Hybridised Identity as Counter-Discursive Strategy: A Genealogy of British-Asian Culture and its Postcolonial Theatres

Dimple Godiwala
York St. John College

Abstract This article examines the hybrid genealogy of British-Asian culture and theatre through the eyes of the Indian outsider who exists on the overlapping borders of British and Asian cultures in England. British-Asian theatre is theorised as a fusion of two cultures where the excess is a celebration that results in the birth of new morphologies. Contemporary British theatre is compared with theatre in India, and the stages of race in England emerge as truly alive and infused with dynamism in these early years of the new century. Salient British-Asian theatre companies are analysed with regard to their productions as their drama reveals itself as postcolonial in form, style, strategy and content.

Genealogies [...] are the combined product of an erudite knowledge and a popular knowledge. (Foucault, 1980, p. 83)

It is not possible for us to describe our own archive. Constituted and formed within it, it delimits us as we speak from within its very rules. It is that which gives to what we can say its modes of appearance, its forms of existence and co-existence, its system of accumulation, historicity, and disappearance.

Who then can hold the mirror up to us? Who can describe us as we are, in the mode of our becoming, even as we transform ourselves? Is it not one who is interstitial—inside enough to understand fully our boundaries and delimitation, at once close to us, and yet different from our present existence, someone on the border of our time and our presence, someone who can indicate yet its otherness and our possibilities, one who is a presence in the gap between our own discursive practices? (Foucault, 1972, p. 130–131; translation modified.)

The Theory, the Culture, the Practice

Writing from the interstices of India-in-England, constituted in the difference of the discourses of India and England, situated on the border of two cultures, observer of a third as the two heterogeneous sites of ‘British’ and ‘Asian’ overlap and mingle, noting the particular construction/s of British-Asian, it is impossible not to note the need for history. We can look back to note that the twentieth century has been a time where new freedoms were gained creating new interstitial spaces which were variously ‘genderised’, newly sexually and/or racially delimited. Feminist consciousness gave rise to women’s need for a history, and an effort to reconstruct a past within which women could see themselves as having played a role. Thus, herstorians re-wrote the traditional history of humankind seeing women where there had been only men. During
this time, gay and lesbian groups formed as homosexuality created a legislative-political and recognised space for itself, giving rise to the need to excavate the past in a search for gay history. Sartre and Fanon envisaged a new anti-racist humanism, one that would include the majority of the world’s peoples, those who had been subjugated by the practices of Imperialism and colonialism.¹ This is the postcolonial critical project, which seeks to destabilise Eurocentric and Imperial versions of history. These various re-inscriptions of alterity strive to make the colonial—patriarchal—heterosexual western Self, result in a new history-in-process which is variously equal. History, re-structured to incorporate our various multiple identities, gives us validity, roots, a sense of belonging. It valorises us. It gives us projects to continue and lineages to transgress. It is in this cultural matrix that neo-cultures like British Asian culture/s—like the newly formed political consciousnesses of women and gays—need to look to the past in their need for a history. Straddling two long and ancient lineages, the British-Asians have hybrid culture(s) that need to carve out an identity through a fusionist invention as well as an historical re-appropriation from a pre-colonised Indian past as well as an English/British present.² British-Asian ‘Culture’ is a heritage of fusion in its collective histories of appropriation, assimilation and invention.

