THE CHANGING PARADIGMS OF REFORM: A STUDY OF THREE PLAYWRIGHTS FROM POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN THEATRE (1950 – 1990)

Ph.D. Thesis

By

MANIVENDRA KUMAR

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY INDORE

JULY 2025

THE CHANGING PARADIGMS OF REFORM: A STUDY OF THREE PLAYWRIGHTS FROM POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN THEATRE (1950 – 1990)

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

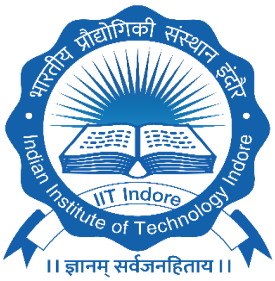
requirements for the award of the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

MANIVENDRA KUMAR



SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

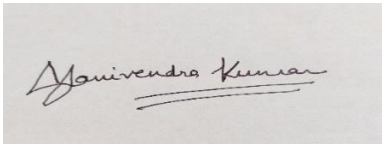
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY INDORE

JULY 2025

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY INDORE

I hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **THE CHANGING PARADIGMS OF REFORM: A STUDY OF THREE PLAYWRIGHTS FROM POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN THEATRE (1950 – 1990)** in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY** and submitted in the **SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, Indian Institute of Technology Indore**, is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the time period from January 2020 to February 2025 under the supervision of Dr. Ananya Ghoshal.

The matter presented in this thesis has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree of this or any other institute.

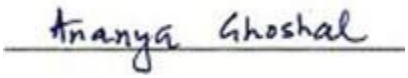


July 7, 2025

Signature of the student with date

MANIVENDRA KUMAR

This is to certify that the above statement made by the candidate is correct to the best of my/our knowledge.

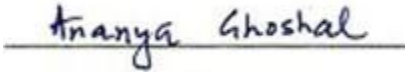


July 7, 2025

Signature of Thesis Supervisor with date

DR. ANANYA GHOSHAL

MANIVENDRA KUMAR has successfully given his/~~her~~ Ph.D. Oral Examination held on **the 4th of July, 2025**.



July 7, 2025

Signature of Thesis Supervisor with date

DR. ANANYA GHOSHAL

Dedicated to the *Gods,* I have seen:

– *My Teachers and My Parents.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledging so many contributions that have helped shape me and my thesis in a few paragraphs appears challenging. To begin with, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Ananya Ghoshal, without whom this project simply wouldn't exist. Words will never do justice to express my gratitude for her guidance, support, and care. Although I come from a background that contrasts sharply with the typical paths of scholars and researchers, I am grateful to her for believing in me.

I am also sincerely grateful to my PSPC members, Professor Nirmala Menon and Dr. Shomik Dasgupta. Professor Menon's classes on literary theory have helped me gain new perspectives.

I can comfortably confess that I have not met someone as profoundly knowledgeable as Dr. Dasgupta, who taught me the value of exploring the context. His feedback and kind support throughout these five years are some of the reasons for the evolution of my ideas into a thesis for which I shall always be indebted.

My evolution as a researcher has much to do with some of the sharpest minds I have ever come across. Dr. Lawrence Switzky and Dr. David Kornhaber are the foremost on that list. I am sincerely thankful for their excellent feedback and questions on my article, which helped sharpen my research skills.

I had the opportunity to gain critical insights about Habib Tanvir and his theatre first-hand, for which I am sincerely grateful to his daughter, Nageen Tanvir. Interviewing her was an honour, and her kind words of encouragement will keep pushing me to explore further.

I am grateful to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and its faculty members for their steady encouragement. I am also sincerely thankful to Ms. Kalpana, Mr. Amit, and Mr. Atul from the School office for their kind assistance with official and academic procedures.

I thank the UGC for providing financial support to this project through the JRF Scholarship. I also convey my gratitude to the Institute's Academic and Finance Office staff for their consistent, hassle-free processing of my documents and their kind words.

During the course of my PhD journey, I was bestowed the opportunity to explore the research environment outside India. I was immensely thankful when I received the email from Charles Wallace India Trust confirming the Trust's short-term fellowship for conducting research in the UK.

I cannot thank enough the British Library Staff and the curators, especially Mr. John O'Brien; the Goldsmiths University special collections staff Hannah Stageman and Althea Greenan; the University of Bristol Theatre Collections staff Jill Sullivan and Beth Richards; and the National University of Scotland Special Collections staff Mr. Peter Findlay, for their generous efforts in finding resources for my research.

My visit would not have been as enjoyable without friends who never let me feel alone. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. Samiparna Samanta and Dr. Chandra Sekhar for their guidance and companionship at the British Library, even though they met me for the first time. I sincerely thank Mr. Akpor Eghweree and Mr. Denzo for their camaraderie in Bristol. I am also grateful to Ms. Kim Sujin for her company and her help in locating the various repositories in London.

The stress accompanying a PhD journey could not have been mitigated without my friends and colleagues at IIT Indore. I am genuinely grateful to Aditya Sundwa, Meghna Gangadharan, Kaviarasu P, Mahima Singh, Harish Sahu, Shyam Sundar Pal, Ramesh Mahtha, Bittu Mandal, and my other lab mates for all the good memories that I will hold on to for my life. I am also thankful to my teammates from the Cricket Club, who helped me keep the team spirit alive and the never-say-die attitude.

I can't thank my siblings, Manasi and Manavendra, enough for taking care of me like I was their younger sibling and being the pillars

of support I could rely on for anything, ranging from delicious food to vibrant conversations. I also thank my cousins, Vishal, Prashant, Sakshi, Pragya, Anurag, Anshuman, and Aditya, who made this journey less stressful and much endearing.

I believe I wouldn't have made it here if I did not have the support of my fiancée, Shweta. I cannot express enough my gratitude for her love, patience, and unconditional support through all the ebbs and flows during the last ten years. Thank you.

Finally, how do I convey my gratitude to my parents in a few words, who have been there at every step of my life and would always put my needs before theirs? My father has always been my inspiration, and my mother is the real superhero. This thesis is dedicated to them.

SYNOPSIS

Changing Paradigms of Reform: A Study of Three Playwrights from Post-independence Indian Theatre (1950 – 1990)

Introduction

This thesis reappraises the works of three post-independence Indian playwrights viz., Mohan Rakesh (1925–72), Habib Tanvir (1923–2009), and Mahesh Dattani (1958–) and through their works, examines the significant transitions in the functions of Indian reformist theatre after the independence. It contextualises and studies the impact of these transitions on the playwrights to argue that their plays serve as "liminal" (Thomassen 1) avenues bridging different streams of their respective theatrical traditions. They also problematize the conceptualizations of reform and, in turn, bridge the methodological gaps between the concepts of 'drama' and 'performance' (Schechner 8) in their respective traditions of theatre.

The reformist paradigms in modern Indian theatre can be delineated in terms of the subject and agendas in the plays, and the playwrights' approach to their contemporary theatrical and social fabric. The problematization of this paradigmatic structure results from the playwrights' departure from their respective traditions, often to initiate a new stream, which, in turn, makes them agents of change within their theatrical traditions and society. The thesis explores these unique (dis-) continuities created by the three selected playwrights and reports their dramaturgy to be liminal experiments that have redefined the traditions of modern Indian theatre. An outline of the reformist paradigms of modern Indian theatre shall help to precisely point to their liminal stature.

A brief account of the trajectory of reformist agendas presents a lucid picture of the transitions in the reformist paradigms of modern Indian theatre, which can be divided into two major "streams" (Dalmia

119), distinguished by the historical event of Indian independence. The pre-independence dramatists took inspiration from a plethora of sources, arguably the most prominent of which was the contemporary reformist writing by leaders and social reformers. The playwrights of the early modern theatrical traditions of Bengal, including Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813–1885) and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873) in their plays such as *The Persecuted* (1831) and *Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata* (Is This Called Civilization? 1865) critiqued the oppressive, orthodox social norms. Another primary agenda of these writings was to awaken the nationalist consciousness, which was also reflected in the dramatic literature of the time. As Amiya Sen points out, "[i]n nineteenth-century India, […] 'reform' was not just about altering beliefs or practices, but invariably touched upon deeper questions of self-identity" (3). Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan* (Indigo Mirror, 1860) is considered the epitome of this call to the nationalist identity. It provoked the colonial government into invoking the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876 to curtail such performances that the government deemed libellous. Due to the Act, the emphatic calls to nationalist sentiments gradually transitioned into allegorical representations of colonial oppression in the late nineteenth century. Playwrights such as Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850–1885) had to leave the method of direct affront through his plays such as *Bharat Durdasha* (*The Plight of India*, 1875) and represent the contemporary socio-political situation through allegorical narratives such as *Nildevi* and *Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja* (*Doomed Kingdom Confused King*), both written in 1881.

Harishchandra's allegorical nationalist method was continued by the renowned Chhayavadi (romantic) poet and playwright Jaishankar Prasad (1889–1937) in his plays *Skandagupt*a (1928) and *Dhruvaswamini* (1933). Prasad and his peers, including Harekrishna Premi (1907–74), known as the "neo-Sanskritic" school (Dimitrova, Gender 31) used Indian antiquity to present contemporary socio-political scenarios. Prasad chose to write in heavily Sanskritised Hindi

and believed it was "[…] a major error to consider that drama should be written for a stage" (Dalmia 93).

The "post-independence" (Dharwadker xv) playwrights, however, did not have an oppressive foreign power to target, and they turned their gaze towards society and the psychological complexity of its individuals. They wrote in the wake of "Ibsenite-realism" (Dharwadker 272), which began to influence the dramatic traditions during the first half of the twentieth century. This transition after Prasad was ushered in by the realist school of Upendranath Ashk (1912–1957) and Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Shrivastava (1910–1996) who, inspired by Western realism and with a "[…] desire for social reform" (Dalmia 119), presented the audience with radical solutions to orthodox social norms; especially issues permeating the lives of women.

Arguably, the realist school of Indian theatre reached its zenith in the hands of Mohan Rakesh, who, in his quest to "recapture" and not fabricate the contours of "surrounding reality" (Self-Portrait 12), created an ultra-realistic approach to dramatic writing. He was followed by the Marathi playwrights, especially Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008) and Mahesh Elkunchwar (1939–), who, according to Aparna Dharwadker, "[…] work[ed] predominantly in the realist mode and posesse[d] a social imagination that expresse[d] itself primarily through the psychodrama of family relationships" (269).

The realist school of playwrights was succeeded by the "theatre of roots" (Awasthi 48). At its peak during the 1960s and 1970s, it evolved "as a result of modern Indian theatre's encounter with tradition" (48) and intended to bring elements of indigenous folk theatre into urban arenas. The term tradition was used by Suresh Awasthi to refer to the gauntlet of folk theatre and performing arts such as Nacha, Nautanki, Kuttiyattam, Bhavai, and Tamasha. Pioneered by Habib Tanvir, the movement included stalwarts such as B.V. Karanth (1929–2002) and Ratan Thiyam (1948–). While most of the playwrights harnessed the folk elements only to complement their urban stories, Tanvir worked out

a method to harness both the rural and urban paradigms of theatre equally. Tanvir's dramatic corpus also represents a significant transition in the fundamental paradigms of reformist playwriting that emphasized the issues of the plebeian population.

The roots movement was followed by another significant stream of modern Indian theatre – Indian drama in English, which was the most recent to evolve as a performative tradition. The emergence of playwrights, such as Manjula Padmanabhan, Uma Parameswaran, Dina Mehta, and Mahesh Dattani, played a pivotal role in the transition of Indian English drama as we understand it today. Especially Dattani's initiation into theatre as a playwright-director with Little Theatre Group and later with his own theatre company, Playpen (established in 1988), led to the production of plays *Dance Like a Man* (1989) and Final *Solutions* (1993) that were meant for the stage and, in turn, led the tradition of Indian English Drama into its contemporary form.

Research Objectives

This brief overview of Indian theatre traditions provides us with substantial evidence about the boundaries between them, the schools within them, and the departures envisioned by their playwrights from their respective traditions. The trajectory of the reformist agendas of playwrights in modern Indian theatre leads us to a few pertinent questions. How did the agendas of reform in the post-independence Indian theatre differ from those of the pre-independence era? What did 'reform' mean for these playwrights, and how did the theatrical traditions after independence problematize the conceptualizations of the term? What were the points of departure for these three playwrights in their works, and which new ideas did they offer to their audiences and readers? What transitions did their experiments ultimately lead to? Can they be termed liminal reformists, given that they have diverged from their traditional practices? Can the liminality in their works be applied to their realistic methods? What does it yield? Why have they been grouped together? And most significantly, what has been their influence on the present theatrical landscape in India?

Literature Review

The answers to the questions above can be sought through the extant scholarship on Indian theatre that falls into one of these three categories: 1) general historiography of the various theatrical traditions ranging from Sanskrit theatre to folk theatrical traditions, 2) the different streams and traditions and the politics of modern Indian theatre, and 3) the influences and ideological leanings of the major exponents of post-independence Indian theatre as described by Diana Dimitrova and Nandi Bhatia. The major works that help in tracing the history of reformist Indian drama include Richmond, Swann, and Zarilli's *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* ([1990] 2007), Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader* (2009), and Ananda Lal's *Indian Drama: The Beginnings* (2019). The various streams of post-independence Indian theatre are described in key works, such as Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (2008). The ideological influences of the playwrights during the pre-and post-independence periods are comprehensively described in Bhatia's *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (2004), Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2005), and Diana Dimitrova's *Gender, Religion, and Modern Hindi Drama* (2008). These works emphasize the diverse literary movements that impacted these playwrights and established the groundwork for their reformist agendas.

