Karnad translated Badal Sircar’s Evam Indrajit into English. Girish Karnad has also translated most of his plays into English, leading to wider accessibility for his works by making dramatic texts available. This entire movement towards translation gained a huge momentum when Girish Karnad became the editor of Oxford University Press, Madras sometimes in the 60’s. His initiative in getting regional plays translated in English led to the works of Mahesh Elkunchwar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar being read by a much wider audience. This was further cemented by the art journal Enact (1967-1982), edited by Rajinder Paul from Delhi where plays in English were regularly published, along with regional plays translated into English. During the journal’s existence for seventeen years, many plays by Vijay Tendulkar, Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Satish Alekar, Mahesh Elkunchwar etc were translated into English. Seagull publications added to the wealth bank along with the Theatre India Journal published by The National School of Drama, creating for theatre an archival cornucopia to dip into.

The most exciting development was that major playwrights in India wanted to collaborate with eminent directors in a workshop situation, where, through improvisations and dialogue, a play that was written by a playwright in the isolation of his study, got performance dimensions through this collaboration.

‘The author is ‘represented’ by a text- published or unpublished – that was created in the privacy of his study, expresses his individual temperament and exists apart from the staging process’ Furthermore, Mohan Rakesh goes on to say it is, “an equal

---

Karnad, Girish Raghunath: Kannada actor-playwright, film director, and playwright. A much lauded public figure, Karnad served as director the Film and Television Institute of India (1974-5) and the Sangeet Natak Akademi as its chairperson( 1988-1993)

Sircar, Badal: Bengali dramatist- his work deals with themes of absurdist meaninglessness and identity crisis.

Elkunchwar, Mahesh: Marathi Playwright. His work reveal a preoccupation with death, loneliness, creativity, the illusion of wealth and the apparent purposelessness of choice or action, while the ultimate goal of life remains unknown.

Alekar Satish: Marathi playwright, actor and director.

Mohan Rakesh, Sahitya: 40,9)

243
collaboration between the author, director and performers. Some meaningful collaborations have taken place between playwrights and directors – Mohan Rakesh with Shyamal Jalan\textsuperscript{390}(1938-). Girish Karnad with BV Karanth and Mahesh Elkunchwar with Vijaya Mehta\textsuperscript{391}(1934-).

In addition to the playwrights translating plays, many serious translators have emerged who have through their translation work made many playwrights available to an audience who are familiar with Hindi or English. In the field of Hindi translation, Pratibha Agarwal\textsuperscript{392} is responsible for making the entire body of Bengali literature available to the Hindi speaking audience. Marathi plays are available to a wider audience due entirely to the untiring efforts of Vasant Dev\textsuperscript{393}.

**The English Theatre. The Politics of Language**

Performing in the English language, a language spoken by more people in this country than perhaps any other language- is still associated in the performance world, as the language of the colonizers. Despite the strong hold of the English language in social discourse, science as well as in theatre, it seems like a strange contradiction that in performance arts, English theatre immediately suggests corporate power, social elitism and India’s interface with global trends at the cost of losing its regional and local identification.

The English colonizers built the earliest proscenium theatre in India for the theatrical entertainment of their trading garrisons in the major seaports. The playhouse in Calcutta received help from English theatre/manager David Garrick\textsuperscript{394} who came up in

\textsuperscript{390} Shyamal Jalan: Hindi director, actor and founder member of the group Anamika based in Calcutta.

\textsuperscript{391} Vijaya Mehta: Marathi actress, and director.

\textsuperscript{392} Pratibha Agarwal: lives in Calcutta and is an eminent translator and runs the Natya Shodh Sansthan, the independent city-based society devoted to researching various aspects of Indian theatre and preservation of manuscripts, pictures and other production items.

\textsuperscript{393} Vasant Dev: has been translating plays from Marathi into Hindi

\textsuperscript{394} David Garrick (born 19 February 1717 in Hereford – 20 January 1779) was an English actor, playwright, theatre manager and producer who influenced nearly all aspects of theatrical practice throughout the 18th century.
1753 to design and build the Bombay theatre which was modelled after London’s Drury Lane. British residents staged amateur performances at such halls. It became common for companies travelling from England or Australia to present shows during halts in Calcutta or Bombay for the expatriate community. “Even before Macaulay declared English the educational medium for chosen Indians in 1835, The Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813-1885) wrote the first play in English by an Indian: The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta (1831) - a dramatised debate on the conflict between orthodox Hindu customs and western ideas. Native students under the new system understandably looked to the English literature for inspiration. Study of Shakespeare led to a spurt not only of translations and emulation of his work in the Indian language, but also staging in English of scenes and also full-length plays by Shakespeare, particularly amongst English collegians. Since only men studied in those days, they enacted women’s roles too. Rarely did British and Indians participate in the same production; a version of Othello in 1848 set Calcutta press agog with its ‘real unpainted nigger Othello’, a Bengali gentleman.

India has published as many as 200-plus English plays, though most remained unperformed; many not even performable. “That English has become, by choice and default, the one link language in which a national conversation is possible among all those involved with theatre raises two intriguing questions. In relation to theatre, why is the ‘national’ link language a weaker critical medium than some so-called ‘regional’ languages? And why has English remained a weak medium for theatre criticism in India when it is the vehicle for extremely sophisticated social science, history, philosophy, political theory, journalism, and literary criticism, not to mention literature itself?”

395 The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane is a West End theatre in Covent Garden, in the City of Westminster, a borough of London. The building standing today is the most recent in a line of four theatres at the same location dating back to 1663, making it the oldest London theatre. For its first two centuries, Drury Lane could “reasonably have claimed to be London’s leading theatre” and thus one of the most important theatres in the English-speaking world. Through most of that time, it was one of a small handful of patent theatres that were granted monopoly rights to the production of “legitimate” (meaning spoken plays, rather than opera, dance, concerts, or plays with music).

396 Shanta Gokhale—writer, drama critic and translator, living in Mumbai. The Oxford Companion To Indian Theatre: English theatre.

397 Aparna Dharwadker: This essay is a slightly revised version of a plenary paper delivered at ‘Not the Drama Seminar,’ Ninasam, Heggodu, Karnataka, 26 March 2008.
“Butcher them [Anglo-Indian playwrights], castrate them, and force them to write in their native Hindi or Urdu or whatever languages their fathers and mothers used to speak”. (Dyaneshwar Nadkarni,398)

Despite Dyaneshwar Nadkarni’s very vitriolic diatribe, we need to articulate the problematic relationship that the English Indian playwright and English Indian director have with their audiences. English Indian drama has an unusual position in the history of the theatre movement, in colonial and postcolonial theatre. Even though it has a long tradition, it has never been included in any debate or discussion, nor has it been allotted any artistic merit. From the beginning it has been isolated from the energy and vitality of the local and popular traditions, with which it was presumed to have no connections. English is considered the ‘link’ language in conversations as well as in critical discourse, as it has far more accessibility to a large amount of people then any of the regional languages. Yet English theatre sits in a very precarious space and has not found wide spread acceptability, especially amongst the cognoscenti’s. It has been simply argued as the colonized voice, expressing local issues and content in the language of the colonizer, and seeing in the choice of language an act of betrayal. This reductivism doesn’t take into account how translation, publication and performance are inextricably interlinked, and how these have acted as catalysts for a vital multicultural theatrical practice in post-independence India.

An active spurt of dramatic writings emerged from Bengal, Karnataka and Maharashtra, and the language in which these plays were most prolifically translated were into English and Hindi. Most of the regional plays that got translated in English were more for publication purposes, as well as being viewed on the level of its textural viability than for its performability. Hindi translations of the regional text scored in terms of being actively performed, more due to a greater audience appeal, while plays translated in English were more widely read. An active English theatre culture exists in India, yet the English theatre is always perceived as being subordinate to regional theatre practice. We have a large population of English speaking people, as well as an audience that makes its first preference an English play rather then a regional one. Even so, the

398 Dyaneshwar Nadkarni 1973 – lives in Mumbai and has been an active drama and art critic.
English theatre is considered frivolous, non-serious and derivative. This sort of rejection of the English theatre by the regional directors reeks of linguistic chauvinism, and this sort of fetishizing of regional languages can lead to a dangerous trend.