The British-Asian has a diasporic obsession with all diasporic traditions and rituals ‘authentically’ Indian, and, in the pursuit of the preservation of these, fossilises them. Everything Indian is valued, and the identity of the British-Asian is contingent on the particular Indian-ness of he/r sacraments. As Sartre put it in his preface to Fanon’s ‘The Wretched of the Earth’, the sacred is turned into a weapon against despair and humiliation, ‘in other words, the colonized defend themselves against colonial alienation by taking religious alienation to greater lengths’.³ Originating in the need for the formation and preservation of identity as a collective resistance to the hostile exclusivity of the host culture, this collective longing to be constituted within the discursive matrix of the subcontinent, bizarrely—but also perhaps appropriately—extends to the mass commercial Bollywood film. This is as inauthentically normalising in its function of the containment and mediation of norms as it is in fact ‘appointed’ the task of constructing the norms of contemporary Indian ‘culture’. Quite like the Hollywood film, Bollywood marginalises its other discourses and similarly plays a major role in homogenising behaviour and attitudes as the dominant ideology becomes pervasive through Indian culture.⁴ The Bollywood film and its incessant mass produced songs infiltrate the little Indias in England to normalise the diasporic subjects whilst simultaneously forming a backdrop of the reassurance of a ‘home’ they may never have seen. The consciousness of the stereotypical ‘British-Asian’ is largely infiltrated by this mass commercial media and it is much of what s/he—regardless of he/r class—brings to the theatre in the form of audience consciousness. Merged with this collective fantasy is the tradition and ritual carried so long and so rigidly by the diaspora, as to become ossified and almost meaningless except to the still—through all the generations—displaced subject to whom it offers the comforts of solidity and the connectedness and rootedness, which was never offered by England. Born and bred in England these subjects constituted in an almost forcible and forced difference are denied any definitions that would confer on them Englishness through the long generations of their residence and citizenship. Thus, the simulacra of customs past are a necessary fixation bestowing identity in a
schizophrenic existence that offered social mobility to so many but withheld any sense of belonging. The need for history and cultural identity can only be accessed and retrieved by this drive that leads to an incestuousness and an ever-exclusive construction of identities. It is interesting that these constructed British-Asian identities are as plural and as exclusive as India itself: the Gujaratis and Punjabis, and more generally, the Hindus, Muslims and the Parsis and the Christians will seek their equivalent in Britain as they do in India in a form of cultural incest. As much ‘Indian’ in Britain as they are ‘British’ in India, these subjects are then, for the most part, structurally, and schizophrenically, constituted by the very terms of English exclusion to create and remain in the Indias of the mind whilst they partake of and contribute to the economy of their country of migration. The British-Indian, or, more appropriately, the British-Asian (to use the collective label which serves as theoretical resistance) lives well within the notions—concretised solidly in every corner of every ghetto—of a lost and half-remembered regional grouping of India armed with a British passport and citizenship. ‘One may not be able to return to the world of one’s ancestors, but one can claim to be doing so, with political effect.’ Hybridity, then, in theory and culture, is the prediscursive condition that determines the British-Asian subject. Thus, constituted within and without the dominant English culture, hybridity in British-Asian theatre (which is really an English-Indian-ness in terms of pre-fusion theatrical lineage/s) becomes a strategy of assimilation and negotiation with the histories of the Other(s). This is a genealogy which unites the erudite knowledge of India and England with local memory, establishing a history of the knowledge of struggles, and makes use of the knowledge tactically to form a postcolonial theatre. The Other is both Indian Other recaptured through the broken mirrors of memory, shards lost, given up or distorted through time, and also the English Other mediated through a veil of difference where the subjectivity of its presence is strategically modified out of recognition through the triumvirates of assimilation, appropriation and invention. Thus, a disruptive space is created in British-Asian theatre, spawning bastard forms and styles too fluid and uncontrollable to be able to be legitimised instantly by the pens of critics weighed by twin histories of aesthetic and intellectual critique and judgement. Yet this illegitimate hybrid bhelppuri space is a marriage—sometimes ideal, at other times fractious—of two weighty families with lineages that extend back through time: the two reluctantly embracing histories of English drama and Indian performance forms. The former, re-invented and re-appropriated, lends its verbal and lingual weight—shastra—to the dance—natya—of the penetrative dialectical intercourse and fecundity of the Indian other, birthing the strangely uncontrollable forms and colours and sounds—CinemaScope, Technicolour and Stereophonic—of the subcontinent. This is mediated through authenticity by the immediacy of a loan (such as the authentic Indian music and dance and songs of ‘Genesis’) or invention and assimilation through the magic of distorting memory and/or cultural pastiche (the invented music of Asians in a post-modern Britain, brilliantly depicted in ‘Revelations’). Yet, as these weighty lineages cross-fertilize producing progeny that can be as wildly unrecognizable (as in the supposedly ‘Indian’ accents which populated the English language ‘Balti Kings’ or the simulated ‘African’-ness of ‘Genesis’) as sometimes ‘authentic’ (the Indian-ness of ‘Genesis’) or, indeed, twice-authentic (the subcontinental ‘slice of life’ of ‘Tainted Dawn’). The twin lineages corrupt at the nexus of their meeting to produce the hybridised
neo-discourse of British-Asian theatre. ‘The conflictual structures generated are [in]consistently articulated through points of tension and forms of difference’ in theatrical and performance texts which superimpose upon each other to create a marriage—for better or for worse—of hybridity or (to extend Robert Young’s metaphor) post-colonial desire. That this discourse of British-Asian-ness is, in Rushdie’s phrase, ‘translated’ and indeed distorted in the construction and forging of identity cannot be denied: these are the conditions in which it must be constructed and indeed, constructs itself.