The primary corpus of this study encompasses the celebrated works of the three playwrights, beginning with Mohan Rakesh's *Asadh Ka Ek Din, Lahron Ke Rajhans*, and *Adhe Adhure*. Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* exemplifies his reformist credentials. Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* is regarded as one of his most powerful works, addressing the enduring conflict between conservatism and modernity. To contextualize, the study relies on works such as Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence* and her introduction to the translation of *Asadh*, viz., *One Day in the Season of Rain* (2015). Vasudha Dalmia's

Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre (2008) is another extensive study that extends to Habib Tanvir and his folk-urban model of theatre and culminates with a study of the women directors of the 1980s. Similarly significant in this regard are Diana Dimitrova's *Gender* and *Hinduism and Hindi Theatre* (2016), which includes essays focused on Rakesh's socio-literary context. Other focused studies include essays such as Renu Juneja's *Women in the Plays of Mohan Rakesh* (1984) and Cecilia Cossio's *Contradictions of the Feminine in the Writings of Mohan Rakesh* (1993). Similarly, works delineating Habib Tanvir's context include Anjum Katyal's translation of *Charandas Chor* (2004), her book *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre* (2012), and her subsequent edited collection *Charandas Chor* and *Other Plays* (2019). She retraces Tanvir's trajectory as a dramatist and director. Javed Malick, in his *Diverse Pursuits: Essays on Drama and Theatre* (2021), establishes Habib Tanvir as the playwright responsible for “refashioning” (132) theatrical modernity in India. Tanvir's own contribution in this regard is significant and is found in the form of interviews, such as My Milestones in Theatre with Katyal, and his scholarly inquiries into his style of theatre, such as in his essay *'It Must Flow' A Life in Theatre*.

Works that analyze Mahesh Dattani's plays as part of the legion of avant-garde drama include Aparna Dharwadker's Theatres of Independence (2005), Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri's Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction (2005), and Kaustav Chakraborty's edited collection of essays *Indian Drama in English* (2011). Chaudhuri's book is among the most comprehensive thematic analyses of Dattani's plays. Her analysis proceeds from the disintegrating familial structures – a leitmotif in Dattani's plays to the invisible issues of the urban middle class and then to his stagecraft. Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence* credits Dattani as one of the most successful playwrights in English after the independence and foregrounds that his plays are "perhaps the first to challenge effectively the assumption that Indian drama written in

English represents a disjunction between language and sensibility […]" (83).

Curiously, all these categories of scholarship on post-independence Indian drama point to a dearth of scholarly attention toward unravelling the transitions in the functions of reformist drama in India. These works represent a substantial body of research demonstrating that reformist theatre in India encompassed more than just societal issues or the shift in playwrights' focus from political themes to social topics and ultimately to interpersonal and internal conflicts. Instead, it also involved the reformist playwrights' departure from their predecessors in pursuit of a new tradition, which they aimed to reform in the process. The core idea, thus, is to test Indian realism (in theatre) for creating transitional passages at the level of events, characters, and dramatic conflicts. The present study addresses the challenge of bringing together such reformist playwrights and studying their points of departure to change the foundational paradigms of reform in modern Indian theatre.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical framework for this study comprises a multifaceted approach that helps us put into perspective both the technical (theatrical) and the social functions of these plays. Broadly, the study focuses on analyzing these works through close readings and by examining the performances available (whether live on stage or their recordings). Richard Schechner's *Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance* (1973) and *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985) have been applied in analyzing the key elements of performance, including stage construction and direction. These seminal works by Schechner offer a critical perspective for evaluating the plays' alignment with performance in relation to the existing tradition.

Another set of works pivotal to understanding the playwrights as liminal reformists is Bjørn Thomassen's *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2014) and Victor Turner's *Frame, Flow,*

and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality (1979) and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969). Specifically, Van Gennep's book helps to study the "rites of passage" (15) as a crucial concept that highlights the liminal phase these playwrights developed to establish a new trajectory within their respective traditions.

Liminality is ingrained in the contours of the contexts of the playwrights and their plays, and the study unearths these layers that conceal liminal spaces. Through a cross-sectional application of liminality, the thesis examines the individual, social, spatial, and temporal liminal spaces within the plays through which the playwrights portray dramatic conflicts. The cross-section here is the gamut of the context and the texts of the playwrights. Van Gennep's tripartite structure of "rites of separation, rites of transition, and rites of incorporation" (*The Rites of Passage*, 11), interpreted from their anthropological implications and collated by Thomassen, is applied to Rakesh, Tanvir, and Dattani's works. Scholars such as Kristen Mcquinn, in her essay *Not at Home: Liminal Space and Personal Identity in The Hobbit and Coraline* (2020), provide the framework for studying the evolution of the characters and their identities through liminality. The framework yields the playwrights' use of liminal spaces and times to present the conflicts emerging from the complex, realistic characters to reveal contemporary social issues. The method also establishes the argument of their problematization of reform through their plays and characters that do not fit into straight-jacketed labels of reformist theatre.

Structure of the Thesis

Introduction

The thesis is structured into four chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The introduction provides the contextual background as outlined in the first section of this document. It informs the readers of the objective, which is to study the transitions in the agendas of reform in the post-independence traditions of Indian theatre

through the works of the three representative playwrights. It then establishes the central argument that these playwrights are grouped together by virtue of the dual reformism of their respective traditions as well as of contemporary society. It concludes by arguing that these playwrights are liminal reformers, and their plays – liminal avenues – that marked the most significant transitions in the trajectory of reformist playwriting in India.

Chapter 1: The Curious Case of Theatre Criticism: The Trajectory of Scholarship on Modern Indian Theatre

The first chapter begins by establishing the significance of this study by pointing to the dearth of detailed studies on post-independence Indian theatre. It also serves to create a brief context for these playwrights. It then revisits these trajectories within their contexts and highlights existing gaps in research. The significance of this chapter arises due to the intertwined nature of extant scholarship on post-independence Indian theatre. The chapter points to the complexity of these streams of theatre that the three playwrights experiment with to lead it in a novel direction. It concludes by accentuating the significance of this study, which aims to bridge the void between focused thematic studies and the general studies of these playwrights.

Chapter 2: The Complexity of Reality: A Study of Mohan Rakesh

The second chapter, divided into two parts, begins by introducing Mohan Rakesh and contextualizes him within the diverse traditions of Hindi drama. It also brings into context the school of realist Marathi playwrights, such as Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar, and studies the liminal stature of Rakesh as a realist playwright who uses both fictionalised history and urban reality to create a point of departure from the other schools. His position as the pioneer of the Nayi Kahani (new story) movement further enhances this contextualisation. The second part studies his social reformism. It argues that Rakesh's reformism emerges from his method of “no exit” (Nigam 67), viz., not providing any solution to the conflicts faced by his characters. This

section investigates the origin of the presented dilemmas and reports that they arise from the liminal void in which Rakesh's characters frequently find themselves trapped. It also points to his method of anachronizing his characters, who, by their names, are revered as divine figures but, in the play, are endowed with complexity and individuation (see Dalmia 117–118). The characters thus become liminal entities between the mundane and the divine. It then examines his dramatic conflicts, which often arise from the space between the extremes of worthlessness and ambition, domesticity and spirituality, individuality and familial bonds, creating a liminal void where characters such as Kalidasa, Nand, and Savitri are found ensnared. The chapter concludes by reiterating that Rakesh's distinct position as a reformist playwright is a function of his experiments that create a transitional space and initiate a novel stream of Hindi theatre.

Chapter 3: Reforming the Roots: Habib Tanvir

The third chapter examines Habib Tanvir's theatre as a novel stream, emerging from a liminal space between the urban-rural divide in theatrical practice. It begins by contextualising the diverse approaches to the term folk and its utilisation by (inherently) urban playwrights. Through the works of scholars, such as Brahma Prakash, who have pointed to the appropriation and mutation of folk at the hands of urban forces of theatre, it argues for Javed Malick’s assertion that Tanvir is also an urban-trained individual but does not appropriate folk. Tanvir's association with Chhattisgarhi *Nacha* and his academic and theatrical background developed in cities such as Delhi, London, and Bristol, contrasting with each other, creates a unique space for him at the thresholds of urban and folk theatre. The study reports that Tanvir integrates the rural methods of composition with urban methods of presentation, which constitutes the source of his theatrical reformism. It includes his innovative technique of stitching together several short, impromptu performances based on the stories from a vast corpus of folklore. The second part of this chapter analyses Tanvir's social reformism, which emerges from his long association with the left-centric

theatrical agendas of the Indian People's Theatre Association (est. 1942-43). The study yields that Tanvir's plays present a "carnivalesque" (Bakhtin 10) reversal of social hierarchies. In his plays, such as *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor*, Tanvir challenges the marginalisation of plebian issues in post-independence Indian theatre. The chapter concludes by establishing Tanvir's position as a liminal reformer and his innovative approach to social reform through a reversal of hierarchies.

Chapter 4: Mahesh Dattani and Indian Drama in English: A Study of the Evolution of a Performative Theatrical Tradition

The third chapter studies Mahesh Dattani and begins by contextualizing, through the works of early critics such as M.K. Naik, the late evolution of Indian English drama as a performative tradition. The first part contrasts earlier traditions of Indian English drama with the later generation of playwrights such as Uma Parameswaran, Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, and Dattani. Further, it establishes Dattani as a reformer of Indian English drama and emphasises his role in initiating a transition within what was otherwise a literary stream of theatre. It reports that Dattani's association with theatre groups (Little Theatre and Playpen) created his point of departure from the preceding generations of playwrights. The second part explores Dattani as a reformer of urban socio-cultural thought. Through close readings of his plays, such as *Where There is a Will, Dance Like a Man,* and *Final Solutions* and by studying their available performances, it reports that Dattani's reformist agendas are similar to those of Rakesh and Tanvir and include the non-resolution of the conflicts presented. His characters are caught between the rules of two different time periods, between life and death, and between the complex spaces of conservatism and progressivism, which results in conflicts. The chapter reports that Dattani challenges urban society's complacency and their latent allegiance to conservatism. The chapter concludes by reiterating Dattani's revamping of the paradigms of Indian English drama and his appeals for social reform to the (semi-)urban populace.

Conclusion

The study concludes with a concise summary of the project, emphasizing the significant contributions these playwrights have made to Indian theatre. It reiterates that when seen through the theoretical framework of liminality, the trajectory of Indian reformist theatre points to exact liminal phases that have shaped modern Indian theatre in its present form. It summates the contribution of these playwrights through their dramaturgical experiments and establishes them as the catalysts for the significant overhaul of modern Indian theatre in its approach to stage and performance. It concludes by suggesting that including detailed studies of playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi), Girish Karnad (Kannada), Badal Sircar (Bangla), and Safdar Hashmi (political/street theatre) in a similar strain would open further nodes of investigation into the liminal era of modern Indian theatre.

References

Banerjee, Utpal K., and Mahesh Dattani. (2004) *Utpal K Banerjee in conversation with Mahesh Dattani*. Indian Literature, 48(5(223)), 161–67. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346512

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, New York: The Macmillan Company. 1913.

Biswas, Siddartha. *Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

Bhatia, Nandi. *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press. 2005.

Coser, Lewis A. *Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change*. The British Journal of Sociology, volume 8, no. 3, 1957, Pp. 197–207. https://doi.org/10.2307/586859.

Dattani, Mahesh. *Final Solutions*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books. 2005.

– *Collected Plays*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books. 2016.

Dalmia, Vasudha. *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Indian Theatre.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2006.

Devy, G N. Introduction to *The Outcaste* by Sharankumar Limbale, trans. from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2003.

Dewey, John. *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology.* New York: The Modern Library. 1922.

Dharwadker, Aparna. *The Critique of Western Modernity in Post-Independence India* in *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader* by Nandi Bhatia. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, Pp. 42–56.

Dimitrova, Diana. *Gender, Religion, and Modern Hindi Drama*. London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008.

Lal, Ananda. *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings*. Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press. 2019.

Nigam, R.L. '*Mohan Rakesh: A Study'* in *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors* edited by Paul Jacob. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi Publication, 1989, Pp. 65-70

Roadarmel, Gordon C. *Modern Hindi Short Stories*. University of California Press, 1974.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Adhe Adhure.* Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan, 2020.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Asadh ka Ek Din.* New Delhi: Rajpal and Sons, 2019.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Natya Vimarsh,* edited by Jaidev Taneja. New Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2012.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Another Life: Thirteen Stories and a Play.* Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018, Microsoft Pdf reader e-book.

Rakesh, Mohan, and Deborah Torch. "*Mohan Rakesh: A Self-Portrait*." Journal of South Asian Literature, volume 9, no. 2/3, 1973, Pp. 3-14, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40871688 accessed March 10, 2021.

Rakesh, Mohan, K. P. Singh, and Asghar Wajahat. *Interview with Mohan Rakesh.* Journal of South Asian Literature, volume 9, no. 2/3, 1973, Pp. 15-45, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40871689 accessed March 10, 2021.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Lehron Ke Rajhans.* New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2017.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Looking Around as a Playwright.* Sangeet Natak, 1966, Pp. 16-21.

Schechner, Richard. *Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance*. The Drama Review: TDR, 17.3, Skjoldager-Nielsen, Kim, and Joshua Edelman. "Liminality." *Ecumenica*, 7.1-2, (2014): 33-40. 10.5325/ecumenica.7.1-2.0033. Accessed 20 September 2024.1973, 5–36. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1144841. Accessed 15 May 2023.

Skjoldager-Nielsen, Kim, and Joshua Edelman. "Liminality." *Ecumenica*, 7.1-2, 2014, 33-40. 10.5325/ecumenica.7.1-2.0033. Accessed 20 September 2024.

Styan, J. L. *The Dark Comedy: The Development of the Modern Comic Tragedy*. Cambridge University Press. 2008.

Tanvir, Habib. *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*. Kolkata, Seagull: 2018.