At the same time, there are some issues that crop up when English is used as a performative language in India. In many cases, English speaking theatre presents a problem for Indian actors because of the complex post-colonial legacy of speech which has been left behind. Different actors have different English accents and different regional mannerisms, which do not always seem to fit the context of the play, even when the source text is from the pen of a regional playwright. The directors and actors performing on the English stage, either replicate plays straight from West-End or Broadway and make an attempt to create a home-grown version of the Broadway hits, rather than work towards an attempt at indigenization.

Pearl Padamsee399, a warm and charismatic director, did her version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* while her maverick husband Alyque Padamsee400 created plays such as *Evita*, which launched the stage career of Sharon Prabhakar and ‘Tughlaq’, which flagged off the career of the internationally known actor Kabir Bedi. Despite all this, they catered to a very specific audience and the acting protocol was not only alien but also alienating. I wish to underscore my point by referring to a production directed by Lillete Dubey,401 A well known producer of English plays. To use the example from the staging of Vijay Tendulkar’s *Kanyadaan* (2007). This play is about a committed nationalist, who treats his home as a laboratory to test his ideas on secularism and modernity. The play talks about gender, caste, class and ethnicity. Unfortunately, these volatile themes from the play, dealing with public and private spaces, alienated the audience from the ‘cause’ because, when rendered in English, it immediately shifted the text into another space- the space of the elite, the space of the privileged, the space that belonged to that strata of society that had access to western education. The text illustrated this conundrum effectively by not taking any positions. The upper caste family tried to solve/diffuse the

---

399 Pearl Padamsee (1935-2001) An active theatre director and actress from the English stage in Bombay
400 Alyque Padamsee (1935-) is an Indian theater personality, both as producer and actor.
401 Lillete Dubey, in addition to acting, Dubey is a theatre director, television and film artist, and founder of the Theatre Action Group in Delhi.
problems through their historical knowledge frame about drinking and violent behavior while the *Dalit* youth tried to approach issues of marriage through his learnt/observed *behaviour* or cultural framework that came from deprivation and poverty. Since both families had no recourse to a third knowledge framework to solve the issues arising out of an inter-caste marriage, apart from a feel good, 'everyone is equal' kind of socialist framework of the father. This might seem like good rhetoric but never works in a ‘real’ situation.

When such a visceral theme about caste and class is enunciated by all the actors in English, with very little thought given to the background of the characters, it becomes difficult to relate to the world being projected on the stage. In the end analysis it is not so much to do with English per se that disorients the audience, but the way the language is spoken. Indian actors, in an attempt to speak English like the English, always seem to speak the language with an accent that suggests neither patios nor provenance. This inadvertently falsifies the emotions of the characters and makes it difficult to connect with the performance. In a certain way the viewing of such a play makes you feel twice removed from the character and the content of the play.

The first level of alienation occurs in the choice of language— a *Dalit* speaking English with an upper-crust accent, blurs the character’s social and cultural positioning. It is strange to see a dispossessed and downtrodden character speaking in English with a public school sing song intonation.

The second level occurs when the English language causes an actor to assume a voice and a tone that has more of a relationship with ‘imagined’ English melodramatic theatrics than with real feelings. This, unfortunately, is the bane of most actors performing in the English language for the stage. The same play done in Hindi or Bengali would not have the same destabilizing effect on the way the ideas of the play are represented. The communities which they evoke have little in common with the way the English language is spoken by the actors.
“Writing in English about characters who are presumably speaking in an Indian language, for audiences for whom English is the second language, is not a situation conducive to ‘great drama’. Such ‘translations’ are forced, limited and alienating. That is why the translation of a play from one Indian language into another is usually a translation of context as well”\textsuperscript{402}

Although English, drama has been written in India since 1870 by Indian writers, including playwrights such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt\textsuperscript{403} and Mannmohan Ghosh\textsuperscript{404}, their writings were considered esoteric and obscure and have not been included in the pantheon of Indian writing, even during that period. In Post-independence India, despite a movement of English playwriting in India by serious writers of literature Gurcharan Das,(1943-) Nissim Ezekiel(1924-2004), Gieve Patel(b1940-), Asif Currimbhoy(b1928-1994), Pratap Sharma(b1939-) and more recently Mahesh Dattani,\textsuperscript{405} plays in English have remained on the periphery and have not been accorded the status or currency that regional writers have.

Playwriting in English has an unusually precarious position, both in terms of performance as well as publication, as its content replicates a world that seems outside the reality of the wider Indian world. In the metropolitan culture of Bombay, dominated by Marathi, Gujarati and to some extent, Hindi theatre, English theatre, despite the eminent names attached to it, did not have a visibility or impact beyond the Malabar Hill and Cuffe Parade circuit.

Mahesh Dattani challenges this fairly contentious issue by reiterating, that his choice of language does not suggest a post-colonial hangover and neither is it arbitrary, “it is a language in which he is comfortable” and “he can express what he wants to say.” The language in which he writes is English, but the inflection is colloquial with a local

\textsuperscript{403} Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) exceptional Bengali author, who led a life more dramatic then his plays. Most of Dutt’s plays were staged after the establishment of Bengali public theatre, though they were premiered at the amateur theatricals of various aristocratic families during his life time.
\textsuperscript{404} Mannmohan Ghosh: Bengali playwright. Exact date unknown but somewhere between 1844-1910.
\textsuperscript{405} Mahesh Dattani(1958-): The first Indian dramatist in English to win the Sahitya Akademi award, for his play ‘Final solutions’
cadence that places the characters into two simultaneous worlds, where the memory of childhood experiences of village temples, the scent of incense, the clatter of street life and the values of a middle class home are captured, yet the play cannot avoid resonating with a westernized ambience due to the history of the language in which the play is written. Although the situations in the play are rooted in Indian reality, the milieu from which the characters emerge would not speak the English language in the manner in which the actors portraying the characters speak. In the choice of language we see a reflection of the dialectics of colonial and post colonial conflicts that preoccupy most English writers. Dattani’s work does, to some extent, challenge the stereotyping of the English language theatre. But it’s difficult to break that prejudice, as English language theatre comes with a huge baggage of associations that is difficult to shake off. To see Indian characters mouthing dialogues in a language associated with elite India immediately isolates them from the emotional space that the characters inhabit.

Purushottan Lal, a publisher and translator from Calcutta, translated a Sanskrit play into English in 1964, and gives a comprehensive theoretical justification of this concept. On translating Shakuntala he says, “I want to produce an 'actable,' that is, a stage-able version of the classic text. The crucial problem is not one of translating the language itself, but rather of rendering value systems, cultural conventions and forms comprehensible to a western audience. This means that it is not possible to make a simple separation of form and content: problems of comprehension linked to the Indian thinking also manifest themselves in the structure of the play. In syncretic theatre, one utilizes in parts, the linguistic and performance codes of Western theatrical sensibility while retaining the unmistakable signature of Indian performance aesthetics.”

“Until the advent of Western culture in India we had always regarded translation as new writing.” During the colonial period there was widespread 'literary bilingualism' which has continued into the postcolonial period and is reflected in the everyday bilingualism of the educated classes in India. For the dramatist this state of bilingualism resulted either in two separate literary and theatrical activities or, as was

---

406 During a seminar at the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1981
more often the case, in a state of continual and mutual exchange between works in the mother tongue and that in English, or between works in two Indian languages. We are familiar with the plays of Ibsen, Chekov, Shakespeare Brecht, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, and the great classics from the Sanskrit and Greek plays due to translations. In order to translate a play we need to do it in the context of the language in which it is being translated, its location, its time, the proclivities of the directorial style, the authorial signature, the interpretation, the concept. We work towards not only a literal translation, but in terms of a performative text or as a trans-location. As the text will reach the audience through the body of the actors who carry within them the history of their own specific cultural impulses, the translation will necessarily include those dimensions that help in enunciating the text.

For Ariane Mnouchkine, as for Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), and for BV Karanth (1929-2002), as also for my own work in the Punjabi language, a play does not aim to reproduce a text outside itself. In the plays directed by the above mentioned directors, whether they take a text from India, France Greece of Norway, neither England, or Greece, or France or India is imitated realistically, it is not an attempt to make an ethnological study of the period, time or history that is being referred to in the play, but to see history as flowing all over and to use certain signs and motifs that suggest an ongoing action; a setting up of a historical writing, rather than fixing a historical moment.