The Theatres, the Performances, the Texts

British-Asian theatre comes into being when the generation of the Indian and Indian-East African diaspora, whose fathers have moved to middle-class status in Africa, grows up in England. The 1970s and 1980s saw the talent of individual dramatists as well as theatre groups; the major theatre companies being Tara Arts and then Tamasha, and, more recently, the younger ‘One Nation … innit’! 1977 saw the inception of Tara Arts, which began as a community group staging the literature and drama of the Indian subcontinent. However, the particular lineage of British-Asian theatre is more complex: it encompasses ancient and contemporary India as well as England; the latter mediated through the classical, the modern and the historical. It is the unsettling fusion of the multiple texts of the Natya Shastra and Bollywood, as well as the history of (verbal and non-verbal) western and eastern theatre morphologies, each text valorised individually in the postcolonial British-Asian psyche that is constructed in artistic and aesthetic alterity. Indian classical and fusion-music and song generate a host of cultural meanings that are a code through which to reach the Asian audiences. Yet, British-Asian theatre is not Indian by the standards of the latter’s pressures and needs to adhere to classical Sanskrit practice. Nor is it part of classical English theatre traditions in Britain. British-Asian theatre is constructed through difference. This is a theatre born through ‘acculturation’ as it is ‘modified through intercultural exchange and socialisation’ as it avoids the ‘false representation’ produced by rigidly antithetical and binary categories of ‘authenticity’ which India and England currently seek in their individual and divorced calls for a living theatre.

Critical discourse upon which the transient performance texts are predicated to legitimately enter historical theatrical discourse must pause to take stock of the lineages which result in this difference of British-Asian performing texts. Post-war Labour-England was a time of openness to the working classes on the English stage, even as their texts conformed to middle-class aesthetics and theatrical conventions. Just as class was then an exotic difference, now it is the postcolonial subject whose stages and performances form exotic fare. Critical dramatic discourse often flounders unable to judge this excess of neo-discourse and practice. This excess is a result of a proliferation of fractured texts that are familiar to the English and/or the Indian, but represented in a stage-of-difference; i.e. a stage of transformation-in-process. This becoming is a process of ‘reconstructing the past [which] usually heralds the emergence of new voices and new tools for understanding that past.’ It is not possible to ‘retrieve’ intact texts of a ‘pre-contact period’ living, as the British-Asian does, in difference. This is—at the level of artistic practice—a marriage and birthing of strange
and monstrous morphologies. ‘The past continues to speak [...] but it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual “past”, since our relation to it [...] is always-already “after the break”’.  

Is British-Asian theatre a post-colonial theatre? According to Gilbert and Tompkins (1996), ‘history inevitably manoeuvres a strategic presentation of certain views and a repression of others.’ Western history in the imperial episteme erased Other histories with a violence, valorising western knowledge and, in theatre, western styles, forms, sounds, and gestures. The languages of theatre, both verbal and non-verbal, were western as other theatre languages were suppressed, erased or became subjugated and acquired a negative valence in the face of Imperial morphologies. The representation of other performance texts and the decentring of Imperial texts by appropriation into other performing strategies then become central to postcolonial theatres. The very presence of the Other theatres in Britain necessitates a restructuring of English theatre from within, displacing authoritative versions of ‘English’ theatre and in this case, of importing Indian-ness and inventing an indigenous theatre which throws into relief much of current English theatre which is ‘deadly’ and stultified in practice.

However, the translation into Indian languages, music, songs, gestures, tonal inflexions, dance, and movement destabilises the political position of the English language and English drama in England, thereby decentralising the imperial hegemony underlying English culture. Postcolonial drama fractures temporality and re-historicises, remapping spatial epistemologies and interrogating notions of linearity which are part of the conventions of realism even as it conveys entire audiences—via the theatrical spaces of imagination—into unviolated ‘pre-contact’ spaces, in strategies of deconstruction which implode dominant western theatre practice.

