



Defying Norms/Categories: Understanding Postdramatic Theatre Through Postmodern Times

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Abstract

Postdramatic theatre revisits the theoretical concepts of drama, plot, character, and the body in order to deconstruct the deeper nuances of human identity vis-a-vis theatre and performance, especially in the postmodern times when the ‘absolute’ has lost its meaning. The understanding of post-dramatic theatre entails the analysis of the new theatre aesthetics, especially post-1960s. This paper intends to understand the concept of post-dramatic theatre both as a theory as well as a philosophy that defies any normative way of doing theatre and making performances. The paper aims to argue that post-dramatic theatre does not pose an opposition to the conventional meaning of theatre performance but goes beyond it to broaden the horizon and meaning of theatrical performance keeping in mind the postmodern scenario. After understanding this concept of theatre, the paper also attempts to trace the relevance of postdramatic theatre in the Indian context, especially regarding the representation of crisis. This will be done in the light of how the meaning of postdramatic theatre in the Indian context entails an understanding around the aspects of multiplicity and diversity attached to the Indian theatrical traditions that are open to experiments and creativity beyond conventionality.

Keywords: Crisis, Drama and Performance Studies, Performance, Postdramatic Theatre, Representation.

Introduction

Postdramatic theatre and postmodernism are two related movements in the world of theater and performance. They both emerged in the latter half of the 20th century and have had a significant influence on the way we understand and experience theatrical productions. The prefix of ‘post’ in both postdramatic theatre and postmodern times entail moving beyond the conventional ways of performance as well as questioning the already existing concepts of drama and theatre. Considering that we are living in the postmodern era, the basic premise rests on how in such times, the absolute has lost its meaning. The relationship between postmodernism, postdramatic theatre, and crisis is a complex interplay that reflects the dynamic shifts in cultural, artistic, and socio-political landscapes. Emerging as a response to the certainties and grand narratives of modernism, postmodernism introduced a paradigm shift in the latter half of the 20th century, challenging established norms and embracing fragmentation, diversity, and self-reflexivity. The synergy between postmodernism, postdramatic theatre, and crisis is evident in the shared inclination to question, deconstruct, and reconfigure established systems, offering a platform for artists to experiment with new forms of expression in the face of

profound societal, political, and existential challenges. As both a reflection and a response to the turbulence of our times, postdramatic theatre emerges as a vital artistic mode that embodies the spirit of postmodern inquiry amid moments of crisis. Samuel Beckett's seminal play, *Waiting for Godot* is often considered a precursor to postdramatic theatre. The work's existential themes, fragmented narrative, and repetitive structures challenge traditional theatrical norms. The play reflects the postmodern skepticism toward fixed meanings and grand narratives, presenting a sense of crisis in the human condition.

1. Postdramatic Theatre and Postmodernism

To understand both these entities in relation to each other, first it is important to understand each individually. Postdramatic theatre is a term coined by German theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann in his book *Postdramatic Theatre*. It represents a departure from traditional, text-based, and plot-driven drama. Lehmann introduces the term 'postdramatic theatre' to describe a shift away from the traditional dramatic elements of plot, character, and dialogue. Postdramatic theatre is characterized by a focus on the performative and visual aspects of theatre rather than a structured narrative. Lehmann argues that postdramatic theatre deconstructs and challenges the established conventions of dramatic theatre. The linear narrative, cause-and-effect relationships, and character development are often fragmented or discarded. Postdramatic theatre treats the performance as an event rather than a representation. The experience of the audience is crucial, and the boundaries between the stage and the audience may be blurred. Some key characteristics of postdramatic theatre include non-linear and fragmented narratives, emphasis on the live, embodied performance itself, blurring the boundaries between the stage and the audience, and challenging the conventional separation between performer and spectator. Coming to the tenets of postmodernism, they are challenging the idea of a fixed reality, emphasis on intertextuality in the form of pastiche, parody, and appropriation of existing material, employment of fragmented narratives followed by a rejection of linear storytelling, blending of various styles and traditions, celebration of diversity. Here, it can be seen that both the entities share many characteristics and the major thread that connects them is the thread of defying the normative/the absolute/the singular/the conventional. While postmodern defines the timeline of our contemporary existence, postdramatic theatre is a response to such times that are marked by constant examining as well as questioning of assumed meanings and binary oppositions in language and thought. Postmodernism also challenges the idea of universal truths and values suggesting what is true or valuable is context-dependent and varies across cultures and individuals. It can be implied that postmodern has contributed to a more pluralistic and complex understanding of the world thereby initiating debates about the prevalence of absolute truth, authority, and social cohesion. Amidst all this, postmodernism also voices out the meaning of crisis- what it is, how it functions, and why it is essential to accept a state of crisis.