"The translations of cultures have an anthropological antecedent that needs to be acknowledged, if only to emphasise that the process of translation in theatre is decidedly different. At a normative level, the concept of translation assumed validity in anthropological circles from the mid-1950s onwards, as a means of avoiding the

407 Sujit Mukherjee: an interview with Rajendra Paul In Enact 1989
408 Ariane Mnouchkine: a celebrated director runs one of the most significant companies in Europe Theatre du Soleil in Paris.
409 Bertolt Brecht: German poet, theorist, stage director and playwright. For Brecht, we need to step away from a picture to come closer to seeing it.
410 BV Karanth: One of the most eminent theatre personalities in Contemporary India. He directed plays, composed music, conducted workshops, translated plays, and directed films.
ethnocentric extremities of inferiorising other cultures on the basis of their incommensurable differences and universalizing them on the basis of imagined family resemblances. Translations provided the means by which it was possible to accept that cultures and languages embodied in them are ‘different’, but not so different as all that411.

In theatre, language and words are never just verbal sounds but set up a whole range of propositions and possibilities, as words are never just a literal phenomena but are mediated through the bodies and voices of the actors during a performance, and a whole vector of meaning that is both social, economic and political is decoded.

“They show in its movement, as if the skin was a palimpsest upon which, over and over again, cultural differences as well as similarities are inscribed412”.

I remember reading a play that was translated from French into Punjabi by a Punjabi professor of French literature. It was assumed, that as the professor knew both the ‘source’ language and the ‘target’ language, the play would be a successful translation. Knowing a language does not imply a successful translation. As the professor had no feeling for the stage, he was completely oblivious to the hidden text, the silences, the shades and moods behind the words, making his translation untenable for a theatrical performance. In my own work, I have frequently worked on plays where the text is written in a language to which I have no access to, and these plays have been reached through a translation in English. A text translated from an alien language opens up a myriad world of possibilities as performance is never entirely literal, but is mediated through the bodies and voices of the actor in a particular mise en scene, where the theatrical presentation is shaped, defined and communicated through the actor, on the stage, who interprets the translated text through emotional memory. As words are just scratches on paper which come alive through the actor the director sees words as an end product. Before the word is articulated a whole wealth of experience has gone into it.

411 Leach 1973:722 in Asad 1986:142
412 Patrice Pavis; Page-3 from the Intercultural performance reader
Exchange Between Cultures

Artists all over the world attempt to seek and synthesize universal elements across cultures; to find the points of connection and disjunction. Most artists working with problems of translation do admit that the representation of the other is not driven by either ethnological consideration or authenticity, but more toward discovering a form that is hybrid; a voluntary mixing of genres, styles, traditions whose sources cannot be easily distinguished. The work of Amal Allana, BV Karanth, Barba and Mnouchkine draw upon various sources of influence in their work. Yakshagana form in the production of Macbeth in BV Karanth’s work and devices from Kabuki theatre are seen in the work of Ebrahim Alkazi in his production of Andha Yug, while Brook has used devices from Sanskrit theatre in his Mahabharata. Mnouchkine has used kathakali in Greek tragedies. How do we discuss this cultural transfer? How does culture travel, become transformed, take on a fresh identity?

“As if there were a limit to History! As if India weren’t my affair! As if South Africa weren’t my affair! I am French, but I belong to the world. If India is not our affair, it risks becoming so. A few years ago, who would have thought that Iran would be our affair? I know that once again people will write that we’ve made a historical production. But in reality we’re talking about what concerns us. We ourselves did not know to what extent we would be talking about ourselves, about our time, our divisions, our intolerance, our hatred.” 413

When talking about translation, especially between one culture and another, the question of political correctness, of Orientalism or Occidentalism, always creeps in. Critics wonder what “right” someone has to interpret another culture, and are always on the look-out for latent racism or outright cultural ignorance, rather than being interested in the creative impulse behind the theatre. In the above quote, Mnouchkine addresses this critique, suggesting that the creative process as an artist is not one which is founded upon sociological or anthropological accuracy. It is one which always ends up telling a very

413 Ariane Mnouchkine: Collaborative theatre The theatre du Soleil. In an interview about directing a play about India page-143)
personal story, although it may cast a broad net into other cultures to discuss the human condition in a new way.

The Spaniard playwright Federico Garcia Lorca is very popular on the Punjabi stage. Most of his plays have been translated by the famous poet Surjit Patar and performed in Punjabi. Although the problems of translation and of literary translations have gained popularity, the same cannot be said about a play that gets translated for the stage complete with the *mise en scène*. The problem of translation of a dramatic text from one language to another is communicated to the audience through the actor’s body. So we cannot view translation in purely linguistic terms, but have to address subjects: the way cultures collide and the way race and the entire question of identity presents itself. In order to understand the entire conceptualisation of a text and translation, in relation to the *mise en scène*, I felt it was essential to interview Patar, as I was keen to get a first hand understanding of how text is translated from one language to another, how do cultural codes shift and how do we connect an ostensibly ‘foreign’ text and make it 'belong' to our lives.

“When I first begin translating I begin with passion. I want to say something through the play about the world I inhabit, which as a writer I wish to share. To a great extend the writer is dependent on the director who will be making the work manifest. During the process of translating the play *Yerma*, I was trying to locate the central leitmotif of the play through which the narrative and the images of the text would radiate and connect. As it is a play about sterility, I got my cue by composing the song for the washerwomen’s scene. This scene is fairly central to the play and reflects the ideas of the community in which *Yerma* is placed. The feudalistic thoughts that equated the worth of a woman in terms of how many children she could produce, was set on the banks of a river. The mannish washerwomen are gossiping and spewing venom on *Yerma* for not being able to birth a child. The psychology of the community in which *Yerma* is positioned comes out very effectively through the gossip the women indulge in and in the

414 Surjit Patar, (1947-) An eminent poet and translator adapter of plays, he did his PhD in Punjabi on “Elements of Folklore in the Poetry of Guru Nanak Dev”. He retired as Professor of Punjabi from Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana.
way they vent their suppressed desires and frustration. While washing clothes on a river bank they spew out this ditty: *Beria nu bere lag gaya, tenu khuj na laga mutiyara* (the berries are sprouting on the trees, but your tree is bare....) The image of a barren tree, that could not bear fruit, gave me the tone and texture of how I should translate the play.\(^{415}\)

This was very revealing to me, as translation is a complex issue, especially when a translation is not from the original language in which the play is written. The questions that assailed me were that did cultural meanings and sub-text get lost due to lack of accessibility of the source language?

Patar mulled over this question “I cannot really answer that, as I do not know Spanish. But if something is lost, then something also is gained – each language has its own texture, its own visual imagery, and its own rhythm”.

“The text is one element of the performance and here, of translating activity, or put in another way, the text is much more than a series of words; grafted on to it are ideological ethnological and cultural dimensions. Culture is so omnipresent that we no longer know where to start investigating it. We are limited here to unmasking it in a series of concretisations, which vary according to the Social context of the observer and is complete only when a given audience fully appropriates the source text. This set of gestural movements and variations in the *language-body* have been used to show how the translation involves the transfer of culture, which is inscribed as much in words as in gestures. We have to broach the question of the actor shaping and finally interpreting the text and body; he can salvage the most ridiculous translation, but can also wreck the most sublime!”\(^{416}\)

“When I went to Columbia, I found the Spanish language very festive and full of warmth, a quality that is similar to the Punjabi language.”\(^{417}\).

\(^{415}\) Surjit Patar in conversation, in Chandigarh regarding his creative process while translating the play *Yerma* in Punjabi. (2008)

\(^{416}\) Theatre At The Crossroads of Culture: Patrice Pavis; Theatre Translation; page 155.

\(^{417}\) Surjit Patar in conversation for this chapter on text and translation in Chandigah: 2008.
One of the anxieties of translation is that of a possible loss of text, meaning and syntax in translation. To some extent this may be true, that the musicality of the language in the process of shifting may suffer, but conversely the musicality of the language into which it is being translated would add its own value to it.

When I directed the play Yerma in 1992 with my theatre group ‘The Company’, I was not interested in placing it in a Spanish village, but more interested in the musical motifs, the expressive movements, the community life, and in a way, neutralized cultural specificity through adaptation. In this way our troupe used language as a part of the process but not something that stood between the actor and the story. The most significant aspect of translation for theatre is not merely the verbal element. It is the translation of form, structure, and aesthetics. It is the process by which a text is turned into something elastic, so that it stretches around the actors like costumes, so that they may wear it comfortably. In 1993 it was performed in London for the London International festival of Theatre. A review in the English paper 'The Guardian’ in a certain way supports my point of view.