Reciting the classics is one postcolonial strategy that destabilises and relocates authority and authenticity by altering power structures via revisionist performance. This results in what Helen Tiffin calls ‘canonical counter-discourse’ by which she means the localisation and indigenisation of canonical texts in order to divest them of their apparent authoritative status. ‘Rewriting the characters, the narrative, the context and/or the genre [is] a means of interrogating the cultural legacy of imperialism and offers renewed opportunities for performative intervention. [...] Counter-discourse seeks to de-construct significations of authority and power exercised in the canonical text, to release its stranglehold on representation and, by implication, to intervene in social conditioning’. Thus, the power structures in the original text are destabilised and re-allocated.

Tara Arts brought many ancient Indian classics to England. Bhavni Bhavai, the 14th century Gujarati folk play (Asit Thakore) is ancient India melded with western music and performance conventions in a necessary overlap of morphologies as the oedipal tale of a prince-hero brought up by untouchables allegorises racism in the host culture. Hayavadana, Girish Karnad’s post-independence play, indirectly derived from the 8th century Katha-Sarit-Sagar via Die vertauschten Köpfe (Transposed Heads) by Thomas Mann is a trope for the interstitial position of midnight’s children. The derivations are an acknowledgement to the intellectual traditions of Indo-Germanic culture and an acceptance of a post-independence Indian-English hybridity of identity. Tara Arts’ storyteller negotiates the space between the stories of Hayavadana, a progeny of miscegenation and Padmini’s love for the intelligence and poetry of...
Devadutta and the beauty of Kapila in a confusing allegiance to two men, two
texts, and two cultures.

Although Tara Arts began as a company that imported classical Indian theatre
texts in a bid for theatrical authenticity, the company has also proved ace at
displaying and displacing the authority of the classics of Empire as it has recited
western texts making them work for the interstitial diasporic communities
of the Asians in Britain. Jatinder Verma has directed Molière’s Tartuffe,
Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Troilus and Cressida, Rostand’s
Cyrano, and Gogol’s The Government Inspector amongst other western classics.
Verma and his company dismantle the authenticity of Englishness in performing
the canonical classics by the act of simple transposition of the dialogue into rich
regional Asian accents and inflexions. Tone and gesture, voice and stance
dislocate the canon transposing the text into Indian theatrical spaces signified
by the richly colourful Indian sets and costumes, music and dance. Using an
array of meta-theatrical devices, from storytelling to Indian song that often
reflect on the self-consciousness of postcolonial theatre in England, Verma
reworks, re-enacts, revisions and displaces the imperial authority latent within.
Farrukh Dhondy’s Film, Film, Film (1986) was a spirited attempt to fuse a
re-appropriation of King Lear with Bollywood cinema serving well the appetite
of his Asian audiences for classics and kitsch. The Shakespearean narrative is
transposed into the corrupt and fecund-pop machine of Bollywood: source and
sustenance of Indian fantasy, norm and value-system, predicated in Dhondy’s
play on coded satirical asides accessible to the Asian audience in a gleeful
exclusion of the English. The most successful and original example of postcolonial
re-inscription and representation of Shakespeare needs to be mentioned in this
context of strategic subversion, though not Asian: it is Aimé Césaire’s A Tempest
(1985) in which the author makes the textually implicit strategies of colonialism,
domination, resistance and rebellion explicit and overtly articulated in his version.23

Storytelling as a performance strategy challenges stasis and fixity of
performance, as its revisionist improvisational approach and lack of regard for
naturalistic conventions such as the fourth wall are ways of interrogating
received western models. Additionally, storytelling valorises oral cultures that
have been violently superimposed upon and negated by colonial cultures that
considered themselves as repositories of knowledge, power and status because
of carefully documented histories. The storyteller re-visions history and is a tool
that aids and facilitates audience imagination, transporting it into remote areas
of experience and geographies. The active-imaginations engagement with the
oral/verbal challenges the increasingly passive audience-receptivity of a visual
culture/medium/discourse/text. This already theatrical tradition transfers
easily onto the stage and was well utilised in Genesis to distinguish between
African and Indian culture.