Thomassen, Bjorn. *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through The In-Between.* Surrey, Ashgate Publishing Limited: 2014

Turner, Victor. "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1979, pp. 465–99. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233219. Accessed 15 July. 2023.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, University of Chicago Press: 1960.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

1. Kumar, Manivendra and Ananya Ghoshal. "Social Reform in the Plays of Mohan Rakesh." Modern Drama, vol. 68, no. 1, 2025, p. 75-96. **https://doi.org/10.3138/md-68-1-1305**
2. Kumar, Manivendra, Dr. Ananya Ghoshal. "Understanding Humour as the Catalyst to Social Reform: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's 'Where There is a Will' (1988)." *Indian Theatre Journal*, vol. 8, 2024, Intellect Publishers, pp. 7–17. https://doi.org/10.1386/itj_00035_1
3. Kumar, Manivendra, Dr. Ananya Ghoshal. "The Significance of the Stage: Understanding the Role of Mahesh Dattani's Stage Directions in Dance Like a Man (1989)." *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, De Gruyters – [Accepted for publication in the November 2025 issue]
4. Kumar, Manivendra, Dr. Ananya Ghoshal. "The Spatial-Temporal Canvas that we call the Stage: Text and Performance in *Final* Solutions," Theatre *Academy*, vol. 2, issue 2**,** pp. 19–35, .2024. https://doi.org/10.62425/theatreacademy.1525738

Table of Contents

Introduction

1.1 The Different Connotations of Reform: Traditions, Streams, and the Trajectory of Modern Indian Theatre

This thesis is the outcome of a fascinating interaction with the lineage of modern Indian theatre, especially the traditions in the latter half of the twentieth century. It sets out to explore the agendas and methods of reform in the works of playwrights who emerged after independence. The playwrights selected for this study are Mohan Rakesh (1925–72), Habib Tanvir (1923–2009), and Mahesh Dattani (1958–). While immeasurably different in their approach to theatre, these playwrights can be grouped together by virtue of their shared reformative visions for their respective traditions and society. The points of departure, again, being an umbrella term, can be explained as such avenues in the context of the playwrights and their works that we can observe as acts of deliberate digression from their tradition. The term tradition, too, being a keyword in this thesis, refers to the intertwined yet significantly different "streams"[1] (Dalmia 118) and "schools (Dimitrova, *Gender* 8) of theatre[2] that emerged after independence. To draw upon the critical inferences of the term, one can take a cursory glance at what T. S. Eliot refers to as tradition in his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1919), which is a "simultaneous order" (*English Critical Texts* 294) that shapes and reshapes both the past and the present generation of poets, in this case, the playwrights. Thus, the tradition of modern Indian theatre can be observed as an amalgamation of streams that have converged to shape the theatrical landscape in India. The question that immediately follows is, how are the streams of modern

[1] Dalmia takes into account the fluidity and mutual influence of theatrical traditions to term them as streams. It is in this context this study shall use the term throughout.
[2] While several scholars and performance theorists such as Richard Schechner have devoted significant attention to the intricate distinctions between the terms drama and theatre, in this thesis, owing to the textual analysis of the plays, we use the terms interchangeably. However, definitions of the terms such as by Schechner have been used to provide necessary differences wherever applicable.

Indian theatre defined? Who created these streams of theatre? How do we categorise them as streams and not separate traditions? What constitutes the paradigms of reform in these streams of theatre? These questions make it essential to briefly recall the trajectory of modern Indian theatre, which will also help retrace the reformist tenets of modern Indian theatre. However, prior to recalling the trajectory of reformist theatre, we need to comprehend the problematics of the terms modern and Indian in these traditions.

Erin B. Mee, in her *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage* (2008), states the problematic exclusive demarcations of modern Indian theatre. She notes:

> "[m]odern theatre in India developed as part of the colonial enterprise in three port cities established and built up by the East India Company […] In the nineteenth century, the British introduced modern European theatre to these colonial cities in three ways: by touring productions to entertain their expatriate communities; by supporting productions of English plays staged by the expatriates themselves in newly erected British-style playhouses; and by teaching English drama in Indian universities, where Shakespeare was presented as the apex of British civilization." (1)

Mee's assertion, while standing true to the chronology of the transition of Indian theatre under the influence of European dramaturgy, also points to the complexity of the term modern itself. Tony Pinkney further substantiates this complexity in his introduction to Raymond Williams' *The Politics of Modernism* (1989), who notes:

> '[m]odcrnism' is the most frustratingly unspecific, the most recalcitrantly *un* periodizing, of all the major art-historical 'isms' or concepts. Announcing n1crcly the empty flow of time itself, modernism in one sense begins when the static, mythic, or circular or circular (non-) temporality of the 'organic community' ends […] (3)

However, in the Indian context, the lack of scholarly attention to the theatrical and performative genre of spiritual and community-based traditions before the arrival of the British and after the decline of Sanskrit theatre meant that modern Indian theatre was defined,

excluding the indigenous performance traditions and conceptualized prominently the theatre prevailing in the "three port cities". Mee corroborates:

> It was expected to have human characters, conversational dialogue, behaviour that was psychologically motivated, events that were causally linked, and realistic settings that allowed spectators to believe in the present-tense reality of the action onstage and to identify with the characters, eliminating anything that would shatter the illusion of the fictional world of the play. (2)

On the other hand, genres of performance that were "based on actor improvisation, composed of short and unrelated pieces of entertainment and/or of a number of song-and-movement sequences and/or taking place over an entire night […]" were thought of as "theatrical but not 'theatre' per se" (2).

Fascinatingly, what was modern and Indian in the mid to late nineteenth century came under heavy criticism around the decades of independence as a remnant of the colonial era. Aparna Dharwadker sums up the critical stance towards this aspect of Indian theatrical modernity that emerged from the European influence. She notes:

> For the antimodernists, therefore, the end of colonialism presents a moment of restitution, when the older 'natural' theatrical traditions can assume their rightful place in the national culture […] according to them the modern theatre of the colonial period created nothing of lasting value: it was a 'desert of imitation' and opposed all the habits of representation and spectatorship that were most suited to Indian culture. (*The Critique* 62).

It was a similar stance that critics such as Suresh Awasthi took after the independence towards the realist schools of theatre pioneered by the likes of Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar, to provide leverage to the cultural nationalist movement, which he called the "theatre of roots" (Awasthi 48). Another similar rejectionist position came from Girish Karnad, who was of the opinion that Indian families did not operate in the same manner as their Western counterparts, who discussed all

important affairs in the living room. He wrote in his essay *Theatre in India* that;

> […] Hierarchies decide the nature and direction of communication in India. In many land-owning families, fathers and sons do not address each other directly but only through the women of the house or the servants. In Brahmin families, women express opinions on family matters only when the men have sat down for their meals. And so on. It is not uncommon to see in Indian realistic plays, women of the house sitting alongside the menfolk, openly discussing the most private family matters in front of total strangers, a situation unthinkable in traditional Indian homes. (341)

However, Karnad's position was more nuanced than those of the critics who believed that Indian realist theatre was a fading shadow of the colonial impact. Interestingly, as I elaborate in the third chapter, the roots movement was also an inherently urban exercise conducted by Delhi-based government institutions, which encouraged the playwrights to integrate indigenous art forms without actually proposing a framework for the sustained development of these performance traditions in the urban arena. This notion is also supported by Dharwadker, who terms the movement a deliberate "ideological construct" rather than a "living form" (65).

Taking into consideration these pro-and anti-realist positions of the scholars, this study omits the burden of defining each tradition and its streams of theatre. It should be noted that the diversity and co-existence of the various performance traditions in this country make it extremely challenging to label which form is more Indian than the other. Also, in the socio-cultural context of India, this exercise seems futile unless one has some agenda to promote one form over others. With the clear demarcations of modern and Indian seeming improbable, I shall now explore the trajectory of the playwrights' agendas and paradigms of reform in the tradition of modern Indian theatre.

The paradigmatic structure of the theatrical corpus in the early modern traditions of theatre in India, which can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, can be defined in terms of its subjects and

themes, the target audience, and its approach to theatre as a performative art. Under the colonial regime, the contemporary socio-political situations were the most recurrent subjects in the plays of this era and were primarily written with nationalist agendas in mind, targeting the mobilisation of the masses. One of the most detailed explanations of the early traditions of Indian theatre comes from Ananda Lal's Introduction to his *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings* (2019). He takes us to nineteenth-century Bengal, often considered the cradle of modern Indian theatre. Lal rightly points out in his introduction that [theatrical] modernism "[…] reached us on the coattails of the British Raj in the mid-nineteenth century" (31). Arguably, one of the foremost sites of influence of European culture on Indian society could be observed in the paradigms of theatre and performance. The colonisers, along with their machinery for trade and administration, also brought their means of entertainment – the proscenium theatre. Scholars such as Lal point to the immediate impact of the proscenium theatre, which could be observed in Bengal on the socio-cultural elites who had already begun emulating the British lifestyle and were invited to attend the productions of Shakespeare brought to India by the touring theatre companies from England. Soon, Western-style theatres were set up, and stories ranging from Shakespeare to the religious and secular repertoire of the folk-performance tradition of Jatra began to be performed on proscenium-style stages. Lal credits the earliest proponents of Bengali drama, Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813–1885) and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873), for initiating the tradition of plays written in English in India. Lal notes in his introduction that it was Banerjea's *"The Persecuted* (1831) that marked the "true commencement of Indian Drama in English" (11). However, it is the function and purpose of these plays that this thesis is particularly interested in recalling. A glance at the titles of the plays written by Banerjea and Dutt reveals considerably about the critiquing nature of the plays. Banerjea's play was titled *The Persecuted Or Dramatic Scenes, Illustrative of the Present State of the Hindoo* [Hindu] *Society* and dealt with the orthodox prejudices of contemporary society. The play was based on Banerjea's own

persecution by his orthodox neighbours and community on the allegations of eating beef. The play was deemed to have "considerable skill" (Lal 20) and reformative in character by the newspaper *Samachar Darpan* (News Mirror). As Lal quotes:

> We have received from the author Baboo [Babu] Krishna Mohan Banerjea, a copy of "The Persecuted," a drama. The work is executed with considerable skill, and considering that the author writes in a foreign tongue, the English is very good. To analyze its contents in the present state of native society in Calcutta would be a delicate matter. […] It describes the rich natives generally as having departed from the rules of Hindooism and indulging in sensuality. We have, however, no hesitation in saying, that though the censures are severe, they are not unjust. A very great laxity does prevail among the natives of the metropolis; and those who are loud in their outcry against the Nastiks, the term by which the recent dissidents from Hindooism are called, would, if judged by the shastras they themselves venerate, be considered as having forfeited their privileges as Hindoos. (20–21)

Lal states in his essay *A Historiography of Modern Indian Theatre*[3] (2009) that he deems the play modern "because of its theme, social criticism forming an integral part of modernism; for the first time in Indian drama, an author explicitly criticized the living conditions around him" (33). Similarly, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's play *Is This Called Civilization* (Ekei Ki Bole Shabhyata, 1865) "satirized [the] affectations" (33) of the upper classes. Despite critiquing social situations, these works, Lal mentions, "remained within the confines of private family theatres open only to invited audiences" (33).

Another significant social function of plays in nineteenth-century Bengali drama can observed in Dinabandu Mitra's *Nildarpan* (The Indigo Mirror, 1860), which represented the plight of the indigo farmers in Bengal and their harassment by the British planters. Also written in protest against the prevailing social situations, the play created a significant stir among the public against the colonial government and appealed to the political consciousness of the masses. Farley P.

[3] See Nandi Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader*, pp. 31-40.

Richmond notes in his essay *The Political Role of Theatre in India* (1973) that the theatre of this era:

> […] served as an instrument of social change […] when dedicated patriots were committed to exposing social evils, some of which had resulted from British rule and some of which had plagued Hindu society for centuries. This period, marked by an unrestrained desire among Indian writers and producers to propagate independence, is also characterized by suppressive restrictions imposed by the colonial government on the publication and performance of plays. (319)

It was because of the performances of *Nildarpan* and the subsequent response from the audiences that the colonial government decided to implement the draconian Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, authorising the government to censure and suppress the socially instigating plays.

Despite the implementation of the act and the subsequent censure, the theatre still had a crucial role to play in the shaping of nationalist ideologies and aspirations. Playwrights then turned to allegories and symbolisms to depict the plight of the nation. In the Hindi-speaking region of India, Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850–1885), who used direct attacks prior to 1876 in his plays, such as *Bharat Durdasha* (The Plight of Bharat, 1875), depicting the exploitation of the Indian masses, began utilising allegorical narratives in his next play *Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja* (Doomed Kingdom Confused King,1881). The play satirized the whimsical governance of the Britishers through the allegory of a king who has no methods to provide justice and decides about the fate of people on a whim. Another play, *Nildevi*, about the protagonist of the same name and published in the same year, used a historical plot to valorise women and to symbolically appeal for their enfranchisement in the nationalist agendas. It is for plays such as these that Bhartendu Harishchandra is referred to as the father of modern Hindi drama and literature.

Similarly, in the tradition of Marathi theatre, plays such as *Jhansichya Raniche Natak* (A Drama about the Queen of Jhansi, 1870)

by Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar (1871–1934) propagated the Tilakite[4] nationalism and shaped the formative years of Marathi theatre. Neera Adarkar notes in her essay *In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843 to 1933* (2009):

> "From 1861 a new tradition of historical plays started to evoke the emotions of patriotism rather than religious fervour […] The establishment of universities and the exposure to English literature encouraged many college students and teachers to translate Shakespearean plays as well as old Sanskrit plays and stage their shows in the colleges of Bombay and Pune."[5] (222)

To sum up this overview briefly, we can reiterate that most of the modern theatrical traditions of the northern and western regions of India[6], particularly in their formative periods, produced plays reflecting contemporary social and political issues. A significant quantity of scholarship on modern Indian theatre deals with the representation of socio-political issues and its contribution to the propagation of nationalist agendas. This thesis looks at this large proportion of modern Indian theatre from Eliot's perspective of the tradition as a structure changing with the present. The primary purpose of the above overview is to create the context for delineating the exact points of departure by the playwrights who emerged after independence. It is significant to note that this study is limited to the examination of traditions of modern Indian theatre in the second half of the twentieth century and does not venture into exploring numerous folk performance traditions that existed during the time. Nevertheless, the playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century also used similar methods to appeal to the nationalist sentiments of the masses, especially in Hindi theatre.

---

[4] Several plays in this era propagated Bal Gangadhar Tilak's idea of nationalism.
[5] Scholars, such as Sharmishtha Saha, have explained in detail the nationalist agendas propagated by Marathi and Bengali theatre and their contribution to the formation of national identity. See Saha's *Theatre and National Identity in Colonial India: Formation of a Community Through Cultural Practice* (2018) p. 28.
[6] Although we do not discuss the traditions existing in the southern part of India here, works such as *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance by Richmond, Swann, and Zarilli* demonstrate a similar trajectory of reformist agendas in theatrical performances.