“Given that it’s a play about barrenness, it may seem odd to say that the Punjabi production of Lorca’s Yerma that has come to the Tricycle Kilburn as a part of LIFT is a good example of cross fertilization. But, in, so far as one can judge without understanding the language, there seems to be a definite consonance between the modern Punjab and Lorca’s Andalusia in that both equate fecundity with moral virtue and are in the thralls of a strict code of honour. Chowdhry also uses colour and symbolism in a deeply un-Anglo Saxon way. You see this in the climactic masque where the stage is aflame with red, gold and saffron and where the raven wigged Naqqals (Punjab’s female Impersonators) dance in print frocks to BV Karanth’s music and the rhythm of the toombi and harmonium. And the final image of the Yerma hurling a blood filled earthen ware pot at a white sheet to betoken the killing of her husband, proves yet again the theatrical power of suggestiveness over statement. But what is striking is Chowdhry’s ability to render a Spanish classic in Indian visual terms. Water, fire, ashes, in particular, acquire a strong symbolic power. And when Yerma writhes on a bed of dry leaves beneath a
wasting rope length flame the production achieves a resonance that transcends the limitations of language”.

It is not my approach as a director, to force the use of alien, fixed structures of language or costume into my productions. For this reason, my approach to translation is one which is never based in the realist traditions. A realist production never allows the director the space to experiment with the translation of a text according to the specific environment in which the director and actors are working. When I work I am not interested in portraying realism on stage, recreating the milieu from which the text has come, but more interested in the truth of the character, the truth of the situation, the truth of the moment. Therefore, the act of translation is one which must also allow the space for improvisation and, as productions evolve, the actors are encouraged to discover new elements of the text; the removal of others. In this way, the text remains alive, and continues to blossom through the course of its varied performances.

Through the entire creative process a performance text is being created by the actors through gestural and rhythmic improvisations and simultaneously, the translation of the text is being shaped by the actors themselves, as they choose their own intuitive construction of the characters. From these experiences I am completely convinced that the most obvious manifestation of inter-cultural text is through the bodies of the actors who create their own text, through their understanding of the character. There is no neat or ordered formulation for this.

**Working Against Stereotyping in Translation**

When B.V. Karanth directed *Malavikagnimitra* by Kalidasa, a rarely performed Sanskrit play, the stage was peopled with court dancers in elaborate costumes,

---

**Excerpts from the newspaper review, “The Guardian” 1993, written by Michael Billington**

4 Sanskrit theatre: the classical drama of India is, with a few exceptions written in the Sanskrit language. The origin of the plays are a matter of conjecture. References to the plays and the actors are found in the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and in some of the ancient Sanskrit text. Sanskrit theatre was holistic, consisting of a highly evolved text, pre-written as well as orally circulating among the community of artist. Although the manuscript tradition persisted, and Sanskrit plays were written sporadically right up to the present, the floating oral version easily grasped the audience fully familiar with its story, if not
kathakali\footnote{Kathakali( from katha, story, and kali, drama): celebrated dance-drama theatre tradition from Kerala.} half curtains, with the action quivering on the edge of the stage, and the role of the vidushaka (jester) split between two actors, to show the ‘angik’ (the body of the actor) and ‘vachik’ (the voice of the actor). It was a startling departure from the conventional staging of a Sanskrit play. The physical presence of a chorus of ten accompanied by musicians electrified the stage. It was crucial for Karanth that the audience understood the words of the song. ‘We must sing as we are speaking and speak as we are singing’ was an oft repeated instruction that he gave to his cast. This production became a performance in which the actors wrote with their bodies, and certain signs and symbols appear throughout the play, not just delineating a style or a tradition or illustrating the text, but creating an innovative and unusual ‘take’ on the text that stood outside the ‘set’ understanding of the conventions of Sanskrit theatre. Karanth, through his production, in no way reduces the text that emerged from the great pen of Kalidasa, but illuminated the text by walking with an old story into a new terrain to rewrite it for a fresh interpretation.

This way of working encounters many blocks, chief among them is the viewing habits of an audience. To explain this contentious issue even further let me use as reference, points from one of my productions that I have directed. My first play in Chandigarh, in Punjabi, was based on the kissa of Heer Ranja (1984). When you deal with a text that an audience is familiar with, they expect to see the production in exactly the same way as they recall the text.

“We see the play done by good actors in what seems like the proper way- they look lively and colourful, there is music and everyone is dressed up, just as they are supposed to be in the best of classical theatre. Yet secretly we find it excruciatingly boring- and in our hearts we blame theatre as such, or even ourselves. To make it worse there is the deadly spectator, who for special reasons enjoys a lack of intensity and even a lack of entertainment, such as a scholar who emerges from a routine performance of the content, and it gradually strengthened and became popular over time. It turned into the main vehicle for performance by traditional artists in different languages from the medieval period onward. In the nineteenth century, classic Sanskrit plays again offered models of structure and style for dramatist in the nascent regional literature.
classic smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself, while reciting his favourite lines under his breath. In his heart he sincerely wants a theatre that is nobler-than-life and he confuses a sort of intellectual satisfaction with the true experience for which he craves. Unfortunately he lends the weight of his authority to dullness....421

*Heer Ranja*, written by the Sufi poet Waris Shah, is part of the collective memory of the Punjabi. Every Punjabi woman aspires to be a *Heer* and every lover a *Ranja*. The image of *Heer* is an idealized and romantic heroine who is virginal and pliant. Instructions have already been inscribed on how the hero and heroine will be interpreted in popular myth. When I read the verse play of Waris Shah I was struck by the spirit of rebellion in the young lovers. I was not interested in making a stereotypical guess-work reconstruction of the characters, and neither did I want to use the filter of theatrical and popular memory to delineate the character. As the work is a maha/cavy* (epic verse play) I chose those portions of the text that gave me a clue to the characters’ inner impulses and found those were the portions of the text that appealed to me politically, socially and spiritually

At one point *Heer* defiantly tells the Kazi: the priest (who is trying to persuade her to give up her love for Ranjha for the sake of her father’s honour) *hun na murha mai ranjan toh, pavha bhap de bhap de bhap aha jaya-* (I will not turn my back on Ranjha, even if my father’s father comes) This created a furore of protest, even though the text was from Waris Shah. The reason for the protest was that this did not fit into the stereotypical image of the way *Heer* is represented in popular Punjabi literature and culture, and this choice of line, even though it was from the original text, seemed to carry the strong smell of subversion that would disturb the set iconography of the beloved Punjabi heroine. I remember that a critic from ‘The Indian Express’ had, as the headlines of the review of the play, ‘Punjab Teri Heer Mali’ (Punjab your *Heer* has been sullied). This was in reference to the popular Raj Kapur film- *Ram Teri Ganga Mali* (Ram your Ganga has been sullied). As most projections of popular myth are played out by the men

421 The Empty Space: Peter Brook-Page 12-13)
for male audiences, centuries of repetition reinforce the way the characters are perceived and over the years they become sanctified and do not lend themselves to any questioning. In this way the difference between ‘real’ and ‘dead’ gets mixed up. To relate images from popular myth to new thoughts by freeing them from their ‘museum’ status is the struggle of each artist.

“Again we must beware of indignation, for if we try to simplify the problem by making tradition the main barrier between ourselves and a living theatre we will again miss the real issue. There is a deadly element everywhere, in the cultural set-up, in our inherited artistic values, in the economic frame-work, in the actor’s life, in the critics function”

Girish Karnad (b.1938), one of India’s leading playwrights, reworks mythic material and recasts it around modernist concerns by taking myth and giving it a sub-text, with hidden motives and impulses. In his play Naga Mandala, the narrative of love, sex and sensuality are played out within an existentialist framework. Even though the story is taken from traditional material and rooted in the folklore of the region of Karnataka, the delineation of characters and the layering of the content is modern in their psychology, interpretation and characterization.

It was originally written and successfully performed in the South Indian language, Kannada, in 1989, and then subsequently rendered into English by the author and performed in that language a year later. It has also been translated into other Indian languages; however, the critical and scholarly attention the play has attracted is focused, significantly perhaps, on the English version. The performance style is heavily influenced by the conventions and theatrical devices of the folk narrative traditions. Girish Karnad’s plays take their cue from the past in order to observe the present. Naga Mandala is a story that is fluid enough to disturb stable representations. The main core of the story revolves around an unhappy bride who fills her loneliness by conjuring fantasies, dreams and illusions to give meaning to her life. These stories then get a life of their own and

422 Peter Brook: The Empty space: page 20
start functioning independently from her. Such is the power of the unconscious, that a frivolous wish or fantasy can take on a life of its own, and Karnad uses the format of a folk tale to allude to this process.