Keeping in mind these arguments, if we now try to understand the relevance of postdramatic theatre, the first step is to delve into the historiography of what drama was then and what it is now. From Aristotelian times, the dramatic story has a linear sequence, dialogue holds primacy, three unities of time are followed. In the second half of the 20th century, playwrights like Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, Beckett were known for experimenting with both form and content of writing plays and doing theatre. However, during such observations, many questions took form like: why there should be emphasis on word or text, why the dramatist who writes a play is not present on stage, why don't the spectators come on stage. All these contentions paved the way to the coinage of postdramatic theatre. For Lehmann:

[P]ost dramatic theatre . . . most definitely, does not [original emphasis] mean a theatre that exists 'beyond' drama, without any relation to it. It should rather be understood as the unfolding and blossoming of a potential of disintegration, dismantling and

deconstruction within drama itself. (2006, p. 44)

Through this observation, it is evident that postdramatic does not pose an opposition to dramatic. Rather, it can be considered as an extension of the dramatic. It does not entail death of dramatic/pre-dramatic or an opposition between the past and the present of theatre practice but it is an ongoing process of redefining meaning of performances. In a way, postdramatic theatre acts as both a theory and a philosophy of doing theatre. As a theory, it shares its characteristics with postmodernism as both of them advocate incredulity towards metanarratives and as a philosophy, it advocates inclusivity and attention to details. It brings margins to the centre of performance. In the book titled *Myriad Spaces: Indian Theatre and Beyond* edited by Chandradasan (2021), Professor and theatre director Abhilash Pillai discusses the basic aspects of post-dramatic theatre in his essay titled 'Postdramatic Theatre'. He discusses that there are five such aspects: text, space, time, body, and media. He elaborates upon how the meaning of postdramatic theatre lies in the mutual disruption between text and stage whereby both of them have their own individualities. While discussing the nature of text, he goes on to explain how inter-textuality is also an important factor in postdramatic theatre. Such works have a complex internal history wherein the subject of one performance might become a title or character in another work. Such works also involve critical dialogues that tend to challenge traditional notions of performance writing. Then comes the aspect of space for which Pillai explains that in postdramatic space the gap between actor and audience is quite close. The performance space gives primacy to the participation of the audience as well. The concept of fourth wall witnesses a huge shift in this case. Audience also becomes the part of the performance. Time is also an interesting aspect wherein the text gives the reader the freedom to analyse the text at her/his own. However, postdramatic theatre questions such patterns. Rather, in such works, time does not follow any linearity very much like a stream of consciousness. Lastly, the aspect of media can be understood through the intervention of technology and its manifestations like mobile phones and projectors as props unlike traditional ones like lanterns. Moreover, the performative turn with respect to Indian theatre post 1960s has been evolving amidst contemporary cultural forms that defy the traditional norms of performance. Some of the examples are video, immersive, cinematographic and performance installations-oriented theatres.

The meaning of postdramatic theatre in the Indian context entails an understanding around the aspects of multiplicity and diversity attached to the Indian theatrical traditions that are open to experiments and creativity beyond conventionality. On a closer analysis, the modern Indian playwrights are known for their experimental style of theatre wherein the experimentation is done both at the level of form as well as content. Safdar Hashmi's 'Street Theatre', Girish Karnad's 'Hybrid Theatre', Badal Sircar's 'Third Theatre', Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre are all known for their unique style of theatre that goes beyond the conventions of the *Natyashastra* or Aristotelian meaning of dramatic action. Hashmi co-founded the street theatre group Jana Natya Manch (Janam) in 1973, along with his wife, Moloyashree Hashmi, and a group of like-minded individuals. Janam became one of the most influential and politically engaged theatre groups in India, using the streets as their stage to reach a wider audience. Street theatre, as advocated by Safdar Hashmi and Janam, aimed to take theatre to the masses, making it accessible to people from all walks of life. It often involved performances in public spaces, such as parks, streets, and marketplaces. This form of theatre was not confined to traditional auditoriums but instead sought to engage with the public directly, addressing social issues and political concerns. Badal Sircar's Third Theatre had a significant impact on the Indian theatre scene, influencing subsequent generations of playwrights and directors. The movement reflected a commitment to social and political activism through the medium of theatre and challenged conventional notions of theatrical production. It was a response to the conventional practices of commercial and professional theatre. This concept emerged during