The turn of the twentieth century saw the evolution of commercial theatre in the northern regions of India. The rise of Parsi theatre companies and their unprecedented success during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has led several scholars to study their emergence and contribution to Indian theatre. Scholars such as Diana Dimitrova have emphasized the significant contribution of the Parsi theatre companies towards the development of proscenium-style theatre in India. Traditionally, due to the close association of drama with folk traditions, the stage in almost all the traditions of Indian theatre was open from the sides, with temple premises and the courtyards of the socio-cultural elites being the most prevalent areas used for staging performances. The introduction of backgrounds and scenery by the Parsi theatre companies led to a distinctly novel amalgamation of Indian and Western dramaturgy in the Northwestern regions of the country. The repertoire of their stories ranged from Indian to Persian mythology, and their penchant for spectacles and music on stage brought immense commercial success as well as severe criticism, especially from Hindi playwrights such as Harishchandra. We shall be exploring the reasons for the Hindi playwrights'[7] criticism in detail in the second chapter on Mohan Rakesh. Here, it is sufficient to state that despite their criticism of the commercial Parsi theatre, the Hindi playwrights continued to use the proscenium stage for their plays. Both the Parsi theatre and the amateur theatre in India thus developed with dramaturgical techniques imported from the West. The Parsi theatre companies' agenda was diverse and inclusive, which required contribution and participation from all communities. The eclecticism of the ensemble of actors, writers, and stagehands, all employed by the Parsi owners, was reflective of the cultural diversity of India and the harmonious living of the people. Kathryn Hansen, in her essay *Parsi Theatre, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay* (2001):

[7] Hindi playwrights, including Harishchandra and Rakesh, were staunch critics of the Parsi theatre. Harishchandra even wrote a parody of Agha Hasan Amanat's *Indar Sabha* (Indra's Court, 1853) titled *Bandar Sabha* (1880).

> […]Companies maintained a mixed repertoire and switched easily from a serious drama set in one social milieu and language to a farce in a completely different register. These shifts were paralleled by a diversity of song genres and performative novelties such as dances, skits, and other set pieces within the body of the play. The Parsi theatre was eclectic and open-minded in its borrowings from culturally embedded local forms. One of the chief complaints against it was that it dissolved the boundary between high and low art, absorbing what was topical, catchy, and entertaining without regard to canons of taste. (44)

Contrastingly, after Harishchandra's death in 1885, there can be observed an interregnum in the arena of Hindi theatre only to be driven forward by the likes of Jaishankar Prasad (1889–1937). Credited as the pioneer of the literary movement of Chhayavaad (romanticism) in Hindi poetry, Prasad also re-established and propagated the stream of Hindi theatre that Harishchandra had left behind. Prasad's plays, such as *Skandagupta* (1928) and *Dhruvaswamini* (1933), valorised Indian antiquity to appeal to the nationalist sentiments of the populace. The only significant difference between Prasad and Harishchandra lies in their approach to drama. Harishchandra took a performative approach and established theatre companies such as Harishchandra Natya Mandali, Bhartendu Natya Sangh, and Kashi Natak Mandali. Prasad's dramas, on the other hand, "acquired a new maturity and sophistication" (Dalmia 87) but were burdened with literariness and were written "in chaste, Sanskritized Hindi" (88). With the country still under colonial rule, the reformist agendas in his plays were primarily oriented to fuel the nationalist consciousness. His indifference towards the theatricality of his plays is evident in his opinions. He believed it was "[…] a major error to consider that drama should be written for a stage" (Dalmia 93).

A noteworthy deviation from Prasad's tradition is observed in the plays of Upendranath Ashk (1910–96), Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Shrivastava (1912–57), Lakshmi Narayan Mishra (1903–87), and Jagdish Chandra Mathur (1917–78). This group of playwrights was the first in modern Hindi theatre to break the mould of nationalist historical plays and to write in the wake of Western realism inspired by Ibsen.

Diana Dimitrova, in her *Gender, Religion, and Modern Hindi Drama* (2008), calls them "the pro-Western" or "pro-Ibsen" school of Hindi drama (31). Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar, especially, are considered the pioneers of avant-garde playwrighting in India. Mishra and Mathur, although progressive in terms of their representation of social issues, supported the orthodox traditional views in their treatment of women characters. Dimitrova notes:

> The playwrights Harishchandra and Prasàd portray women's heroism but refrain from making their female characters independent of male authority. In Misra's plays women are expected to adhere to the rules of traditional Hindu society. My study shows that Ràkesh's handling of the subject matter is also marked by conservatism […] Ask exposes women's oppression by conservative Hindu society in the dramas *Kaid* (Prison, 1950), *Uràn* (Flight, 1950), and *Alag Alag Ràste* (Separate Ways, 1954) and discusses the problems of the educated and emancipated woman in *Bhamvar* (Whirlpool, 1961) and *Svarg ki Jhalak* (A Glimpse of Paradise, 1939). In *Anjo Didi* (The Elder Sister Anjo, 1955) and *Taulie* (Towels, 1943) the author shows the difficulties in relationships between men and women in marriage without blaming these difficulties all on women's nature, as many dramatists before him had done. (12–13)

Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar's radically reformative agendas of women empowerment and representation of the issues of women within the conservative Indian social milieu challenged the prevalent social conservatism, and hence, their position as reformist playwrights appears on the margins of the canon of modern Hindi theatre.

The ideas of the "pro-Ibsen" school of Hindi theatre were assimilated and expanded by Mohan Rakesh, who was also a leading figure in the Nai Kahani (New Story) movement of the late 1940s and 50s. Despite Dimitrova's accurate criticism of Rakesh's favouring conservatism in the case of women, this study shows that Rakesh's reformative methods made it essential for him not to provide tailor-made solutions to his audience and readers for the conflicts presented in his plays. His works resonated with his "immediate reality," a concept he called a person's surroundings, including the people and their

experiences, and thus akin to real life, his plays also dramatized conflicts that never had easy solutions for any of the individuals involved. His plays, *Asadh Ka Ek Din*, *Lahron Ke Rajhans,* and *Adhe Adhure,* all were reflections of the complexities of interpersonal relationships that Rakesh had observed around him. Despite using settings that were chronologically distant and were located as far as the time of the Budhha (c. 563–448 BCE) and the Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa (380–415 CE)[8], Rakesh achieved a universality in his plays by amalgamating the distant settings with contemporary issues. One of the most significant aspects of his reformist methods was the gradual reversal of gender roles starting from the intellectually and emotionally strong yet subservient character of Mallika in *Asadh* to strong-willed Sundari in *Lahron Ke Rajhans,* and finally culminating with *Adhe Adhure's* Savitri, who represented the women of the newly independent nation, a significant part of the workforce contributing to the growth of their families and the nation.

The decades of the late 1960s and the 1970s saw a significant bend towards the folk performance traditions of the country, resulting in a movement termed the "theatre of roots" (48) by Suresh Awasthi in his essay "*Theatre of Roots: Encounter with Tradition"* (1988). The movement, led by pioneers of modern Indian theatre, such as Babukodi Venkataramana (B. V.) Karanth (1929–2002), Kavalam Narayana (K. N.) Panikkar (1928–2016), Girish Karnad (1938–2019), and Ratan Thiyam (1948–), can be identified by the renewed interest of the playwrights and directors in the regional folk-performance traditions of India. Kathryn Hansen notes in her essay *Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre* (1983):

> Considered decadent and largely forgotten during colonial days, these regional theatres have recently received attention and a certain amount of governmental support from the national and state Sangeet Natak Akademis. Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit

[8] These characters were never meant to be portrayed in accordance with historical details as Rakesh claims in his preface to the second edition of *Lahron ke Rajhans* and in his *Interview* (1973).

> dramatic tradition, on the basis of common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (Suttradhara) and clown (Vidushaka), and abundant song and dance. (77)

The movement developed in reaction to the modern realist traditions of Hindi and Marathi theatre and utilised folk arts and traditions such as including *Yakhsagana* from Karnataka, *Theyyam* and *Patayani* from Kerala, Thang-ta from Manipur, and Nacha from *Chhattisgarh*. The outcome of this movement was a repertoire of plays that, despite the political antagonisms between the rural and the urban models of theatre involved, succeeded in generating a corpus of dramatic works that harnessed the folk in one way or the other. The playwrights integrated elements from the folk traditions in several ways, such as Karnad's presentation of *Hayavadana* (The Horse Head, 1971) used techniques from Yakshagana, including the Yavanika (half-curtain) and the invocation of Lord Ganesha. Similarly, Habib Tanvir's use of the folk-dance form of Nacha in his *Charandaschor* (1975) and the subsequent plays was an unprecedented method of amalgamating the folk with the urban techniques of theatre. Even though the movement invited more attention towards the polemics on rural versus urban and the problematics of what could be considered traditional or indigenous against what could be considered modern, the repertoire of plays, including Tanvir's and Karnad's were distinct achievements in terms of refashioning the Indian reformist drama.

The refreshing approach taken by these playwrights to harness folk performance traditions to resonate with the vibrancy of these traditions did not mean that the plays were only meant to draw the urban audiences' attention to them. Instead, plays such as *Hayavadana* and *Charandaschor* were highly reformative and revealed through folk elements the complexity of human nature and the conflicts arising from it. Moreover, Tanvir's integration of the Nacha performances into the plot of his play was not only for aesthetic and stylistic purposes but was also used for commentating on scenes and to make the audience aware

of the subliminal meanings. Karnad, too, with his plays such as *Nagamandala* (1987), blended folklore with contemporary issues of gender dynamics in rural Karnataka. Despite the criticism of the theatre of roots movement for its denunciation of realist drama and the revivalist approach towards folk theatre, it did help establish a novel stream of post-independence Indian theatre and an attempt to establish a canon that inherited Indian roots and was a not as much influenced by Western realist drama as the preceding schools of drama.

Arguably, one of the most thriving traditions of Indian drama today– the Indian drama in English– developed as a performative tradition only during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Again, recalling the initial plays from Bengal, such as *The Persecuted* (1831) by K. M. Banerjea, the tradition of Indian drama in English also evolved through a trajectory of reformist plays ranging from social criticism to translations of Bengali plays and the mythological epics to plays based on Greek mythology by Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), and then to the plays changing the paradigms of this tradition after the emergence of the contemporary generation of English playwrights led by Mahesh Dattani. A symmetrical analogy can be drawn from the tradition of modern Hindi drama that starting with Harishchandra's plays, was literary in the initial phases and could only become a performative tradition with the likes of Mohan Rakesh. Similarly, Indian drama in English was also primarily literary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it was not until the 1970s that the plays began to be written for performance. Plays performed in English in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries primarily included adaptations of Shakespeare, and translations of Bengali plays. The earliest generation of scholarship on Indian theatre corroborates this assertion, and scholars such as Shanta Gokhale, Eunice De Souza, and M.K Naik have elaborated in depth on the shortcomings of the first-generation English playwrights in India. De Souza, for instance, in her essay *Some Recent Indian Plays in English* in M. K. Naik's and S. Mokashi-

Punekar's edited collection *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English* (1977), notes contemplating the failure of plays written in English:

> When I spoke to Ebrahim Alkazi, Director of the National School of Drama at a theatre conference a few years ago, I asked him, among other things, what he thought of Indian drama in English. 'It's a lost cause', he said. At that time I was inclined to agree with him, for of the thirty-five or so plays that I had read in published or unpublished form, or seen produced during the last ten years in Bombay, there were less than half a dozen that were, and still remain viable. Now I am inclined to think that even these very few successes give Indian drama in English a sense of direction, and suggest ways in which those who write plays in English can confront their problems. Even the plays which fail are worth looking into to discover why they fail: Is it because the playwright is using English, a language which 'alienates' him from the 'Indian sen-sibility'? Is it because English imposes a limit on the kinds of people depicted in a play and only the lives of those who normally speak English can be explored? Is it a question of language at all? Or is it a failure which stems from the lack of awareness necessary to make a play worthwhile, from the lack of the intellectual and emotional stamina to create credible characters and work out the implications of a theme to the end? (156)

The questions, De Souza raises in the above paragraph might appear anachronistic to the readers in 2024–25, as Indian Drama in English has gone through a radical evolution beginning from the last two decades of the twentieth century. However, as De Souza proceeds to establish in her essay, it was never the question of language as the medium of communicating the sensibilities of the (then) small section of the English-speaking population in India. It was more about the function of the plays and the ideas being communicated. As she notes;

> As I see it, there is no reason whatsoever why using English should, in itself, defeat our playwrights. Even if they were to limit themselves to the Westernized Indian elite educated in English, there would still be plenty of work to be done. The number of people who communicate in English most of the time in India may be minute. But it is this minute number that, whether we like it or not, is still the influential section of the population, in social, political, economic and cultural terms […] (156–57)

The emergence of playwrights such as Dattani brought a paradigmatic[9] shift in the approach towards drama in English. His experiences of theatre as a kid, as a college student with the Little Theatre Group, and then as a playwright-director were shaped through performances. Hence, his plays, from *Where There is a Will* (1988) to *The Big Fat City* (2012), were all written for the stage and with the agenda of examining the prevalent yet latent social issues in urban-middle-class[10] families. We shall explore further the trajectory of Dattani's reformist ideas that changed the dynamics of the tradition of Indian English drama in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Presently, we shall endeavour to comprehend the other connotation of reform this thesis explores and, in doing so, answer the question of why these playwrights from different schools and traditions of Indian theatre have been grouped together.

The above overview of the traditions and streams of theatre during the twentieth century, while limited, establishes the reformist agendas and the transitions in these agendas at the hands of subsequent generations. It also brings our attention to a few pertinent questions regarding what we consider a transition and what exactly were the points of departure of the playwrights selected for this study. It also leads to the theoretical framework and the methodology of this thesis as elaborated in the sections below.

1.2 The Liminal Reformers: Towards A Unifying Methodology

To say that only the playwrights selected for this study should be labelled reformists or that they have a better vision for reform than the other playwrights, including their contemporaries or their preceding generations, would be presumptuous and an unjust analysis of the entire

[9] The thesis approaches the paradigmatic structure of Indian English drama in a similar manner as defined in the first section of this introduction. This structure, constituted by the subject and themes and the playwright's approach towards the stage, also serves as a unifying strain between other traditions of modern Indian theatre and the Indian drama in English.