The story about a snake becoming a lover after drinking a magic potion can be perceived on many levels. There is the literal narrative - a snake assuming the role of her husband. And on a completely different register, the transformation of the husband into the snake assumes a philosophical tenor. To unravel the characters not only on the basis of what they are doing, but also what they are not doing, is what creates the dramatic tension. Each character in the play has an unarticulated gesture and action. The audience is invited to look beyond the represented, to an alternative world; a world where a chorus of flames speak more eloquently than humans and where a snake takes a human form.

Karnad explores the meaning of creativity by presenting a complex and provocatively ambiguous world where fictional characters and real characters intermingle and the lines between the visible and the invisible are blurred. What makes his work fascinating is that even though it is set in the traditional/folk format, it examines issues that are contemporary.

The Way a Translated Text is Received

“One of the rules for theatre translation and for translation in general is never to appear as an interpreter of the text, but to keep oneself in check, so as to maintain a mystery’. It is true that it is criminal to remove any ambiguity or resolve any mystery that the text has especially inscribed in it”. 423

The above statement, talks about ambiguity and the mystery of the text, yet can any reading, any translation, avoid interpreting the text?. That would be an impossible position to take. Whenever you take up a text from another cultural, social situation cutting across time and space, you bring your own ‘way of seeing’ into it. While reading the text, you can hear the characters speak, emote or proposing a mise en scène.

423 Theatre at the Crossroad by Patrice Pavis: Theatre Translation; page 145
Performing *Naga Mandala* in Punjabi made me realise, that to perform a play from another cultural context can only be done with a great amount of openness and with a sense of freedom to concretise the thoughts and sensibilities of my own creative affiliations. It is to Girish Karnad’s credit that he allowed me the space to experiment with my creative affinities, without being possessive and insisting that the play should be ‘performed in the way it is written’. ‘Play the way it is written’ is the sort of instruction that most directors give to the actors. I have always believed that a play is a performative text rather than a literary text.

“*Naga Mandala* in Punjabi? For those who have seen the late Shankar Nag bring life into Girish Karnad’s vibrant play, talk of a Punjabi version of it would have amounted to some kind of culture shock. Add to this is the fact that it is being staged in cities that are important centres of Kannada theatre- Dharwad, Mysore, Udupi, and Heggodu, apart from Bangalore- and it turns blasphemous. It simply lent itself to challenging interpretations and what lay below the narrative-the subtle, allegoric layers examining man- woman relationships-had their own parallels across the country. And with the Punjabi poet, Surjit Patar, who has earned renown as ‘the voice of Punjab’ in these troubled days, agreeing to translate the play, adding his own songs and poetry to it, there was no looking back. Neelam dismisses all myths about the essence of literature, being lost in translation, with a wave of her expressive, red-tipped hands. ‘When you translate it, you get the energy and texture of the language into it. The play spreads itself and is no longer confined. The chauvinism of language ceases to exist. The play has not been merely translated, but has been created all over again, with the basic narrative remaining unchanged.’ The story could belong to any place in the country- Girish Karnad could very well have been a Punjabi playwright and B.V. Karanth a Punjabi musician”424

424 Deccan Herald: 6th December, 1991
In order to understand the transformation of the dramatic text, written and then translated, staged and received by the audience, we have to reconstruct its journey and its transformation in the course of its successive concretisation. The original text is based on the playwright’s formulations and choices. It is not objective reality that creates the work, but a complicated field of inspiration, storytelling skills, cultural framework and the playwright’s understanding of reality. The text is then received through this network of culture, ideological dimensions and situation.

When I asked Patar to translate Girish Karnad’s *Naga Mandala* in Punjabi from the English transcript, he was extremely hesitant. He discusses his initial reluctance in translating this play, his disconnect with the snake imagery, and the problems of transporting a folk tale from Karnataka to a Punjabi Village:

“Not being familiar with the language of theatre, I was completely thrown off balance by the snake imagery in the text. Having been nurtured on the tradition of ‘realistic drama,’ I presumed that the snake was a physical requirement for staging the play. I kept on grappling with the issue of how to show a snake on the stage until it struck me that this was an area which the director had to resolve. The other area that confused me was that I was not familiar with the language of theatre that this play was written in. How can flames be made human, how does an intangible element like a story become a character. In most writings that existed in Punjab, at least in contemporary playwriting, folk tales with layered and dense imagery had not made their appearance.

For me the structure was new, and I could understand that this was a new sort of writing. The catalyst became the word *chhaleda* (which in Punjabi means an illusionist. A person who can take any form or shape, a woman, can be transformed into an apsara; and a man to a snake—the word *chall* which can also mean a trickster or an illusionist or a magician). I saw a pool of water or a field of flower but there is actually nothing. This is a mirage – or a *chhaleda* (because there was no water or flowers) were things that I had experienced when I was a child and been rebuked by the elders in the family not to
fantasize. Day-dreaming or weaving magic are qualities that did not find acceptably in a pragmatic society. These stories were part of my archival memory and part of my inherited folklore. (I live in the world of the philistine, condemn me not for being born a poet)

This word *chhaleda* became my starting point and helped me in interpreting the images of the play—it also provided me the tool with which to unpeel the various layers of the sub-text. For me to shift the play from a village in Karnataka to Punjab was not a problem or an issue at all. All the characters in the play looked familiar, I had, many times, met the blind-women, the husband, the poor brutalized wife, members of the Panchayat. These characters had certainly entered my universe during many stages of my life and they seemed familiar.

The songs were the most exciting and challenging part of the translation. I wanted to give the fictional characters – the chorus of flames, a song on their entry. As a child I had been a witness to the songs sung by women during *Lohri* (the festival to mark the change of the season from winter to summer, by lighting a fire). Women of a particular village would, during the *lohri* celebration, carry oil lamps, or burning flames and dance and sing and go to different places. I took the traditional words, but played around with them, using similar words that existed in the traditional song but changed the placement of words. By making these changes, I also managed to change their meaning and context. When I translate a play, my response is never immediate; I allow it to incubate within me before it is hatched. I have to internalize the entire text before any words can flow forth. For me it is not translation work, but an entire internalization of ideas, thought, content and mood. It’s almost as if I am creating a world, in which the characters and I will live.”

The translated text belongs both to the playwright and to the translator. We cannot assume that the translator is transferring the visual, aural, tactile, resonance of the original text by drawing parallels that are simultaneous to the source from where the text has been taken. The translator actually realizes that the text can only be realized by

425 Surjit Patar (b 1945-) in conversation, regarding the translation of the play Nag Mandala in 1990.
positioning it, in its own local vernacular and regional reality, while engaging with the nuances of the language in which it is being translated.

The translator reassembles the plot in accordance with the logic of the situation and develops the characters through that time and space which fits in with the ideological concerns of the translator and the director of that specific play that is being translated for performance. This is not to suggest that the play will not resonate with the echoes of the source material, but it is to state that a translation of a text that is transferred from one language into another will have a texture and resonance that will mirror its own specific reality. Hence, it cannot be just a translation from one language into another, but needs to confront and communicate situations and characters that are not only separated by the boundaries of their language, but also separated through geography, time and specificities of their cultural configurations.

Can a western play like Jean Giraudoux ‘Mad Woman of Chaillot’ exist in the Punjabi language independent of its western identity? Actually while working on the play (1994), the imaginative construction of the characters in the play was so rich and intense that one unconsciously erased the source of its origin. Yet would it have been possible to transfer a Parisian café to a pavement bazaar in a Punjabi moffussil town, if the French play did not have the potential for a Punjabi director to do so? Transformation is only possible when the transformation originates from the text itself, rather than superficially be imposed from the outside. These decisions are taken by the text and what it opens up before you as a director. To state it more explicitly, I would say that the French text continued to echo throughout the creative process, even if most times the scenes constructed in the Punjabi version were at complete variance with the source text and did not enter into the mise en scene. A continuous negotiation takes place between the source text and the target text, which is always being manoeuvred by the actors and the director, consciously as well as intuitively.

This play was invited to the Festival’d Avignon, which is one of the most prestigious theatre festivals in the world. The London International Theatre Festival, (LIFT) which had invited Yerma, did a hat-trick, by asking me to perform ‘The
Mad Woman of Chaillot’ en route to France. Performing at the Waterman’s in London, to a packed audience every night, was an exhilarating experience. The reviews in the local press validated my conviction that, take a play from any part of the world, explore its inner values, seep it in the ambience of the local milieu in which the play is being translated and watch the geographical, cultural differences dissolve.

“Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry has followed Yerma’s, LIFT 93 success with another European classic. It is given in the unique style of The Company- part Indian folk, part rap, complete with the usual chorus of naqqals, men in drag who put the oomph in traditional dance.

Giraudoux’s eccentric Madwoman of Chaillot translates happily as an Indian woman bountiful” (John Thaxter The London Times 1995)

Gayatri Sinha, the theatre critic for The Hindu saw the play in Avignon in the same year and reviewed it for her newspaper.

“The café of the original becomes a slice of a street corner, with a dhabavali who makes glasses of sweet tea, the shoe polish and flower seller, the dyer with swathes of coloured cloth and a pixilated policeman, all against the backdrop of film posters. All this was transported to the cloister of the Celestins in Avignon, a natural alfresco venue. The mazurkas of Giraudoux became the jugni of traditional songs of the Punjab, and the long passages of the original became foot-tapping ditties, set to the music of BV Karanth. The sound of the Indian street, of temple bells, prayers, the call of hawkers and the musical instruments of Punjab were recreated.” (Gayatri Sinha: The Hindu 1995)

No text can be dreamed by different directors in the same way. It will always be imagined by different directors in different ways at different points of time. For a text to be translated specifically for a performance by a particular director is something completely apart from picking up a play that is already translated. As we had taken the French text from an English translation of the play, an understanding of the source language did not seem as significant as the comprehension of the ‘theatre language’ of the play. Even though it was a very verbose text, Surjit Patar, the translator of the play reshaped the text by
shifting the action and the circumstances of the play into another world, another cultural reality. The production is created by a number of people sharing an identical point of view but with several interpretations. BV Karanth, Surjit Patar the actors and myself collaborate to work on the text, improvise the text were everyone’s quintessential energy and creativity is given space. The Madwoman of Chaillot at first reading seemed dated, but on reading it deeply there were layers of possibility. I suggested the form of the production. As a director I am responsible for the construction of the production. As we went along we kept on modifying the text, reworking it, abbreviating the unnecessary, trying to unravel the core and attempting to remove the inessential deadwood from the text that did not work in terms of our production design.

"The language of translation can-in fact- must- let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intention of the original, not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of intention."

As this play was conceived as a musical, the images in the play got a fillip by the musical rhythms and sound patterns created by BV Karanth. The moment I described the scene and the music I needed for the scene, he would strum his harmonium and notes would tumble out and give flight to the imagination. The musical score that he created had an eclectic quality that drew upon, Hindi film music, Pop compositions, traditional songs reworked by retaining the text but recasting it in familiar yet unusual compositions. Surjit Patar wrote the play with a degree of fun, irony, and irreverence. In this cauldron of many resources it was possible to construct a piece that was both modern as well as local. The point that one wants to make here is that different points of origin translate a 'foreign' text into a local text, and the point at which these trajectories meet, disseminate

---

426 Walter Benjamin *the Task of Translator*

22 Feb 2009 ... Benjamin talks about language 'kinship,' which to him is not a matter of ... can -- in fact, must -- let itself go, so that it gives voice to the ... so the translation must be one with the original in the form of the ... (Walter Benjamin 1969:79.)
and intersect, get renewed through transformation. The point is not from where the text came, but how it gets a new voice through a new body.

“For me it is very easy to versify dialogues, I can do this sort of work with extreme ease. To set dialogues to rhythm and beat comes as naturally to me as breathing. As I see words more in terms of its poetic meter, rather then literal and textural translation. I also must admit that I fell in love with the character of the mad woman. She became my muse, and I wrote her with love, she inspired me so much that poetry burst within me. Her love for animals – her feeding the stray cats and birds on the streets – her desire to do good for her community, her subversive ways, her challenging of authority, these multitudes that the character contained made her not only inspiring, but also very human.” (Surjit Patar)

The translator must have an understanding of language required for the stage. If a translator has a real feeling for the stage and understands how words are internalized and experienced by the actor, only then can a translation work effectively.

The Reinvention of Tradition: Problems of Presentation:

An important trend in the modern theatre movement of the 1960s-70s period was a deliberate attempt by many Indian playwrights and directors to revisit the past and borrow ideas from epics and history, mythology and folklore. The social and political mayhem that surrounded them was perhaps too close and overwhelming to allow them that detached observation and quiet introspection which were necessary for a realistic depiction of contemporary events. Many among them, therefore, chose to borrow stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, regional folk tales, historical episodes and classical drama, and sought to reinvest them with new meanings that assumed relevance for both those who were writing or directing the plays, as well as those who were watching their enactment on stage.

427 Surjit Patar—being interviewed for this chapter in 2008 in Ludhiana
Dharamvir Bharati’s epic verse Hindi drama, *Andha Yug*, is one of the first such outstanding examples. Widely produced—first by Satyadev Dubey in 1962 and Ebrahim Alkazi for the National School of Drama in 1963, to be followed by many others. It takes off from the end of the Kurukshetra war in the Mahabharata. It centres around Ashwatthama, the warrior son of Dronacharya who is doomed to wander around the ruins of a destroyed world for the rest of his life with a battered conscience.

Bharati recreated Ashwatthama’s loneliness in the present context. His alienation, scepticism, hatred and fear corresponded, with amazing accuracy, to our own problems and tendencies in the socio-political environment of the 1960s’, where all values were fast collapsing. Describing his own dilemma in reconstructing such a character from old epics, Bharati, in an interview given much later said: ‘…in these epics right and wrong are clearly spelt out. My problem was that I was writing about a time when this dividing line was blurred.’ Elaborating further on his conception of right and wrong: ‘are they at all distinct any longer? Hasn’t there occurred a fusion of these opposites?’ He then added: ‘and for Ashwatthama, who is representative of this modern dilemma, everything is meaningless because he is a wandering soul in that shadow world where truth lies with untruth even more truthfully than the lion can lie with the lamb.’

As Bharati explored episodes from the Mahabharata, in Kerala, his contemporary K.N. Panikkar (born in 1928), directed episodes from the Mahabharata, by linking them with contemporary concerns. Even while taking the plays from the Sanskrit theatre, especially the plays of Bhasa, he interpreted them from a modern viewpoint, but used theatrical techniques from the kalari, which is the martial art from Kerala, along with the Kodiyattam dance form from Kerala. A creative synthesis of folk and tradition, Panniker created his own text by also digging deep into myth and the epics.

The images produced in a classical text aren’t images by themselves, but become raw material for a performance. An extraordinary director transforms all these images, intuitions and ideas into a performance instrument for the actors. The actor translates all these images, no matter which part of the world the text comes from, and

---

428 Dharamvir Bharati: *Sangeet Natak Akademi journal: The Playwright Speaks.* (1962)
decodes them for a target audience. All theses images are decoded by the actor through the filter of his performance. Only then do these images become an emotion and connect with an audience.

**The Culture of Links: Myths about appropriation. True and False**

Is this a recognized territory of work and has it managed to find its own identity? Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*, for example, employed Western performance techniques to tell a classical Indian story. Scenes, from Turkish life are incorporated in the works of *Molière*, and Goethe’s work had an abiding interest in Sanskrit theatre which influenced the structure of his famous play *Dr Faust*. From Bertolt Brecht to Grotowski, there has been a great interest in Indian classical forms, their staging conventions and the use of time and space in Sanskrit plays. At the same time, Modern Indian theatre has been deeply influenced by western theatrical techniques. Right from the borrowing of the proscenium arch, to training actors in the Stanislavski system, to the use of realism in their staging of Ibsen, and Shakespeare, these techniques have shaped the cannon and contours of Modern Indian drama. This happened despite India having a rich and living theatrical tradition of its own.

This ever increasing network of connections and exchange has intensified over the years, in two major events. Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata* and Ariane Mnouchkine’s *I’Indiade*, works on an epic scale by two of the best known western directors, both having used Indian themes in contemporary theatre.

Peter Brook’s production of the *Mahabharata* is one of the most celebrated examples and is constantly used for any reference regarding a ‘for’ and ‘against’ argument for translating plays from one culture to another. This work has come in for a lot of criticism as a lot of cultural theorists and academics attacked Brook of appropriating India’s cultural property. The most demagogic of these was by Rustom Bharucha in an essay called ‘Peter Brook, *The Mahabharata*: a view from India’.