The postcolonial stages of Asian Britain are the principal arena for the
destabilising of imperial authority with regard to the English language. Although
the use of English as a language is not necessarily an endorsement of British
authority, ‘choosing [a different language] in which to express one’s dramatic
art is, in itself, a political act’.24 Asian Co-operative Theatre’s trilingual Jawaani
(1988) was a double-bill: Heartgame and Prem explored the tensions of young
Asians as they are regulated to make traditionally arranged marriages with
spouses from the sub-continent who are removed from them by language and
culture. Juxtaposing a young Indian wife with a British-Asian husband reveals
the hybridised cultural position of the latter culture. The clash between western romantic love, which spells freedom and the traditional arranged marriage, is explored using Gujarati, Bengali and English languages. Choosing to perform in Indian languages is ‘a refusal to submit to the dominance of the standard language and to subscribe to the ‘reality’ it sustains.’\textsuperscript{25} The norm is destabilised by the act of incorporating Indian languages, but more dramatically so when English is eschewed completely on ‘English’ stages. As Jatinder Verma (1997) puts it in his comments on Mehtaab, the first company to receive support for non-English work, the Punjabi language 

\textit{Kali Salwar} went ‘beyond the flirtation with Indian languages into another text which would exclude some and include others [thus seeming to fulfil] the same need that Bollywood cinema offers the British Asian’.\textsuperscript{26} Apart from this diasporic need to indulge in splendid nostalgia it points subtly to the need to accept that English is itself a dialect language, variously derived, ‘it can claim no more authenticity than the linguistic forms it helped to spawn’.\textsuperscript{27}

The practice of British-Asian theatre is comparatively nascent: it has been two decades of individuals and groups trying to find a voice. \textit{Autobiographical narration} becomes, at times, a necessary strategy as the voices indulge in a necessary expression in order to find valorisation in cross-cultural identification. Two excellent examples of semi-autobiography marrying theatrical magic are Ayub Khan-Din’s \textit{East is East} which, although set in Salford, cut across race and culture to give the audiences a British cultural universal in the portrayal of a mixed-race couple and their travails. Another is Jatinder Verma and Tara Arts’ millennial trilogy, \textit{Journey to the West}, which speaks of the displacement of the Indian labouring classes to Imperial Kenya and their subsequent social mobility in Africa and then Britain as the last of the series (‘Revelations’) depicts a contemporary young, upwardly mobile generation to whom invention in music, lifestyle, and language is as natural as they create a new England in the heart of old Empire. ‘Genesis’, ‘Exodus’ and ‘Revelations’ are, as titles, an acknowledgement to classical western discourse and an acceptance of links made and ties forged between Western and Asian modalities of thought. In the making, which has involved a thorough research of the Indian-Kenyan-British-Asian diaspora and explored every counter-strategy available, \textit{Journey to the West} is a postcolonial epic. This is an example of a neo-discourse’s indebtedness to a global heritage as inspiration is derived from the ‘Odyssey’, the ‘Ramayana’ and the ‘Mahabharata’, the ‘Hsi-yu Chi Xi You Ji’ and the ‘Bible’—classical epics of the oldest cultures on earth. This is a watershed event in the history of British-Asian culture, as a neo-cultural performing discourse traverses pre-colonial geographies in a search for its classical literatures, displaying a living theatre as it marries the oldest skills of aesthetics in a celebratory epic which negates the several critiques of colonialism and empire as violent practices which suppressed or subjugated native knowledge. Each ancient culture which was part of the British Empire—India, China, Africa—is revealed as having been able to both, sustain and preserve itself and incorporate England as part of its intellectual, aesthetic, and literary practice.