the 1970s as a part of Sircar's efforts to create a more socially relevant and politically engaged form of theatre. Habib Tanveer's *Naya Theatre* was known for its emphasis on incorporating folk traditions and rural art forms into its productions. Tanvir drew inspiration from the folk traditions of Chhattisgarh, particularly the Nacha folk theatre, and integrated these elements into his plays. Naya Theatre's productions focused on socially relevant themes, often addressing issues related to rural life, social injustice, and the struggles of marginalized communities. Tanvir aimed to create theatre that resonated with the realities of the common people. Some of the notable plays produced by Naya Theatre under Habib Tanvir's direction include *Charandas Chor* and *Agra Bazar*. These plays showcased Tanvir's ability to merge traditional elements with modern themes.

Indian playwright Mohan Rakesh's works can also be read in the light of postdramatic theatre. Ashish Sengupta (2022), in his book titled *Postdramatic Theatre and India* discusses how Rakesh's (and Ratan Thiyam's) works comprise an essence of 'post' along with being dramatic pieces. He opines that Rakesh's characters were unconventional, deliberately lacking clear contours. Unlike the predictable personas found in traditional plays, his characters were intricate and multifaceted, defying easy categorization. This deliberate ambiguity mirrored the complexities of the modern world he sought to portray. A distinguishing feature of Rakesh's work was his steadfast rejection of realism and naturalism. In a time dominated by conventional representations of life, he opted for a more symbolic and stylized approach. Rakesh's plays embraced a subjective and impressionistic portrayal of the world, challenging the notion of a stable and fixed reality. Ashish Sengupta, in his work titled *Postdramatic Theatre and India: Theatre-making since the 1990s*, opines, "What is found in the theatres of Thiyam and Rakesh – predominance of scenography, devising, undermining of textuality, narrative fragmentation, disintegration of character and experiment with sound." (2022, p. 33)

Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* also diverges from the proscenium setting and partially deviates from the plot and makes use of noise by mixing speech and song. His *Charandas Chor* adheres to *Nach* performance tradition to showcase Rajasthani culture. Some of the other examples have been listed by Ashish Sengupta (2002) such as:

The theatre solos of Maya Krishna Rao (*A Deeper Fried Jam* and *Ravanama*); the documentary-type reality theatre of Anuradha Kapur and Ein Lall (*The Antigone Project*) and of Amitesh Grover (*Notes on Mourning*); Abhilash Pillai's theatre as media reportage (*The Island of Blood*); his cinematic theatre (*Midnight's Children*); Deepan Sivaraman's scenographic theatre (*Peer Gynt* and *The Legend of Khasak*), Grover's theatre-as-event (*Downtime*), the performance installations of Zuleikha Chaudhari (*The Transparent Performer I, II and III*) and Anamika Haksar (*Composition on Water*). (Sengupta, 2022, p. 34)

2. Postdramatic Theatre in India

Coming to the representation of crisis in the Indian theatre, it is a recurring theme in the plays of Indian playwrights at the levels of social, cultural, and political issues. When it comes to social and political crisis, playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar have depicted issues such as corruption, inequality, communalism, and political unrest. One such example is Tendulkar's play *Ghashiram Kotwal* that highlights the abuse of power. *Ghashiram Kotwal* has been adapted into various forms, including films and musicals, and it continues to be studied and performed in the Indian theatre landscape. The play's exploration of power dynamics, corruption, and social injustice resonates not only with its historical context but also with broader themes that remain relevant in different societal and political settings. In terms of domestic crises, playwrights like Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani have explored themes of