‘Peter Brook’s Mahabharata exemplifies one of the most blatant (and accomplished) appropriations of Indian culture in recent times.....The British first made
us aware in India of economic appropriation on a global scale. They took our raw materials from us, transported them to factories in Manchester and Lancashire, where they were transformed into commodities which were then forcibly sold to us in India. Brook deals in a different kind of appropriation: he does not merely take our commodities and textiles and transform them into costumes and props. He takes one of our most significant text’s and decontextualises it from its history in order to 'sell’ it to the west.  

Peter Brook did not reply to this detractor of his production of the Mahabharata. He very simply replied that what mattered was quality. But questions of, ‘borrowing an epic’ as well as the convention of staging from another culture certainly stuck to the production of the Mahabharata. In this chapter I would like to examine issues of ‘cultural imperialism’ that is being brandished around in terms of a creative director from one country translating a text, form, tradition, image and sounds from another cultural context and locating it into his/her own creative and aesthetic vocabulary.

What is cultural space, and does the local and universal meanings that are found in the works of the Greek Classics, Sanskrit plays, the works of Shakespeare not carry within them echoes of humanity? Each work that is translated from one culture into another historical and social reality goes through a process of search and sifting. And does a work that speaks in a universal tone, belong to a particular nation?

“Cultural property is something the English have done without any hesitation over a hundred years in India, which is to take their objects and without paying them for them, put them in a British museum. This is piracy. What happened in The Mahabharata is that here is a very great work of art which all the pirates ignored because there was no cash to be made out of it. You steal a Buddha from a temple and you can resell it, as people are doing all over the place. The Mahabharata, one of the great works of humanity, to this day remains a name that most people in the West haven’t heard, a

429 Rustom Bharucha: The Intercultural Performance Reader;Edited by Patrice Pavis. Somebody’s Other. Disorientation in the cultural politics of our times. Page 196.

271
totally unknown work, apart from a few scholars and specialists. Why has nobody accused the West of cultural plundering because it reads the Odyssey? 430

“...... there are a lot of cultural exchanges, but I felt that the real exchange of importance to artist was not that among nations, which really suggest official exchange and artificial kinds of boundaries, but the exchange among cultures, something which can be done by individuals or by non-official groupings and it doesn’t obey official boundaries. As we know, especially in the post-colonial world, national boundaries and cultural boundaries differ 431.

When foreigners use Indian material they are accused of being Orientalists, and when Indians use foreign material in their work they are accused of not being loyal to their ethnic heritage. Where is this fear of cultural integration coming from? Culture is not something, like oil that is a scarce resource. In a country with such an extensive history and diversity of traditions, we have ample material to spare for anyone who wishes to experiment. Furthermore, why shouldn’t there be a variety of interpretations of the same text? If no one objects to the thousands of productions of Shakespeare that take place across the globe then why should one object to a variation of the Mahabharata?

And when Anuradha Kapur stages Romeo and Juliet, in Hindi, using performance techniques that are local and vernacular, it is a way of bringing a world classic into the Indian experience. And at what point do we draw the line regarding what is Western and What is Indian? Is metropolitan life with all of its international brands and fast food chains also a “foreign” experience, even if it has been integrated into daily Indian life? If so, then do plays which are considered “authentically Indian” have to be chained to material which is pre-modern, or which avoids the multicultural experience altogether? Why should theatre bow to such compulsions and phobias?

The work of Anuradha Kapur and Maya Krishna Rao has taken imagery from the social discordance that surrounds metropolitan living. The juxtaposition of popular music outside an Indian temple or the projecting of live film testimonies of the Godra

430 Peter Brook: A Biography page 267
431 Richard Schechner: The Intercultural Performance Reader, page42
riots in a production of *Antigone* in Kapur’s work becomes part of the post-modern process of commenting on social fragmentation. This collage of images has given immense power and intensity to the above mentioned productions and they chose their forms and intentions without pretending to understand the normative cultural rules from which these forms have taken birth. This then becomes a creative interpretation of cultural material within new configurations for creativity. What happens when Amal Allana locates Mother Courage in the hilly climes of Himachal Pradesh? This pushes the artist’s inventiveness through fusion and hybridity, and new synthesis are formed.

But here I am tempted to quote the witty observations of Kobena Mercer. “All the symbols of the nation’s cultural identity have come from somewhere else. What could be more English then a cup of tea? Brewed with leaves from India and sweetened with sugar from the West Indies. She’s as fair as an English rose? Excuse me, roses do not spontaneously grow in Watford or Wiltshire, they were imported from fourteen-century China. One could go on to find many more examples of interculturalism in popular culture – in the realm of food, sports, clothing and music- yet all of it erased and denied in narratives that reproduce a monolithic concept of belonging whose values of purity, authencity and homogeneity are all based on a negation of the dynamic exchange that brings all cultures into being”432.

Ariane Mnouchkine’s practice of referring to Asian theatre in her productions is nothing new in Western theatre. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Asian theatre has had an enormous influence on Western theatrical process, from Bertolt Brecht, to Antonin Artaud and more recently, Peter Brooks. But the use of Asian and especially Indian theatrical forms in the works of Ariane Mnouchkine has been extremely radical; more so in her work on the Greek tragedies, where one can see a direct influence of kathakali. In these productions the translation is in terms of content, atmosphere, location, characters, and objects.

---

432 Kobena Mercer is a cultural worker/critic whose varied work on the politics of representation in African diasporic visual arts has inaugurated an important line of inquiry into post-identitarian cultural politics. (mercer1997:42)
Her production of *L’Indiade* is localized in a definitive historical context (1937-1948)—a sweeping panorama that telescopes the crucial decolonization period in India. She, in her production, shows a debate with the varied members of the Indian congress party—from Nehru, to Jinnah, to Sadar Patel and Sarojini Nadia. The stage is covered with a mattress on which crisp white sheets have been placed, showing the two parties discussing and dissecting the distribution of power, which will unhinge and rip the country apart. The starched white sheets on which the leaders Nehru and Jinnah discuss the nation’s destiny, is reminiscent of the meetings where leaders in India sit on white sheets and receive guests. It is an image that immediately evokes an association with jewellery shops, homes of politicians, money lenders and so on and so forth.

The play is treated as a chronicle that aims to be objective and India is signified through body language, gait, gestures; all these contribute to the illusion of constructing a collage of images and objects that represent India; a rickshaw moving all over the stage, peasants with their colourful turbans and the women in bright sari’s recreate a rich and detailed image of Indian street life. The stage, constructed with bricks and laid out with carpets and cushions with incense burning and powder flying, suggests a location that is easily identified by an audience from India, but could suggest exotica to an audience unfamiliar with the sights, sounds and smells of India. In this production, Ariane Mnouchkine’s localises her play during the time that the country was getting divided more as a pretext to speak about dislocation and suffering as a parable of a divided and torn people and their country. In the production what is interesting is that it refers to a world far away or even imaginary, with the cultural references being coded through the Western vision of the East as something colourful, exotic even though the text is layered by a sense of ‘Indian reality’. Adapting a theme from one culture to another is like setting an entire grid of meaning that is not always easy to decode. The adapter can sense the differences between his culture and the one from which he is borrowing and without setting any hierarchies, or ‘otherness’, they can see it as a condition of cultural exchange.

However, since the publication of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, this kind of ‘borrowing’ has been subjected to extreme criticism and has been hurled with the accusations of cultural imperialism, especially after Peter Brooks production of the
Mahabharata. By the staging of the Mahabharata the international audience got access to a mythical India that is epic in scale and has existed since thousands of years and been transmitted orally through the ages by bards and storytellers. Even though it is an imaginary India, it is an India which is linked to the past and the present. Seeing the play in Avignon, in the month of June in 1985, set against the visceral power of a stone quarry was an unforgettable experience. The earth was smeared with fresh wet mud, the river in the back-drop, the fires were lit on the stage to create a ‘feeling’ of the ‘image’ of India. Yet it suggested a universal saga of love and revenge. The need to go back to the source text did not seem essential in this production and neither did one feel the need for cultural references, as the voice and acting protocol of the production had no geographical or ethnographical pretensions, and created both a rootedness and a universal imagery. Through this production Peter Brook’s intention was, as he said: “to bring Indian culture closer to the western audience”

It is interesting to see in the work of Pina Bausch, Ariane Mnouchkine, Maya Krishna Rao, Abhilash Pillai a breakdown of the East-West barrier. Not every cultural exchange can be prescribed by political agenda, determined by market forces and media culture. There are artists in the world who seek out each other at a personal and creative level, through the hardest of conditions, with no thought from recognition even of their respective national cultures.