An unusual but equally celebratory strategy used by British-Asian writers and directors deploying racial hybridity is the \textit{use of western ‘slice of life’ to display counter-discursive histories} in a narcissistic marriage of form and content. So Ayub Khan-Din’s \textit{Last Dance at Dum-Dum} tells the tale of the twice-displaced Anglo-Indian community in India—a text of dissonance and alterity—wherein
a slice of life in the history of a group forced into being by a promiscuous Empire’s miscegenation, hybridity and exclusion. A unique and counter-discursive slice-of-life was Tamasha theatre’s *Tainted Dawn*, which was able to dismantle the hierarchy of white domination by ostensibly ignoring the cause and historical context of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. In effect, the history and moment of Partition was rewritten to erase any references or representations of the British in India, thereby giving us a whitewashed/tarred Indian history. However, it performed within a theatrical space that extends into the diasporic audience imagination, and carries the living memory of the violence of displacement. This performance strategy where real lived performance mingles with a collective memory offers the possibility—eventuality even—of the signifiers of performance merging with the signifiers embedded in memory. This conjoining addresses not just the pain and futility of cultural and geographical displacement of populations but also the violence of an Imperial power that surfaces in the performance text only in fragments. For example, the performance has a few lines of Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech of freedom at midnight resounding over speakers and a lighting design that intermittently displays blood-streaked cracks in the very foundations of the set.

The British-Asian theatre voice is often collective, as seen in Tamasha Theatre Company. Run by Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Bhuchar it is not necessarily a forum for feminist work, but provides encouragement to fledgling Asian women writers by staging their work. In this, they can be compared to Kali Theatre Company. Tamasha’s women playwrights, however, are not politicised qua women. Subsumed as their gender is within the matrix of race and ethnicity by the dominant culture, they write of racialised and cultural concerns such as the invention of Balti cuisine and the horror of Partition. Here, feminist concerns are suppressed under the rubric of Asian. Kali Theatre Company, however, concerns itself with uniquely feminist themes exploring domesticity, tradition and cultural hybridity in Britain through the eyes and experience of the Asian diasporic gendered subjects. Their ‘Song for a Sanctuary’ is in the tradition of the best British theatres-of-commitment. It explores the tensions between western liberalism and Indian tradition and the clash of cultural values within which the abused and violated Asian woman can be trapped, as western feminism proves totalizing and monolithic in its complete lack of relevance for women of different (non-western) cultures. This sophisticated engagement with practical and theoretical concerns of gender makes this tiny company (founded by Rukhsana Ahmad and Rita Wolf) a splendid forum for what broadsheet reviewers often dismiss as didactic dramatised sociology. The now defunct British Asian Theatre Company had also attempted to engage with Asian-feminist issues in ‘Anarkali’ (1986). The text negotiated with the monolithic rubric ‘Asian woman’ under which the gendered diasporic subject is subsumed, rendering western feminism impotent as a solution for her problems. This failure to acknowledge or take on board the concerns of women constituted within difference is a failure of what is a central twentieth century movement to engage with the non-western other. Such theatrical performances then, underscore the need for western feminism to restructure knowledge and power to include cultural difference.

Racism and cultural tensions are once again issues that need to be presented on postcolonial stages. Alternative issues seldom form part of British-Asian fare. This conservative diaspora clings solidly to its traditions, norms and mores,
which bind it ever more closely into itself. It offers the displaced and relocated subjects a supportive network and a firm foundation on which to achieve their dreams of an ever-upward social mobility. Often the odd radical will engage with issues such as ‘coming out’, radical feminism, overt racism and so forth. Hanif Kureishi’s film My Beautiful Launderette was adapted in 1990 for the stage and is a solitary instance of an intercultural Asian gay text. The larger companies, although subversive in their variously postcolonial theatres play it increasingly safe, as they are ever mindful of their funding and media response. Tara Arts’ early attempt to fuse reminders of cultural violence into the 8th century classic ‘Miti Ki Gaddi’ was criticised by reviewers as an unnecessary political statement. In contrast to Tara’s early classicism, Tamasha Theatre Company’s inaugural performance (1990) was Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable, a text that brings ‘home’ the roots of apartheid in ancient Indian cultural practice. It is a provocative text as it juxtaposes another’s race and caste-bound exclusionary practices on the stages of modern Britain, which in turn, discriminates against the very cultures from which the practice originates. This is a contemporary reciting of the roots of the conflicting taboos that lead to miscegenation, and carries a negative valence in both cultures.