[10] The thesis uses Sarah Dickey's anthropological framework from her *Living Class in Urban India* (2016) to refer to the middle-class families represented in the selected plays.

tradition of Indian theatre. In fact, the very foundations of Indian theatre, starting from Sanskrit drama, are based on the function of theatre for the entertainment and education of the audiences. Bharata's *Natyasastra* dedicates an entire chapter to defining the Rasa (essence) – the aesthetic aggregate of Sthayibhava (permanent emotions), Vibhava (determinants), Anubhava (consequents) and Vyabhicharibhava (transitory emotions), for the purpose of educating the Sahridaya (the spectator with a consciousness). In the above overview of modern Indian theatre in the previous section, we observe that irrespective of their form, content, and orientation to stage performance, the plays in each of these traditions have had trenchant social agendas. The question that arises is what distinguishes these playwrights (Rakesh, Tanvir, and Dattani) from their peers, and how have their plays carved a niche for them? Fascinatingly, a recurrent observation found in their interviews is that none of them ever claimed to write for didactical reasons. They wrote because they wanted to capture and report the circumstances around them. For Mohan Rakesh, "[t]he criterion for writing was how far we could reflect the mood of our times" (*Interview* 17). For Tanvir, it was about absorbing "the old" so that it could be "transformed into the new" (*Theatre* 34), and for Dattani, it was about realizing "the potential of theatre as an agent, if not for social change, at least for reflection" (Mee 20–21). These assertions, besides pointing to their constituting notions of theatre, also point to a very significant aspect in their development as playwrights – their socio-literary context. To reiterate, their positions within their respective traditions and within the socio-cultural milieu they belonged to help us comprehend the shape of their ideas about theatre. Rakesh's position as a writer on either side of independence creates an interesting trajectory of his ideas of reform that was influenced both by the preceding generation of playwrights and the progenitors of Western realist drama such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. As R. L. Nigam notes in his essay *Mohan Rakesh: A Study* (1989);

> "[…] Rakesh belonged to no school and could belong to no school. He had no credo. He floated no manifesto. He worked to realize no schema. He does not

> seem to have given serious thought to whether theatre could have or should have a social function." (66)

Nigam's assertion corroborates Rakesh's statements that his agenda as a writer was to capture the "[r]eality" which he felt was "absurd" (*Interview* 38) and then to present that absurd reality because he thought "a writer" was "always committed to his emerging reality" (24). The inference drawn here is that Rakesh's position in the tradition of modern Hindi theatre and even within the realist school was in a space that departed from the previous conventions and intended to start a new one.

Similarly, Tanvir also rose to prominence with his *Agra Bazar* (1954), another play in the first decade of independence when the nation was undergoing profound socio-political changes. The play transcended all conventional methods of playwriting in India and was strung together into a plot from a series of small improvised performances. Tanvir's second major play, *Charandaschor*, came out in 1975 when the revivalist theatre of the roots movement began to fade. Javed Malick and Anjum Katyal credit Tanvir for creating a distinct liminal space that "refashioned" (Malick 132) Indian modernity by blending equally the urban and the rural elements of theatre. In the third chapter of this thesis, we study the sources of Tanvir's departure. We observe Tanvir as a liminal playwright who was trained in the urban centres of India, viz. in Bombay (Mumbai) and in Delhi, as well as, abroad at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts London from 1955–1956, and the Bristol Old Vic Theatre from 1956-1957, and yet claimed to "unlearn" all that he had learned from his interactions with the Western dramaturgy to establish a connection with his Indian roots. In doing so, he also created a distinct liminal space for himself that was "betwixt and between" (*Thomassen* 7) the different traditions and from which he creatively initiated a novel stream of Indian theatre.

Mahesh Dattani, too, if we recall the trajectory of Indian English drama, rose to prominence in the late 1980s, at the moment when India

was contemplating the liberalisation and globalisation[11] of its socio-economic avenues. Dattani initiated a new, living, and performative stream from a tradition that had been referred to as a "lost cause" (De Souza 156) a few decades ago. Similar to Rakesh and Tanvir, Dattani, too, in retrospect, can be observed between the sophisticated and literary school of plays written in English, and between a fully thriving performance tradition that has seen almost seven hundred shows[12] of his play *Dance Like a Man*. To sum up, we can reiterate that these playwrights emerged at such liminal junctures in the real and the literary timeline that their experiences of their time and their respective traditions of drama led them to create a separate space from which emerged new streams of Indian theatre. This space often "[…] between two structured world-views or institutional arrangements" (*Thomassen* 7), allowed the playwrights to apply innovative methods to their dramaturgy and transform the traditions they inherited from. In the following chapters, we shall examine this assertion by studying a cross-section, which comprises the context of and the dramatic corpus of these playwrights, through the lens of liminality. Their creation of novel streams in their tradition is a function of their departure from the preceding generations and points to such discontinuities in the paradigms of modern Indian theatre that are liminal and transformative.

Liminality, as defined by Arnold Van Gennep in his *Les Rites de Passage* (Rites of Passage [1909] 1960) and by Bjorn Thomassen in his *Liminality and the Modern* (2014), provides us with a multi-purpose theoretical framework for this study. This thesis uses the crux of these multiple definitions of liminality, which, in Thomassen's words, "[…] involves a peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really

[11] Scholars, such as Staffan Jacobssan and Ghayur Alam, argue for India's multiple attempts at globalisation before finally succeeding in 1992. See *Liberalisation and Industrial Development in the Third World* (1994), p. 21. Another significant evidence of this assertion can be found in the street plays of Safdar Hashmi (1954–89), such as *Halla Bol* (Charge! 1989), which was a critique of the exploitative conditions of the labourers during the time.

[12] The last performance of *Dance Like a Man* at the National Center for Performing Arts (NCPA, Bombay) on January 29th 2023, that I attended was, as informed by the veteran director Lilette Dubey, the 669th production of the play.

matters, in which hierarchies and standing norms disappear […]" (1). It is this "unsettling" nature of these playwrights' works that makes them liminal. Firstly, it helps us study the playwrights in their social and literary contexts, which contributes as a significant factor in the evolution of their dramaturgical methods. Secondly, it helps us examine the space they create by reforming the rules and agendas of their respective theatrical traditions; and lastly, it acts as a multi-modal dimension in their plays from which stem the conflicts in their plays, which in turn, emphasises the issues of contemporary society.

Precedence for such applications, although occasional, can be found in fantasy and children's literature, where several characters pass through magical realms to undertake life-altering adventures and emerge as changed individuals. Kristen McQuinn's short article *Not at Home: Liminal Space and Personal Identity in The Hobbit and Coraline* (2020) is one such example. As she notes:

> Narratives such as The Hobbit or Coraline are written so that the fantastical elements common to liminal space are made ordinary yet are vital to the development of plot and characters. Thus, normal doors become portals, or Other Parents with button eyes are accepted without second thought. Every story needs liminality in some form for character growth. (14)

Her analysis, albeit in a different and more accommodating genre for the theory of liminality, opens further nodes for investigating other genres, including theatre and performance.

Similar applications and search for liminality in Thomas Hardy's[13] famous novels have been studied in essays such as *Hardy and Generic Liminality: The Case of "The Mayor of Casterbridge" and "Jude the Obscure"* by Peggy Blin Cordon, *The Well-Beloved: The Persistence of Liminality* by Elisa Bizzotto, and *Voyeurism and*

[13] Thomas Hardy (1840 – 1928) was an English novelist. His major works include. *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native (1878), The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), and Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). An entire issue of the journal *The Hardy Review* (volume 15, issue 1, 2013) encompassed articles that dealt with liminality in his works.

Liminality in Thomas Hardy's Short Stories by Emanuela Ettorre. The essays also testify to the existence of liminality in literature and provide a diverse framework for analysing literary works. Isabel Gaidon and Annie Ramel, in their *Liminality: Introduction*[14]*,* provide the most apt description of liminality in literature. They note:

> The "liminal" space of literature, it seems, is entirely contained in that "transitional point" where readers have to abdicate their usual modes of perception and where space and time appear to overlap or fuse, 3 to recreate another, in a more intense type of apprehension of the surrounding world. Such is the poetic function of literature, and of liminality […] (6)

Almost all the plays selected for this study share this characteristic with other genres of literature and also the realist traditions of theatre that the complex interpersonal conflicts presented by the playwrights often insinuate from liminal spaces. Mallika and Kalidasa from Rakesh's *Asadh Ka Ek Din,* for instance, are one set of characters trapped between their choices and ambitions and consequently fail to embrace the "rites of transition" (Gennep 11) that their conflicts lead them to. Kalidasa is caught in the conflict between his life in the village, which includes his beloved and the natural beauty of the village, which constitutes his motivation to write poetry. Throughout the play, he is presented as a man unwilling to let go of his past and consistently rejecting his present. Mallika is caught in the conflict between her choice to wait for Kalidasa's return and her despondent and deteriorating life, especially after the death of her mother.

Further, the classifications of liminality into spatial and temporal dimensions[15] open another channel to study the distinct anachronism created by these playwrights. Rakesh, for instance, claims in his interview that his use of (semi-) historical characters is only meant to harness the already existing connection with the masses. He says:

---

[14] All these essays were published in the same issue of *The Hardy Review* mentioned above.

[15] See Thomassen's, *Liminality and the Modern* p. 89.

> Why did I use these historical characters for my symbols, why did I go back at all in history? It was simply to bring the point home. Sometimes it seems to me very convenient to exploit a deep-rooted sentiment, or something which is an accepted thing with the people. With the name Kalidasa, which is an accepted thing with the people, I did not have to create an image. Perhaps in trying to create a writer today who is torn in this same way, I might give the impression of having created a second-rater, a man who really couldn't make up his mind and, therefore, who was not a real writer. And with all of these works of Kalidasa to which I have alluded, if I were to have used fictitious names, I would not have been able to strike at that image in people's minds. And now, by showing the split in that image, I make them conscious of the writer's dilemma, though at the expense of poor Kalidasa. Many people were incensed. I was criticized on the point that I had reduced this great man to this level. But I thought as I was writing this play that instead of using all my energy in trying first to create a convincing character about whose dilemma or mental struggle people would not be convinced, I would take a symbol from history and use my energies and imagination in creating a play for and of today. (*Interview* 32–33).

Thus, the character of Kalidasa (and Nand, Sundari, and Buddha as well) transcends his own chronological limitations. Endowed with the ambitions and frustrations of thousands of individuals after the independence, Kalidasa becomes equidistant from both the past and the present.

Similarly, Nand and Sundari from *Lahron Ke Rajhans* do not follow the design of their sources from Asvaghosa's[16] *Saundarand* (c. 100 – 200 CE). Both are presented as complex individuals challenging the divinity associated with them and yet they are not from the same stratum of society as Rakesh's audience. The conflict between spirituality and domesticity channelled through Nand reflects the layers of complexity of the human mind and the indecisiveness of the character, which keeps him from choosing either of the two. Nand is often observed wandering from one threshold to the other between his

[16] Asvaghosa (c. 1st – 2nd Century CE) was a Sanskrit playwright and a scholar of Buddhist philosophy. His major works include *Buddhacharita*, *Mahalankara, Tridandamala*, and *Sariputra–Prakarana*, all believed to have been written between the first and second centuries CE.

domestic life and his spiritual conscience and chooses neither. In the overall pattern of Rakesh's plays, *Lahron Ke Rajhans* is found as the middle stage of subversion of gender roles that Rakesh attempts through his plays. Nand's wife, Sundari, is similar to Mallika in terms of her strong will and intellect. Nevertheless, she is also trapped in her conflict of accepting her husband's decision to lead an ascetic life or to ask him to confront his dilemma. Eventually, when she asks her husband to clear his mind and believes that he will return to his domestic life after meeting the Buddha. However, Nand leaves her and the palace and chooses a different path altogether.

Rakesh's third play, *Adhe Adhure*, seems as the culmination of his subtle attempt to subvert the stereotypes of gender roles in which he creates a different structure of the Indian middle-class family. Here, Savitri, the woman, is the bread-earner of the family and Mahendranath, the man, is the frustrated individual who desires respect as an equal, citing his contributions to the family in the past. The conflicts in the play, besides class, are also found to emanate from a similar liminal space (as in the previous plays) in which Savitri's family exists – a space between the structured institutions of an ideal family and a completely fragmented one.

The third chapter in the thesis studies Habib Tanvir's creation of a liminal dimension through his unprecedented theatrical experiments. Tanvir's method of "unsettling" (Thomassen 1) comes from his novel approach to playwriting and theatrical performances. Javed Malick and Anjum Katyal trace his avant-garde methods to be rooted in the Bakhtinian concept of "carnival" (*Rabelais and His World* 10), which further corroborates Thomassen's conceptualisation of liminality as a "[…] strange combination of freedom and homelessness; that pleasant but unsettling sensation of infinity and openness of possibilities which – at some moment, sooner or later – will start searching for a new frame to settle within" (4).

It picks up from Mohan Rakesh's methods and applies Thomassen's definitions to the socio-literary context of Tanvir, who emerges as a liminal playwright-director, having absorbed and traversed between numerous traditions of theatre ranging from folk to explicitly urban. Tanvir's celebrated plays, such as *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor,* are a consequence of his experiences both as a student of urban theatre in cities like Bombay, London, and Bristol and as a learner of the folk traditions within India. The chapter peruses Tanvir's disruption of the norms of modern Indian theatre by crafting a "transitory phase" (*Liminality* 33) through his innovative amalgamation of Nacha with regional folk stories. Tanvir's innovation, again, can be traced back to his association with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)[17], an organization devoted to voicing the concerns of the masses, during the 1940s and 1950s. Tanvir's credentials as a liminal reformer, as mentioned above, are a function of his innovative methods of composing a play. His plays, starting from *Agra Bazar,* were never written as dramatic texts to be rehearsed and finalised into a theatrical script. They were developed from several impromptu performances by his rural ensemble and their feedback on the scenes. Tanvir would crystallise the scene as soon as he found it satisfactory, and thus, the whole plot resulted from stitching together several similar short performances. It was a concept borrowed from the folk performance tradition(s), which still rely on contributions from multiple sources to design and develop a performance.