family crisis and societal pressure on individuals. Examples are Karnad's *Hayavadana* and Dattani's *Tara* that delve into complex crisis at multiple levels. The central theme of *Hayavadana* revolves around the idea of completeness and incompleteness. The characters grapple with their own perceived deficiencies and seek to attain a sense of wholeness, leading to unexpected consequences. Identity crisis and existential crisis are yet another recurring theme in Indian drama, especially in the plays of Rabindranath Tagore and Badal Sircar. Tagore's *Chandalika* and Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* as well as *Pagla Ghoda* are relevant examples that reflect upon the uncertainties/dilemma of human existence. Both plays explore existential themes, questioning the nature of existence and the search for meaning in a complex and changing world. While *Evam Indrajit* uses non-linear narrative and focuses on the inner thoughts of characters, *Pagla Ghoda* employs absurdist techniques, surrealism, and symbolism to convey its themes. Both plays are set in an urban context, reflecting the changing social and cultural landscape of post-independence India. Female playwrights like Manjula Padmanabhan highlights the gendered crisis that women have to undergo in patriarchy-driven society. Recently, ecological crisis has gained centrality and playwrights like Swar Thounaojam is known for raising environmental issues and how climate changes are affecting the humans. Her plays include *Turel*, *Fake Palindromes*, *Lucky Lobster*, and *Bogey Systems*.

3. Relationship between Postdramatic Theatre, Postmodernism, and Crisis

Postdramatic theatre in postmodern times represents a paradigm shift in the way theatrical performances are being analysed. This postmodern approach goes beyond the traditional narrative structures and blurs the boundaries between theater, art, and reality. Postdramatic theatre, thus, celebrates the experiential aspects of performances as it gives primacy to the visual and spatial elements over conventional storytelling. It offers an active role to the audience by breaking down the fourth wall. As a philosophy, postdramatic theatre stands as an important artistic response that advocates embracing multiplicity/uncertainty by giving space to diverse perspectives. There is an attempt to redefine the understanding of theater and critically analyse its transformative potential in the ever-evolving landscape of postmodern times. Regarding the representation of crisis in postdramatic theatre in postmodern times, instead of representing reality in a straightforward, cause-and-effect manner, postdramatic theatre adheres to abstraction, symbolism, and non-linear storytelling to convey the disorienting and fragmented nature of crisis experiences. The intersection of these concepts often leads to innovative and challenging theatrical experiences. Postdramatic theatre allows for greater artistic experimentation, enabling theatre practitioners to explore a wide range of forms, styles, and techniques. It encourages the use of multimedia, technology, and non-traditional performance elements, expanding the palette of creative possibilities. Moreover, postdramatic theatre frequently incorporates elements from various art forms, such as dance, visual arts, music, and technology, fostering a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to performance. As it is adaptable to different cultural contexts and can respond to diverse social and political issues, making it a flexible and relevant form of expression.

The adaptability of postdramatic theatre to different cultural contexts and its capacity to respond to diverse social and political issues underscore its flexibility and relevance as a dynamic form of expression. Unlike more traditional and culturally specific theatrical forms, postdramatic theatre transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries, allowing for a universal resonance that can be customized to address local, regional, or global concerns. In an era of increased global connectivity, postdramatic theatre's adaptability aligns with the interconnectedness of contemporary societies. It enables artists to create performances that speak to shared human experiences, while acknowledging the unique challenges and perspectives of different cultures. While postdramatic theatre possesses a global appeal, its

adaptability also lies in its capacity to engage with and incorporate local narratives. Artists can draw inspiration from indigenous stories, historical events, or cultural traditions, weaving these elements into the fabric of the performance. This engagement with local narratives fosters a sense of authenticity and resonance within specific communities.

Thus, postdramatic theatre in postmodern times offers a platform for artists to experiment with new forms of expression and representation- a phenomenon that forms one of the most important aspects of contemporary Drama and Performance Studies. Postdramatic theatre, crisis, and postmodernism are conceptually interlinked. The rejection of traditional forms and the embrace of a more fluid, experiential, and visually oriented theatrical language in postdramatic theatre can be seen as a response to the postmodernist critique of grand narratives. Additionally, the form's adaptability makes it a particularly relevant mode of expression during times of crisis when conventional structures may be called into question. The relationships among these elements underscore the dynamic and responsive nature of contemporary theatre. Postdramatic theatre can be seen as both a product of the postmodernist ethos and a response to the crises and uncertainties of the contemporary world. In postdramatic theatre, the traditional authority of the playwright and linear narrative is challenged, and power dynamics within the performance space become more fluid. The rejection of traditional dramatic structures aligns with postmodern skepticism towards metanarratives, and the emphasis on immersive experiences resonates with the desire to confront and navigate crises directly.

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