Harwant Bains’ The Fighting Kite, reflected a savage social organisation actualised in systems of cruelty never practiced in the original Indian practice of caste untouchability or ‘apartheid’. These are scattered attempts to portray ‘the savage socius’ which articulates ‘a terror without precedent [the racist skinheads/The National Front], in comparison with which the ancient system of cruelty, the forms of primitive regimentation and punishment, are nothing’ when juxtaposed against this ‘barbarian [host] socius’. The racism and fascism of The National Front are similarly explored in the Royal Court debut of Karim Alrawi (1986) in A Colder Climate. The problem of white directors directing Asian political texts that stage racial violence is succinctly stated by Lyn Gardner who points out that the playwright seemed not to have had been given sufficient time to refine his writing as the play seemed rushed into premature production. ‘If A Colder Climate is merely a gentle breeze instead of the whipping icy blast it might have been I’m prepared to bet the failure lies less with the playwright than the directors.’ This unconscious or subconscious refusal of a culture to acknowledge and engage with the violence immigrants are exposed to in England was brought to light in 1999 with the dramatisation of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry in The Colour of Justice. The reconstruction of the inquiry, which is based wholly on court transcripts, legitimates the voice of a marginalised social group that has been silenced by dominant groups and within theatrical discourse by being elided. The Colour of Justice put on stage, perhaps for the first time, a chilling acknowledgement that racial prejudice exists at conscious, subconscious and unconscious levels in the collective psyche of the dominant culture(s) and that this needs to be rooted out in order for justice to be meted out to victims of racist violence. The meta-discursive ‘act’ of the Stephen Lawrence ‘docu-drama’ pointed to the need for both, the dominant culture, as well as British theatre itself to take on board the fact that racial prejudice has infiltrated through the practices and institutions of British society. British-Asian theatre’s 1980s attempts seem silenced by the complete absence of this issue in the 1990s. However, it needs to interrogate the still imperial hierarchies and hegemonies that determine Asian lives in Britain, and respond to the everyday experience of racism and exclusion.
Conclusion

Much Asian theatre in Britain is performed for the ‘continuation and regeneration’ of the British Asian communities. It is aware of and incorporates English morphologies and traditions. It is an example of a ‘living’ theatre of British-Other(s) that ought to remain mindful of serving or becoming an institutional state apparatus which has made so much British theatre and Indian theatre (in India) so ‘deadly’. The Shakespeare of the RSC often remains a mask for the dominant ideology used as a tool to promote the ‘authentic’ version of British culture and the English language at home and abroad. Likewise, the cultural imports from India are often the ‘deadly’ remnants of fossilised artistic practice; cultural exports which cater to and exploit the foreign capitalist market. Although subsidy and patronage is a constant need, British-Asian theatres must not be ‘intellectually enslaved to the theatrical establishments [and institutional apparatuses] which support them financially’. They must seek to be challenging, hybrid, oppositional if need be, and constantly subvert dominant paradigms of colonialality as it formulates new stages inscribed with a valorising alterity within which is a celebration of the fusionary encounter of the multiple texts of East and West.