Silimar to Rakesh, Tanvir's social reformism also projected liminal characteristics. While Rakesh captured the liminal experiences of the migratory section of the population with aspirations for moving upward in class hierarchies, Tanvir, presented the spaces of conflicts between the urban and the rural notions of living. The contrasts Tanvir presented on stage, such as between the plebian and the erudite concepts

[17] The IPTA was renowned as a cultural wing of the CPI (see Damodaran 2). It had a vast repertoire of music, both composed and borrowed from the regional folk traditions and was known for integrating them with anti-regime performances.

of poetry in *Agra Bazar* and the upholding of values and ethics by a thief, while social elites, such as the queen and the priest practised corruption in *Charandas Chor*, resulted in a space that contradicted the existing social order and, in a manner, reversed it. This reversal, in the words of Krystyna Pomorska, in her forward to *Rabelais and His World* (1984); "[...] is the 'unmasking' and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary rank" (x). The "unmasking" of the cocooned vices within the upper classes of society and their exploitation of the lower strata was a leitmotif in the plays of IPTA, which Tanvir employed throughout his career. His method of challenging the social order and emphasizing the vices of the incumbent nobility of the Indian society was a marked diversion from the realist playwright's method of capturing and presenting the social flux in the decades around the independence. Both his plays were the results of his astute imagination and the drive to find a new form of Indian theatre.

Mahesh Dattani's theatre, on the contrary, also followed the trajectory of the Indian realist theatre. Despite, him being an Indian playwright and writing about the issues pervading the Indian middle-class society, he has been termed a liminal reformist in this study for comprehensive reasons. Firstly, his choice of language of English as the medium of propagating his ideas isolated him from the preceding traditions of Indian realist theatre, including Hindi, Marathi, and also the theatre of the roots. Although the argument seems dated in the present day and age, and roughly half of the population of the country uses English as a second language, the number in the 1980s and the 1990s was significantly lower, and Dattani was criticized for using the coloniser's language. Secondly, Dattani, despite idolising the realist playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar in Marathi, did not rely completely on realism. Instead, in most of his works, including *Where There is a Will* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, we observe a fine balance of realist and sensationalist elements achieved through his stage directions. Especially the construction of such spaces to suspend the characters in a "Shoonya [nothingness]"

(*Collected Plays* 64) or through spaces that presented two different timelines simultaneously. Dattani, although following a long line of playwrights writing in English, emerged as the first playwright whose plays were designed for performance from the outset. He also created a separate space for himself, different from the previous overtly literary tradition of playwrighting in English and facilitated the evolution of a new performative stream of Indian drama in English.

Lastly, in his plays as well, we see the application of spatial and temporal dimensions of liminality. The characters in Dattani's plays, such as *Final Solutions* and *Dance Like a Man*, struggle with conflicts that arise from the norms of the past and profoundly influence their present. The character of Daksha/Hardika in *Final Solutions* is one such example which epitomises the application of liminality in Dattani's characterisation. The characters, played by different actors[18], interestingly, present the same person in different phases of her life. Thus, the chronological distance between young Daksha and old Hardika invokes temporal liminality that fuels her grudges, making her see rioters in Bobby and Javed. Similarly, the ghost of Hasmukh Mehta in *Where There is a Will* becomes a testament to the application of spatial liminality in Dattani's works. Despite his presence on stage, he is unable to interact with other characters. He breaks the fourth wall and communicates directly to the audience but does not elicit a response from them. Hasmukh resides in the liminal space between life and death and acts as a narrator for the audience. Another significant play in which conflict ensues from a liminal space is Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*, which, through a central plot of inter-generational conflict in Ratna and Jairaj's family, presents the grave societal issue of stigmatisation of art and the practising artists. Through the space (both physical and temporal) between the generations of Amritlal Pareskh and his son, Jairaj and daughter-in-law, Ratna, Dattani emphasises the liminal state of thousands of middle-class families who are still affected by orthodoxy

[18] Daksha, the bride, is played by a young actor, while Hardika, the grandmother, is played by an old actor.

and conservatism. The following chapters elaborate on the aforementioned framework and study the cross-sections comprising of the contexts and the dramatic oeuvre of three playwrights. Beginning with Mohan Rakesh, it studies the points of departure that have redefined the paradigmatic structures of theatre in India.

Chapter 1. The Curious Case of Theatre Criticism: The Trajectory of Scholarship on Modern Indian Theatre

1.1 Introduction

Despite the diversity of the corpus of extant scholarship on modern Indian theatre, there appears to be a void in scholarships that deal with this diverse tradition of theatre holistically. Also, the feasibility of such a work that deals with the whole gamut of modern Indian theatre appears highly improbable and challenging. This study ventures into this challenging territory to retrace the lineage of prominent scholarship on the post-independence Indian theatre. Besides serving as a short document that should help the reader quickly point out the major scholarships on the various streams of Indian theatre post-independence, it also endeavours to draw attention to the reasons why modern Indian theatre lacks a comprehensive scholarly compendium examining the diversity of Indian theatre. The aim here is to retrace, through the corpus of academic works, the trajectories of these playwrights and their respective traditions. The limitations here are obvious, as the scope of this thesis only permits works in English to be examined, and thus, a large chunk of works on Indian theatre in other regional languages are not part of this survey. Nevertheless, it compensates for the lack of resources in other languages by incorporating discussions on the transcending nature of the plays, which have also been adapted into films. Keeping at the centre the three playwrights, we observe in the following section the emergence and evolution of modern Indian theatre

and, in turn, the shifting paradigms of reform in the pre and post-independence theatrical traditions of India.

The genre of Indian theatre is an unimaginably vast canvas of performance traditions, and to lucidly demarcate the boundaries of what we call modern Indian theatre is a Sisyphean task. Arguably, it is one of the most significant reasons that no book has ever been written that critically deals with all the theatrical traditions existing in India during the last two centuries. There are works such as *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance (1993)*, edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarilli, that have taken the challenge to describe the different traditions and the practising theatre companies, but, their profound descriptions stop short of critically studying the constituting traditions of Indian theatre. There still exists a huge void in terms of works that deal critically with the numerous traditions of theatre in India. With the arduousness of dealing with modern Indian theatre in one all-encompassing attempt being established, in the following sections, we shall explore the extant scholarship. For this purpose, this survey of literature shall help us in multiple ways. Firstly, it shall explicate in detail the argument this study makes about the changing paradigms of reform in post-independence theatre. Second, and more significantly, the survey points to the dearth of scholarly interest in the reformation of the traditions of Indian theatre that led to the formation of new streams and the emergence of new trendsetters. It is this ambiguity about the connotations of the term reform that this study explores with respect to the term reformist playwrights. As observed in the previous chapter through the re-tracing of the trajectory of reformist Indian theatre, the term 'reformist' has been used in a historical and socio-political context in the early traditions of modern Indian theatre, and then with the emergence of realist schools, in Hindi and Marathi drama, and organisations such as Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the term reformist in drama and theatre leaned more towards socio-cultural than political. In the decades immediately preceding and following the independence, the various streams of Indian theatre witnessed another

paradigmatic shift in the meaning and usage of the term reformist theatre through the works of playwrights such as Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, and Badal Sircar, who led the transition in their respective streams. Although the themes and issues presented in their plays were social, they relied more on conflicts emanating from the psyche of their characters than those caused by external factors. Their modus operandi was still realism, but unlike the playwrights from the previous generations, they rooted it in their characters and, in a manner, approached what Vasudha Dalmia has called ultra-realism in her *Poetics, Plays, Performances* (2008).

Another reformist approach in post-independence Indian theatre was pioneered by the playwright-director Habib Tanvir, who broke away from the realist and ultra-realist methods to usher modern Indian theatre into the paradigm of the folk-urban continuum. Harnessing the flamboyant and carnivalesque elements of the folk performance traditions from different parts of the country, Tanvir and his contemporaries, including Ratan Thiyam and B. V. Karanth, brought the folk into the urban proscenium arenas under the banner of the theatre of roots movement – a notion encouraging the departure from the realist traditions of drama.

Meanwhile, the growth of Indian drama in English had been stunted even after independence due to several factors, including the dearth of professional companies and the playwrights' failure to find a localised form of English that could appropriately resonate with the sensibilities of contemporary Indians. We shall examine the scholarship on Indian English drama in the following section, especially the ones that emerged during the first two decades after independence and dealt with the subject of Indian English drama as contemporaneous and with due significance. Presently, we shall begin with the scholarships elaborating further on this trajectory of modern Indian theatre in three broad categories, viz., the historiographical and genealogical discussions, the taxonomies of the streams of modern Indian theatre, and the body politique of the various streams of modern Indian theatre.

1.2 The Historiographical Works on Modern Indian Theatre.

The first significant work in this category is Nandi Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre* (2009), which encompasses essays ranging from the historiography of modern Indian theatre such as *Towards a Genealogy of Indian Theatre Historiography* by Rakesh H. Solomon and *A Historiography of Modern Indian Theatre* by Ananda Lal; to essays that subvert the traditional urban gaze and interrogate the exclusion of marginal sections of society from the mainstream Indian theatre such as *In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843 to 1933* by Neera Adarkar and *Am I a Hindu* by Vasudha Dalmia; to essays that critique the cynical discourses around Western influences on Indian theatrical modernity such as *The Critique of Western Modernity in Post-independence India* by Aparna Dharwadker and *Reassembling the Modern: An Indian Theatre Map since Independence* by Anuradha Kapur. Also tracing the lineage of performance traditions is the book *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (1993), edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarilli. The book is remarkable for its comprehensive accounts of regional theatrical traditions in India and documents information about major contemporary theatre companies across India. It serves as a significant document elaborating on the diverse forms of theatre in India. Beginning from the Sanskrit theatre, it retraces the origin and the reasons for the decline of the classical Sanskrit theatre before proceeding to the ritualistic traditions of Theyyam and Ayyapan Tiyatta from Kerala. It then proceeds to the devotional traditions of Raslila and Ramlila from Uttar Pradesh, and then to the folk theatre traditions of Nautanki and Tamasha. The book concludes with essays on dance dramas Chhau and Kathakali, along with an in-depth study of the characteristics of modern Indian theatre and its practitioners.

Similar retrospective studies of modern Indian theatre, especially Indian drama in English, include collections such as H. H. Aniah Gowda's *Indian Drama: A Collection of Papers* (1974). Gowda's collection comprises illuminating essays, such as *Classical Indian*

Drama and Modern Indian Theatre by Adya Rangacharya, in which he analyses similarities and contradictions between the critically acclaimed Sanskrit drama and the struggling modern Indian theatre, *A Personal View of Indo-English Drama* by the playwright Asif Currimbhoy in which he discusses the "identity crisis" (44) of the Indian English dramatists under the influence of European drama, and *Folk Theatre in India* by Balwant Gargi who vehemently contests contemporary urban intelligentsia's proclamation of the folk theatre as vulgar. Similarly, M. K. Naik and Shankar Mokashi Punekar's collection of essays titled *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English* (1977) consists of studies focusing on individual playwrights, such as *The Plays of Sri Aurobindo* by S. S. Kulkarni, and *The Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* by Nirmal Mukerji. Only a couple of essays, such as *Some Recent Indian Plays in English* by Eunice De Souza and the concluding study titled *The Achievement of Indian Drama in English by* M. K. Naik, deal with the broader issues and characteristics of the contemporary traditions of Indian English theatre. Other similar collections are C. A. Kincaid's *Tales from the Indian Drama* (1986), Sudhakar Pandey and Freya Taraporewala's *Studies in Contemporary Indian Drama* (1990), V. B. Sharma and V. Reddy's *Flowering of Indian Drama: Growth and Development* (2004), and Lakshmi Subramanyam's *Modern Indian Drama: Issues and Interventions* (2010).

Another notable work in this category is Anand Lal's *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings* (2019). The book consists of translations of three Bengali plays viz. *The Persecuted* by Krishna Mohan Banerjee, *Rizia* by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and a play titled *Kaminee* ascribed to one G. Ritchie. The plays belong to the earliest traditions of modern drama in India and point to the source of theatrical modernism, which, in the words of Lal, "reached us in the coattails of British Raj in the mid-nineteenth century" (31). The book also consists of a notable introduction that retraces Indian theatrical modernity to the times when the first British ships sailed to Indian ports. It also points to the reformist and political undercurrents of contemporary Bengali

theatre that was to influence theatre across the country at the turn of the twentieth century. Other major works in this category include Lal's *Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* (2004), and R. K. Yajnik's *The Indian Theatre* (1933), which deals with the emergence of drama in India in the first part and then with the influence of European (British) dramaturgy on modern Indian theatre in the second part. Nevertheless, the book, published as a thesis in 1933, appears anachronistic in terms of the transitions in the genre of the theatre after independence and also in terms of the subjects of this study. *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* (2003) and its recent version, *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* (2017), both edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, consist of essays ranging from genealogical documentation and essays on some of the earliest authors and genres. Essays such as *The Dutt Family Album: And Toru Dutt* by Rosinka Chaudhuri, *The Beginnings of the Indian Novel* by Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Novelists of the 1930s and 1940s* by Leela Gandhi, *Poetry Since Independence* by Rajeev S. Patke, and *Looking for A. K Ramanujan*, by Mehrotra himself, makes the book a detailed guide for readers to venture into the diverse genres of literature written in English. For reasons that we have reiterated a significant number of times now, discourse on Indian English drama seems to draw little attention in this book. Shanta Gokhale contributes as the only author dealing with Indian English dramatists in her essay, *The Dramatists*. Beginning with a brief account of the arrival of English drama in Indian cities such as Bombay and Calcutta, Gokhale quickly retraces the trajectory of the evolution of Indian English drama from nineteenth-century Bengal to the late twentieth-century plays of Mahesh Dattani. Gokhale's work, despite being the only detailed study of the Indian English dramatists in the collection, presents a substantial account of the trajectory of the evolution of Indian plays in English and also presents the transition in terms of a more authoritative usage of the language and the stage by the dramatists.