Richard Schchner is not afraid of mixing cultures. He says that each artist must explore the ‘culture of his choice’; of learning and voluntarily adopting a chosen culture. Rather than get into the politics of this statement, it is better to position him as well as other artists of the world, involved in this cultural exchange as people who mutually respect and recognize each other work. Not believing in being politically

---

433 Tanztheater is one of the most dynamic styles of contemporary dance, incorporating a collage of music, dialogue, and stage design with dance. As a pioneer of the movement, Pina Bausch has created more than 40 works that celebrate the human experience and spirit. Through intense ethnographic research, Bausch and her company deconstruct social conventions through dance. The choreographer spent more than a year exploring India’s cultural and stage traditions before translating her experience into Bamboo Blues, which does much to redefine our expectations of dance as both narrative and spectacle.

434 Abhilash Pillai: Theatre Director from Kerala. Presently assistant professor of acting at the National School of Drama.

435 Richard Schchner: Interculturalism and The Culture Of Choice. In an article from The Intercultural Reader Edited by Patrice Pavis. Page 41.
correct, he does not get intimidated by those who refuse him permission to enter into a cultural terrain that is not part of his inheritance. “.... as if it is some inalienable and non-negotiable birth right or national asset.”

When plays from different parts of the world are performed that are far removed not only from the text, but also from the customs and sensibilities, how are these performances received? Is there a framed way of seeing and is there a way that this seeing can be translated into another cultural context. Is viewing part of a shared destiny?

In India we are constantly translating every moment of our existence. We are a multilingual nation and in our everyday verbal exchanges we are always mixing languages, expressions and words from one regional language to another without any self-consciousness. I have seen beggars in the streets of Mumbai begging in a language that includes not merely English, but Spanish, French, Arabic as part of a marketing strategy to attract every nationality that swarms the streets of Mumbai to part with a dollar, a dirham or a franc.

Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have been translated into various regional languages, and it is said that theses languages achieved maturity only after the great epics were translated. Pampa of Kannada, Tulsidas of Hindi, Kampan of Tamil translated the Ramayana. These great literary figures were never considered translators, but poets of grand stature and imagination. They did not translate literally but created a new text, keeping in mind the cultural context and their own regional aspirations towards the narrative. Bringing the visual landscape, the imagery, the sounds and smells of their own region as well as erasing those stories and characters that did not have any regional resonance and adding local stories and local heroes to make the epic have immediacy with the audience was possible when national stories were dovetailed with the regional narrative traditions.

Translating helps in retrieving lost histories, preserving the past, and understanding the present. In this entire process, something gets lost, but a lot is also
The language in which a text has been translated gets new stories, new ways of seeing the universe. In translation ideas get reborn, and the images get a fresh power.

“All translations are an attempt to arrive at some primal language that the whole mankind once shared and seems to have lost—maybe after Babel—and each translation is a call into the ‘forest of language’ so that we get an echo. The echo may not be the same as the original sound, just as our image in the mirror or water is not us, yet it reassures us of our own existence.”

A Theatrical Dialogue. Ethics of Representation

Is there an ethics in representation in theatre? What are the modalities of presenting characters from a varied social/economic/political context that the director does not have any real access to? How does one represent the angst of the socially marginalized, when the public space that the director may occupy is completely in contrast to the reality that he/she wishes to represent? Is this just a creative affectation or a genuine desire to traverse into unexplored areas of life in an attempt to understand, fathom and bring to light those areas of experience that he or she may be surrounded by, but is not directly a part of?

I got the answers to these questions from my own experience of working with the traditional Naqqals from Punjab. This, for me, has been a complex and difficult journey, but has also been hugely adventurous. How do I integrate their traditions into a modern leitmotif? Both groups of people (i.e. the Naqqals and myself) were outsiders and strangers to certain cultural elements in our ways of working. How does one create a cultural collaboration? The most significant aspect of this exchange was that there was no language barrier (like it would be if I decided, in my work, to use elements from the Kathakali theatre or from the Kabuki stage). To work with a form that is within your culture, with artists that are also keen to experiment with modern techniques, becomes a positive starting point. To try and explore the underlying principals of both systems of

436 Walter Benjamin: The structure of Awakening and progressive scholarship in new media

277
working became our aim, rather then bringing the traditional elements of naqqal into a Modern performance. This would be like trying to erase their context completely and make the exchange inequitable. Yet the questions that assail the director are: Would it be democratic in its functioning, and equitable in its cultural exchange? Is equitable cultural exchange possible?

Initially, working with local stories in the folk narrative tradition, I moved to plays that are a part of our world literature. From Federico Garcia Lorca, to Jean Giardoux and from Jean Racine to Doris Lessing. I questioned myself, is it right to do plays from another cultural context with which you have no real contact? What are the alternatives of representing the ‘other’ with responsibility? This crossing over, not only in terms of text, but also relocating actor in a fresh cultural milieu, could lead to challenges that could either work or be viewed with suspicion. Let me quote Salman Rushdie, ‘The truest eye belongs to the migrant’s double vision’. As an ‘outsider', I felt free to explore, to be innovative and to take risks. Not carrying the cultural baggage of the text or the codified iconography of tradition, I could move in spaces that I created from my imagination. Using the energies of tradition, with urban attitudes, I worked towards a crossing over, not only of gender, but also worked towards the dynamics of exchange, interplay and interpretation. Regionalizing the national, and nationalizing the regional, to reinvent for myself, signs and symbols which Raymond Williams called ‘realized signifying systems’. The collapse of these systems can be re-identified and fresh signifying systems can be realized, to create a ‘performance as metaphor’, regional and contemporary, national and international, with its varied context. It is through this mirror, which is both reflective and illusionary, that I negotiate global and cultural issues.

Conclusion

To conclude this section, I would like to re-express some of the theoretical and philosophical modalities of translation. While the practical and critical aspects of this

---

438 Raymond Henry Williams (31 August 1921 – 26 January 1988) was a Welsh academic, novelist and critic. He was an influential figure within the New Left and in wider culture. His writings on politics, culture, the mass media and literature are a significant contribution to the Marxist critique of culture and the arts.

278
element of the creative process have been adequately displayed, it would be important to reassert the primacy of this process in a broader intellectual context. Translation makes the expression of a text familiar, and in many cases – such as Punjabi – expresses it in a language which is associated, in the contemporary Indian environment, as crude and boisterous, celebratory and regional. The Punjabi language has a rich poetic and cultural history, communicated by the poetry of Bullah Shah and the philosophy of Nanak. So the translation of these will not transform the experience of the language. Bullah Shah and Nanak, both masters of the regional language, have their place in history and their potency is reduced to religious and spiritual transformation, an expression of the ancient sublime or a reminder of the potentiality of the language. For an urban audience when this poetry is translated into another language, this potency is then dissipated and it is not translated into the daily realities of their own language apparatuses.

Using a familiar language to communicate an unfamiliar culture (in terms of sensations, philosophies, relationships and metaphors) does not only create a broader perceptual mutation, but it also makes us relook at the possibilities of our own language. As has been argued by linguistics, the grammar and structure of any language, creates limitations on what can be said and thought. As a result, language becomes both the creator and sustainer of the quotidian. Unfortunately, within Modernism, the re-engineering of the limits of language and the creation of new language forms and therefore the creation of new linguistic descriptions of sensations is created either through a mastery of language and literature (such as James Joyce) or through the disturbed ranting of a man whose fundamental structures were always collapsing (such as Antonin Artaud439). With translation, the local language can be re-invigorated, the listener’s apparatus expands with the creation of new sensations, and the actor, challenged and surprised by the unfamiliar being carried through the familiar, is forced to relook at his gestures and expressions which, as we learn as creators of theatre, are also just as grammatical and structured as a language. A translated text transforms the bodies of the performer, transforms the living structure of language, and also creates sensations that would have remained unknown to our audience. As you can see, translating foreign texts

---

439 Antonin Artaud (September 4, 1896, in Marseille – March 4, 1948 in Paris) was a French playwright, poet, actor and theatre director.
goes far beyond just telling stories. It cuts to the heart of our impulses as creators and transforms the very coordinates of ‘Being’ – and why should theatre not have the right to do that?