Notes

2 See Robert Young, 1995, p. 3. Young comments that ‘British’ is the name imposed by the English on the non-English’. However, to a British-Asian critic such as Gargi Bhattacharyya, there is ‘no difference’ between them. (Ibid.) In this essay, I use ‘British’ and ‘English’ in apparently similar contexts. I would like to point out that my use of ‘English’ is when the theatre tradition or the language-as-spoken-by-a-native is used as an ideological mask of cultural/imperial dominion, ‘a cunning word of apparent political correctness invoked in order to mask the metonymic extension of English dominance over other[s].’ (Ibid.)
3 Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001, p. 146.
4 Even with Bollywood’s recent shift in taste, it continues to be constructed well within the dominant cultural matrix of Indian norms and practices.
5 cf. Robert Young, 1995, p. 2, who speaks of Englishness as a becoming, ‘a fluidity’ and a ‘need for otherness’. Yet this otherness he speaks of is in terms of a sexual need and desire for a gendered other which is also a racial other, a difference which almost always fulfils the need to define what English is not. Although his portrait of the contemporary London landscape is inclusive, imaginative and multicultural, much as Young would like to establish that the fluidity of Englishness is all embracing it cannot be ignored that Conrad is part of the white (washed?) English canon, but Rushdie will never be English. Englishness, however inclusive it may have been in its formation, has always excluded the racialised black other.
6 By which I mean class, caste, religious community, language/dialect, geography of origin.
8 cf. Michel Foucault, 1980, p. 83.
9 Bhel puri—that sweet spicy salty Bombay invention available at every street corner but mastered only by a few who are able to concoct it with an eye to the aesthetic perfection which brings out its rasa. The secret ingredient is magic as there is no exact recipe.
13 Indian theatre(s) and performance styles are under constant pressure from scholars and critics to maintain the traditional lineage of the original high-language Sanskrit and the classical text of the Natya Shastra, whilst demonstrating a fluidity and innovative change, which is a sign of a living theatre. The 1999 Natyotsav at Centre for Asian Theatre in Dhaka revealed the need for Indian theatre and its practitioners to demonstrate an ‘aliveness’ in a performance culture
continually fossilised at home and abroad by the need of the Central Government apparatus to export ‘Indian arts and culture’ and have it serve as a ‘tourist attraction’. As Rustom Bharucha puts it, ‘the “Orient” can be manufactured in India itself and then transported abroad to validate earlier modes of “Orientalism” which are in the process of being dismantled elsewhere’, in Patrice Pavis, (ed.), *The Intercultural Performance Reader*. London & New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 210. cf. Peter Brook’s (1968) arguments for a holy theatre and his definition of a deadly theatre, to the arguments of Syed Jamil Ahmed, 1999; K.N. Panikkar, 1999; Ataur Rahman, 1999; Nrupendra Saha, 1999; and Kapila Vatsyayan, 1999, for a comparative view of critiques of English theatre and Indian theatre in the context of their individual heritage by scholars and practitioners of each theatre tradition. cf. Richard Eyre, 2000, p. 3, as the ‘deadly’ theatres of two ancient cultures are juxtaposed with the vitality and invention of neo-discursive theatres of today.

16 Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, 1996, p. 110.
18 Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, 1996, p. 108.
19 Apart from British-Asian theatres, Britain’s other theatres range from African and Caribbean theatres of race to the alternative stages of class and gender. For the purposes of this essay, the references to racialised theatres are confined to Asian stages. Though many postcolonial strategies are used by Afro-Caribbean stages, the theorised cultural locus of the British-Asians is markedly different from other British cultures.
20 See Richard Eyre, 2000, p. 3, where he notes that ‘one has to be a very wilful optimist to believe that the dying body of British theatre is going to make a miraculous recovery.’ It is an ‘atrophying’ body of ‘poor work’ and ‘poor audiences’. cf. the arguments at the 1999 ‘Natyotsav’ for the need for Indian theatre to return to elitist classical theatre practice in my note above.
22 Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, 1996, p. 16.
27 Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, 1996, p. 185.
28 Writing in a language ossified and hyperbolically valorised during Empire’s brief moment is difficult enough with every reference to black/dark/night being fraught with an excess of negativity. Cf. the Chinese parallel *gwailo*. (*Gwai* = white ghost + *lo* = male person, or, *po* = female person). In one century of occupation, the Imperial dominating culture had appropriated the pejorative *gwailo* in every European language spoken by those who lived and worked in this island colony and turned it into a self-congratulatory compliment in a counter-discursive revisionist linguistic strategy. It would be interesting to see if the British Black, (a political category which includes anybody who is non-white), could reverse every ‘dark reference’ in the English language.
29 ‘Theatrical space’ refers to the spaces of audience imagination that a living theatre is able to reach. A ‘theatre space’, by reductive contrast is the literal architectural space in which the performance takes place.
31 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1984, pp. 189–192. The Deleuzean ‘savage barbarian socius’ is a typical horizontal reference to imperial texts such as *Heart of Darkness*, mediated chronologically backwards through *The Genealogy of Morals* achieved in a typical transverse axial-link where the savage-dark of the Conrad/Freud text (‘the horror’) mingles subtextually with Nietzschean paranoic madness as it inverses and repeats itself to form the foci of the Deleuze-Guattari punning schizophrenic hyperbolic: ‘the (western) despotic machine’, a most barbarian socius in relation to the original practice. (Greek *huperbolé* = excess/extravagance).
33 Dimple Godiwala, 1999.
34 Dimple Godiwala, 1999.

References

British-Asian Theatres


Correspondence to: Dimple Godiwala, Lecturer in Drama, York St. John College, Lord Mayor’s Walk, York YO31 7EX, UK. E-mail: d.godiwala@yorksj.ac.uk