1.3 The Discourse on Body Politique.

The second category is that of works that delve into examining the further subsections or schools of Indian theatre before and after independence. Sharmishtha Saha's *Theatre and National Identity in Colonial India: Formation of a Community Through Cultural Practice* (2018) is a significant document explaining the nationalist agendas in pre-independence Indian theatre, especially in Bengal and Bombay (Mumbai). Her work both complements and accentuates the limitations of this thesis, which retraces the trajectory of modern Indian theatre from a northern (Hindi) perspective. Vasudha Dalmia's book *Poetics, Plays, and Performance: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (2006) is a pioneering work in this regard. Dalmia undertakes a fascinating project of tracing the influence of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) on modern Indian theatrical traditions. She examines, especially, the Hindi theatrical arenas and traces the emergence of different streams with different ideological influences. She searches for the Indian national theatre in the works of Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850-1885), followed by Jaishankar Prasad (1889-1937), and then, in the works of Mohan Rakesh. She then searches for the similarities between Brecht's theatrical models and the use of folk theatre in the revivalist movement of the 1960s and 70s. She concludes by retracing the role of women directors and religion in shaping the Indian national theatrical consciousness. Her work is remarkable for lucidly delineating the several "streams" (119) of Indian theatre, including the nationalist-revivalist school of Harishchandra and Prasad, the realist school of Mohan Rakesh, and the theatre of the roots that emphasized the use of folk. She also highlights the playwrights' perspectives towards the extant traditions of drama, such as Harishchandra's contempt for the commercial enterprise of Parsi theatre, Prasad's rejection of the "realist vogue of the 1930s" (*Poetics* 119), and Mohan Rakesh's belief in the concepts of "reality" and "conflict" (119-120) to present the holistic complexity of his characters. Dalmia's work serves as an important document in terms of the contextualisation of these playwrights,

especially their literary influences and inspirations. For the purpose of this study, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances* provides the pivotal grounds of contexts and presents the similarities and contradictions that separate one school of Hindi drama from another. It also helps us understand the buzzword of the 1960s and 70s – folk – and its major proponents. She leads us to the theatre of Habib Tanvir and his unique amalgamation of the folk and the urban styles of theatre.

Similar to Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*, Nandi Bhatia's *Acts of Authority, Acts Of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India,* is another pioneering work discussing the political milieu of modern Indian theatre. Bhatia begins with a reiteration of the socio-political context during the pre-colonial era and how the genre of theatre appeared to the colonial government as a tool for resistance that could mobilize en masse the people's nationalist consciousness. She then proceeds to describe the theatrical and socio-political context that led to the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 and how the playwrights responded to it by implementing symbolic allegories such as Bhartendu Harishchandra's *Nildevi* (1876). In the following chapters, Bhatia describes several performances of Shakespeare by the English theatre companies in Bengal and also by the commercial Parsi theatre companies in Bombay. She then reiterates the social function and purpose of theatre as implied in the repertoire of plays by the Indian People's Theatre Association. The book ends on an emphatic note by revisiting the role of women in the Indian nationalist theatre during the first half of the twentieth century. Bhatia challenges the notion of an ideal nationalist woman during the decades of the freedom struggle by analysing the play *Parivartan* (Transformation, 1926) by the Hindi playwright Radheshyam Kathavachak (1890–1963). She notes:

> What we have in this drama, like a number of anticolonial plays, is a moral lesson for women, which suggests they assume the role that was deemed most appropriate for the well-being of the nation […] The prescription of such roles, in turn, provoked comparisons between 'modern' and 'traditional' women and initiated discussions regarding the

> morality surrounding women's roles. In so doing, the nationalist patriarchy carved out 'respectable' roles for women in which neither the prostitute nor the anglicized woman had much to share […] An important ramification of setting such parameters of 'respectability' was that women's voices were suppressed or remained marginal. The primary focus on nationalist concerns obscured women's experiences of subjugation within the confines of patriarchal structures. And since women's roles were conceptualized as primarily 'contributive' to the political domain of nationalism, most attempts toward women's autonomous contribution to theater and nationalism were appropriated. (112-113).

This pattern of prioritising the national interest by subsiding the secondary status of women and encouraging them to fulfil the roles defined by the orthodox socio-religious norms in the plays of the time has been highlighted by several scholars, including Dalmia and Lakshmi Subramanyam.

Another comprehensive scholarly corpus of work in regard to the classification of Indian theatre comprises Diana Dimitrova's *Gender Religion and Modern Hindi Drama* (2008) and *Hinduism and Hindi Theatre* (2016). Both these books advance further Dalmia's categorization of various streams of Indian theatre around the era of independence. Though Dimitrova's focus is specifically on the various schools of Hindi drama before and after the independence, she develops the pivotal discourse around the reformist agendas of these playwrights. She examines the works of playwrights such as Upendranath Ashk, Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Shrivastava, Lakshmi Narayan Mishra, Jagadish Chandra Mathur, and Mohan Rakesh. Similar to Bhatia's analysis of Radheshyam Kathavachak's *Parivartan*, through the lenses of gender and religion, she analyses the plays and the characters, especially women, of the above-mentioned playwrights. Her findings report substantial distinctions between the different schools of Hindi drama, which she labels as "neo-Sanskritic," "pro-Western," and the realist school (*Gender* 31). She retraces the beginnings of the modern Hindi Drama Bhartendu Harishchandra, which is followed by Prasad. She credits Harishchandra for devising a blueprint for an Indian national

theatre by emancipating it from the clutches of commercial Parsi theatre. His plays were written in the distinct forms of comedies (Prahasana) and tragedies (Viyoganta) and he called his works a filiation from the classical Sanskrit tradition (25). Dimitrova deems Harishchandra "moderately reformative" (25-26) as his women characters are presented as courageous to fight for the freedom of their husbands and yet are subservient in the manner, they devote themselves to their duties as wives (Stridharma). Similarly, she observes that Prasad's neo-Sanskritic school of drama comprising his plays, such as *Dhruvaswamini* (1933), glorify the ancient Indian past and are in conformity with Hindu religious traditions. She notes that Prasad's plays reiterated his position as the pioneer of romanticism[19] in India. He openly critiqued Western modernity and wanted to write "in the wake of Kalidasa and Shakespeare" (28), thus attempting to liberate the Indian theatrical traditions from the influence of colonial dramaturgy. His plays are written in highly sophisticated and Sanskritised Hindi and Prasad appears indifferent towards the stage as a medium to project his reformative ideas. The only significant difference between Prasad and Harishchandra, according to Dimitrova, is that Harishchandra "wrote plays for the stage to directly address immediate problems" (28), while Prasad was more interested in searching for an Indian national tradition of theatre that was free from the colonial theatrical model.

The other major school of Hindi drama was the pro-Western school of Upendranath Ashk (1910-1996), Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Shrivastava (1912-1957), and Laxmi Narayan Mishra (1903-87), who departed from the tradition of Prasad and chose to represent contemporary issues in a more contemporary language and style. Their plays did not conform to the tradition of Prasad or Harishchandra. Instead, they were influenced by the European modernist playwrights Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw[20], whose plays are renowned as

[19] Prasad is considered one of the pioneers of the romantic movement, also known as Chhayavad in Hindi Literature.
[20] See *Gender* p. 24.

problem plays and present social problems of contemporary society. Oppression of women at the hands of patriarchal social norms was a recurring theme in the works of these playwrights. However, it is their treatment of this theme and their approach towards this still pervasive issue that distinguishes them from one another. Dimitrova's works make vivid distinctions between these playwrights in terms of the degree of their reformist agendas. Lakshmi Narayan Mishra is deemed, by Dimitrova, as the least reformative because of his adherence to stringent social norms that keep women subservient. Dimitrova notes in *Hinduism and Hindi Theatre* that "Mishra's dramatic work is an interesting instance of an artistic encounter with Western tradition, which results in innovations, experimentalism, and openness in dramatic form, and conservatism in the interpretation of women's issues (45). His work is seen in sharp contrast with those of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar. Mishra's play, *Sindur Ki Holi* (Holi with Vermillion, 1933) vetoed against widow remarriage and in favour of child marriage (*Gender* 24) and thus inadvertently advocated the coercive subjugation of women through orthodox socio-religious norms. Bhuvaneshwar and Ashk, on the contrary, departed from this obfuscated method of Western influence channelled through Indian consciousness. They wrote in the wake of European realism, albeit with one significant difference. Their plays ended with the playwright's resolution to the issues presented in the play and skipped the open-ended denouement, which was a signature characteristic of European realist plays. Both Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar, are deemed highly reformative by Dimitrova because of the strong and independent portrayals of their women characters. She notes that their female characters resemble the "rebellious Draupadi"[21] and the Hindu goddess Shakti (*Gender* 50) and that Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar, through the lives of their heroines, represent the conflict between tradition and modernity. Characters such as Stri and Raju from Bhuwaneshwar's *Straik* (Strike, 1938) and Ashk's *Alag Alag Raste* (Separate Ways, 1954) manifest this departure of these playwrights from the methods of

[21] A character from the Hindu mythological epic *Mahabharata.*

Mishra. Their plays can be termed outright rebellious, which, unfortunately, was not taken in a positive manner by the critics and pundits of their era, thus resulting in an alleged erasure[22] of their works from scholarly debates around the reformist tenets of Indian theatre.

The third school, as pointed out by Dimitrova, was the realist-naturalist school of drama led by Mohan Rakesh. Rakesh, through his works, led the search for an Indian theatrical tradition that was free from the influences of the Western methods of dramaturgy and also reflected the sensibilities of the time. His conceptual subjects – reality and conflict – however, aligned more with Ibsen's and Ashk's subjects of reality and individualistic struggle than with Jaishankar Prasad's historical neo-Sanskritic drama. His plays, though, except his last (*Adhe Adhure*), were modelled after Prasad's historical plays and represented the settings of Indian antiquity. His characters, such as Kalidasa, Mallika, Nand, and Sundari, were semi-historical and were deliberately used to portray the conundrums of a twentieth-century Indian.

His model of theatre encourages us to contemplate that Rakesh was influenced by both the neo-Sanskritic school of Prasad and the realist school of Ibsen, Ashk, and Bhuvaneshwar. His plays are found somewhere in the void that is created by this conflict of classical Indian and modern European influences on the contemporary Indian dramatic tradition. At one point, he departs from the neo-classical tradition of Jaishankar Prasad, and at another, he amalgamates European realism with it. It is this departure that this study explores to examine the reformist agendas in his plays. Scholars such as Dimitrova concur with his experimental style of playwrighting but also label him a traditionalist in terms of his treatment of social issues, especially the ones arising from gender bias and subjugation. This study scrutinises Dimitrova's assertions and argues that Rakesh might not have been a reformer in a similar manner as observed with Ashk or Bhuvaneshwar, but by no means was he not a reformist playwright. His reformist agendas are

[22] See Dimitrova's essay *The "Indian" Character of Modern Hindi Drama*.

often sub-textual and are found in the overall schematics of his stories. The patterns and questions that he establishes with his plays are evidence enough to qualify him as a reformist playwright which will be discussed at length in the following sections of this study.

A discourse on the purpose and functions of the oeuvre of plays in the post-independence tradition leads us towards another category of scholarship on Indian theatre. This class of literature analyses the body politique of post-independence Indian theatre and discusses the primary subjects and methods of these playwrights at length. Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2005) leads this category of work by creating rigorous discourses on the subject and functions of modern Indian theatre. The book, divided into two parts, discusses in the first, the major subjects and themes of post-independence Indian theatre and how they are amalgamated with realism to create contemporary sensibilities on the proscenium stage. In the second, Dharwadker brings forth the contradictions between realism and the folk traditions of theatre juxtaposed with elements of myth and gender issues. Dharwadker's work presents significant discussion regarding the presentation and reception of these works, which adds substantial details to this study's assessment of the reformist agendas of the playwrights.

A significant category of works consisting of a plethora of scholarly discourses and information on the works of the selected playwrights is constituted by the accompanying pieces such as introductions, forewords, and prefaces to the translated versions of their plays. Works such as Aparna Dharwadker's translated version of *Asadh Ka Ek Din*, titled One Day in the Season of Rain (2015), explore insightfully the discourses around Rakesh's monumental play. Dharwadker dedicates her attention to retracing and reestablishing *Asadh Ka Ek Din* as a canonical work that marks the departure from the earlier traditions of Hindi drama. She calls *Asadh*:

> […] the only original dramatic work in the twentieth century that is a full-scale imaginative exploration of a classical writer's life and

> texts – an experimental, theatrical equivalent of a Künstlerroman which, in this case, takes the classical Sanskrit poet Kalidas in his maturity as its extraordinary subject. (9)

Dharwadker's book establishes Rakesh as a "postcolonial modernist who defines a circumspect position for himself in relation to the effects of British colonialism, Euromodernism," (15) and the modern Hindi theatrical traditions. This thesis takes cues from this assertion and further explores Rakesh's "circumspect position" in terms of a liminal space in which he derives from the various influences mentioned above and then amalgamates elements from the previous traditions with his theatrical experiments. His innovations rely upon his tweaking the rules of the previous traditions of Hindi drama and using historical figures and settings to represent inherently modern conundrums and conflicts. This relaxed use of the techniques of Harishchandra and Prasad from the first generation and of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar from the second generation of Hindi drama creates that liminal space from which emerge Rakesh's convention-reforming plays.

Another work that consists of invaluable information on Rakesh's dramaturgy is Jaidev Taneja's edited version of *Natya Vimarsh* (2012). The book comprises an introduction by Taneja and essays by Rakesh himself, delineating his approach to modern Hindi theatre. Other essays include Rakesh's ideas about his transformation from a short story writer into a playwright, his admiration for the initial tradition of Hindi theatre started by Harishchandra; his trenchant reservations against the repertoire of Parsi theatre due to their commercial approach to the Hindustani theatre and their indifference to the Hindi playwrights' project of establishing a dramatic tradition; his visit to Europe and his interactions and exchange of ideas with the European dramaturgs.; and lastly, his unfinished project titled *The Dramatic Word* (see *Natya Vimarsh*, Appendix II 183).

Similarly, works containing contextual and complementary material to Habib Tanvir's theatre include a handful but significant scholarly contributions from Tanvir's nephew and renowned theatre

scholar and critic Javed Malick, Anjum Katyal, Vasudha Dalmia and Katheryn Hansen. Malick and Katyal have published book-length studies on Tanvir's works. Vasudha Dalmia and Katheryn Hansen's works consist of essays that provide significant insights into Tanvir's dramaturgy. Javed Malick's introduction, for instance, to Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* and Other Plays (2018) and Katyal's introduction to her translation of Charandas are two of the most critical pieces of writing on the works of Tanvir. The difference only lies in the overall function of their writings. Malick takes a more overarching approach to establish Tanvir as an essentially modern playwright who harnesses the vibrance and colours of the folk performance art Nacha to drive home his radically reformative socio-political ideas. Starting from Tanvir's first play, *Agra Bazar,* which presents the conflict between the plebian and the elitist concepts of poetry to *Charandas Chor,* which Malick calls a Bakhtinian 'carnivalesque' reversal of the social order (see *Foreword* to *Rabelais and His World*, 1984, p. x), Malick points to the political and social appeals of Tanvir's plays. While Katyal, in her elaborate introduction to the play *Charandas Chor,* enumerates the levels at which Tanvir is a folk as well as an urban playwright, in other words, she elaborates on the process through which Tanvir amalgamates the rural with the urban.

Katyal's other celebrated work, *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre* (2012), retraces the trajectory of Tanvir's evolution as a playwright from his early years with IPTA in Bombay (Mumbai) and Delhi to his visit to the UK to learn acting and production and then to his return to India. However, the most noticeable aspects of her book are the chapters *Working with the Chhattisgarhis* (pp. 74-87), *Connecting with the Folk* (pp. 107-138), and *The Political Habib Tanvir* (pp. 148-157). It is in this part of the book that she outlines Tanvir's far-reaching influence on the contemporary theatrical arena. Especially in the last chapter, she highlights the source of Tanvir's political leanings and his "celebration of the plebian" (*Habib* 151) both on stage through his stories and off it through his ensemble of folk actors and actresses.

Also significant in assessing, or rather reestablishing, Tanvir's position as a playwright-director and his unprecedented approach to theatre is Javed Malick's essay in his book *Diverse Pursuits: Essays on Drama and Theatre* (2021). His book documents a detailed account of the trajectory of modern drama and how it shaped the tradition of modern Indian theatre. Special attention needs to be paid to the third chapter in the book titled *Refashioning Modernity: Habib Tanvir and his Naya Theatre* (pp. 132–173). It is in this chapter that Malick points to Tanvir's creative space in which he subverted all the major rules of his contemporary theatrical traditions and innovated a novel stream on Indian theatre, culminating in the theatrical movement called Theatre of Roots during the 1970s. Malick, in this chapter, also challenges the popular "misconception" (*Diverse* 132) of Tanvir being labelled as a folk playwright and his drama being called only "a variety of folk drama" (132). Malick argues that Tanvir was simultaneously a folk as well as a modern playwright. He notes that these two;

> […] dimensions of Tanvir's work – i.e. his predilection for the folk and his modern and democratic consciousness […] are not two separate currents or aspects of his theatre. On the contrary, they are closely interconnected or intertwined […] in the sense that neither followed the European model nor did it blindly copy any traditional Indian form. His approach to folk cultural forms was neither revivalist nor antiquarian. (134)

Tanvir's unique approach of blending the folk with the urban and creating a novel stream of post-independence Indian theatre leads Malick to claim that Tanvir was "not only evolving a new style and idiom for his own work, he was also, in some ways, redefining the very concept of modernity […]" (135).

The most recent addition to the scholarship on Tanvir is the book *Habib Tanvir and His Legacy in Theatre: A Centennial Reappraisal* (2024). Edited by Anjum Katyal and Javed Mallick, the book presents several known and new perspectives on Tanvir's contribution to modern Indian theatre. Beginning with an introduction by Katyal and Malick, the book reappraises Tanvir through essays with diverse lenses, such as

Shanta Gokhale's Habib Tanvir, Free Spirit of Theatre, which studies the maestro for his norm-breaking approach to theatre and declares him the "quintessential bohemian" (17). The essay presents, in a concise form, Tanvir's trajectory and evolution as a playwright-director, as well as his journey from Raipur in Chhattisgarh to London and Bristol and then back to Delhi. Similarly, Javed Malick's *A Jugalbandi between the Folk and Modernity: The Poetics and Politics of Tanvir's Theatre* is another essay with familiar connotations about Tanvir's work. Readers familiar with Malick's works would already be aware of his ideas in this essay, which appear as an extension of the third chapter of his book *Diverse Pursuits*. Essays offering a fresh perspective on Tanvir's work include *A Truly Naya Theatre* Sameera Iyenger, which studies the innovative methods of play production that Tanvir employed by keeping his artists/actors at the centre of the production process; *In Search of Extra in the Ordinary* by Shampa Shah, which is an examination of the austerity of Tanvir's stories most of which are adaptations from rural folklore. Similarly, Sudhanva Deshpande's *Habib Tanvir and the Actor* presents a refreshing study of Tanvir's reliance on and utilisation of his actors in the development of his plays. It also presents how effectively Tanvir directed both the rural and the urban actors and relied heavily on feedback and improvisation to finalize a sequence. Another novel discussion is initiated by Vikram Iyengar's interview with Habib Tanvir's daughter, Nageen Tanvir, who is an accomplished singer and has been a part of Naya Theatre since her childhood. The interview shifts the reader's attention to a lesser-explored tenet of Tanvir's plays, viz. music, which, despite being an integral part of his repertoire, is yet to be examined as a composite dramatic device that is not merely interspersed for entertainment. The book culminates with Vikram Phukan's retracing of the journey of *Charandas Chor* outside India.

The significance of these dedicated scholarly works can be understood in terms of their role in diversifying the channels of investigation in the works of these playwrights. Both Rakesh and Tanvir can be retraced in these works as avant-garde experimentalists who have

carved a distinct space through their plays and redefined their respective traditions. In the following section, we shall explore similar focused studies on Mahesh Dattani that simultaneously retrace the playwright and highlight the evolution of the tradition of Indian English drama.

1.4 Mahesh Dattani and the Scholarship on Indian English Theatre.

Mahesh Dattani is one playwright whose works have been studied extensively and can be found in the undergraduate or post-graduate curricula of English literature across the country. Despite the plethora of articles on his works, he still remains to be studied comprehensively for his contribution to redefining the core paradigms of Indian English 'drama' to advance it towards 'performance' (*Drama* 8) in terms of Richard Schechner. Prior to examining the works that study Dattani's plays and his stagecraft, we shall briefly recall the trajectory of Indian English drama through first-generation scholarship. The majority of studies on Indian English drama mentioned in the first section dealt with the characteristics of Indian English plays and the ostensible shortcomings of playwrights in writing for the stage. Besides a few essays, such as those by Shanta Gokhale and Eunice De Souza, not many studies focus specifically on one playwright, and those that do have to limit their scrutiny to the text rather than the performative aspects of dramatic writing. Most of the critics, including M. K. Naik and Adya Rangacharya, have cited the playwrights' failure to develop a localised register of the English language to convey the sensibilities of contemporary Indian society successfully. Another reason they observed was the failure of the playwright to draw upon other contemporary traditions for crafting plays for the stage. Nevertheless, the emergence of Mahesh Dattani and his senior contemporaries, such as Majula Padmanabhan, Uma Parameswaran, and Dina Mehta, ushered the tradition of Indian English drama into a new phase. Dattani, in particular, took the movement further by establishing his own theatre company, Playpen, in 1988.

What makes the case of Indian English drama even more fascinating is the presence of professional theatre companies in urban centres such as Bombay during the late nineteenth century. The Parsi Elphinstone Dramatic Society, the Kalidas Elphinstone Society, the Shakespeare Society of Elphinstone College, the Bombay Amateur Dramatic Club[23], etc. However, as Naik mentions, these companies mostly produced Shakespeare and other European plays, and the development of the modern form of theatre in this region happened in Marathi rather than in English. Even during the decades around independence, with organisations for theatre being launched, "[…] none devoted exclusively to drama in English" (183). Organisations such as the Indian People's Theatre Association and the Indian National Theatre, established by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya,[24] were dedicated mostly to producing plays in Hindi and other regional languages and to integrating diverse styles. Thus, the first-generation critics and their criticism of Indian English drama were accurate in pointing to the dearth of a performative tradition in English, owing to a plethora of reasons on the part of the playwrights and the professional or amateur theatre companies.

The emergence of Dattani's generation not only brought a new chapter in the tradition of Indian English drama but also broadened the scope of criticism and analysis of this new stream of Indian drama that is now a thriving performative tradition. Presently, the plays of Dattani and other Indian playwrights are performed globally, and the criticism and scholarly attention to the present repertory of Indian plays is not limited to Indian scholars. However, it could be challenging to sieve out scholarships that deal specifically with Dattani's plays as performative scripts[25] and not merely as stories presenting contemporary social issues pervading the urban-Indian society. In the following sections, I shall explore some of the seminal scholarly works on Mahesh Dattani's plays

[23] See M.K Naik's *The Achievement of Indian Drama in English* in *Some Perspectives on Indian Drama*, p. 182.
[24] See Naik, p. 183.
[25] See Schechner's *Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance* (1973), p. 8.

that can be credited for drawing attention to the playwright and shaping the vast corpus of scholarship on Indian English drama in general. This study, in the subsequent chapters, however, shall limit itself to such scholarships that point to the reformative trajectory of Dattani's plays as defined previously, as sites of both social and theatrical reform.

Anjelie Multani's works on Mahesh Dattani's plays present the foundational critical perspectives on the research on Dattani. Her works, such as *Centering the Margins: Essays on the Plays of Mahesh Dattani* (2018), and edited collections including *Final Solutions: Text and Criticism* (2009), *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives* (2011), offer a wide range of perspectives on Dattani's works. Her critical insights on his plays, especially Final Solutions, are some of the foremost scholarly explorations that offer critical perspectives from a contemporary point of view. Her explorations of issues of *Gender*, homosexual desire, and the role of memory in her *Centering the Margins* is one of the foremost and most incisive pieces of writing on the play. However, the most significant part of her book is her introduction, which retraces the trajectory of Indian English drama through what she calls the "[p]olitics of production and [p]erformance" (11). She notes:

> Pepsi and other multinationals are business houses which target a particular class of consumers and sell a particular image – trendy young international, aggressive, upwardly mobile, discerning, and so on […] They chose to finance a play by an Indian in English, a play that exploits the family as its base, which is concerned with family relationships and gender roles. Perhaps aware of the enormous risk they faced in producing a play in English by an Indian […]. (17–18).

Multani's assessment of the involvement of multinational corporations in the production of plays argues for the case that the vast gauntlet of modern Indian theatre and its evolution is yet to be examined from such unique perspectives as economics. Her other significant work, the edited collection of essays, *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives,* offers a range of scholarship on his several plays. The essays in this collection, such as *We Live in the Flicker: Reflections in Time on the Plays of Mahesh Dattani* by John McRae, *Dismembering*

Traditions within Postcolonial Contexts: A Retrospective look into Dance Like a Man by Gouri N. Mehta, *Final Solutions?* by Multani, *Terrifying Tara: The Angst of the Family* by G J V Prasad, and the appended interviews of Dattani by Multani and by Erin B. Mee, lead the readers to the initial junctions of discourse on Dattani's writings as well into the thought process of the playwright. Especially, the essay by Gouri N Mehta has been a key text behind the idea of exploring the liminal dimensions in Dattani's writings, which she notes stems from "a hybridized state that emerges by both domination or subversion of tradition" (*Critical Perspectives* 101). Despite the rich and diverse attention to various aspects of Dattani's plays, these works lean more towards the thematics of his plays and seldom choose Dattani's stagecraft as their subject.

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri's *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction* (2005) is one of the few works that deals with Dattani's dramaturgy holistically by looking beyond the themes and issues presented in his plays. The social issues permeating the urban middle class are a leitmotif in scholarly works on Dattani. Chaudhuri, however, extends her studies to other intricate details about Dattani's stagecraft and credits him for developing a model of theatre that prioritises stage performance. The book begins with an introduction that recalls the trajectory of Modern Indian theatre. She retraces the theatrical traditions and their prominent practitioners, starting from nineteenth-century Bengal to the post-independence Hindi and Marathi theatres. She then discusses the professional, amateur, and experimental theatre companies in India, highlighting their inherently urban presence and characteristics. She concludes the introduction with a brief account of the contemporary Indian English drama and how it turned into a performative tradition. Delving into the question of language and the response to the author's choice of English, she elaborates on the resentment that some of the novelists and playwrights writing in English had to face in India. However, with the arrival of playwrights such as Dattani, the situation began to change as she notes:

> After decades of active urban usage and in a sense, homogenization of the English language, with the audiences becoming much more at home with the many varieties of Indian English that is internalized and spoken without premeditation, Indian theatre in English begins to emerge with a distinctive and vigorous identity.
>
> Mahesh Dattani is in the vanguard of those who have made this happen; he is an actor and director with his own theatre group and has an innate sense of dialogue that is vital, stimulating, lucid and effective. Dealing with compelling issues rooted in his milieu, he has dispelled the perception about English theatre being just gratuitous fizz. His audiences have been large and responsive, both to the spectacle and the language. (13)

Chaudhuri's assertion sums up the transition in the genre of Indian English theatre led by Dattani and his contemporaries, such as Poile Sengupta, Padmanabhan, Uma Parameswaran, Dina Mehta, etc.

The introduction to Chaudhuri's book is followed by the first three chapters that deal with the themes and subjects in Dattani's plays. The first chapter, titled *The Setting: The Constructed/Deconstructed Family* deals with the complex dynamics of the urban middle-class families in India. Chaudhuri calls this structure both "constructed" and "deconstructed". She notes:

> Dattani unambiguously chooses his location within the dynamics of a pre-existing structure of the contemporary urban Indian family, which then turns into the site of the ensuing conflict within his narrative. With newer realities piling on the older, 'acceptable' realities, his plots and subplots often work to destroy the very edifice in which they situate themselves, blasting the given stereotypes that shape the structures. And two, Dattani makes use of the available stage space to reveal these structures in concrete terms and, once again, achieves the sense of fractured reality by splitting up his performance spaces in practically all his plays into multilevel, multidimensional spaces. His characters move and speak in these spaces with voices that echo and reverberate, to sometimes consolidate and sometimes parody the narrative structures. (25)

Her assertion about the construction and deconstruction of the complex familial structure and the latent conflicts is on point again as we see this

pattern in all of Dattani's plays, which in turn is a linear progression from the plays of his preceding generation of playwrights such as Tendulkar and Rakesh.

The next chapter, titled *The 'Invisible' Issues: Sexuality, Alternate Sexuality, and Gender,* reiterates the social function and purpose of Dattani's plays through the issues he presents. The phrase 'invisible issues' appears as a cliché to describe Dattani's themes and the conflicts he presents, and has been used by several scholars, starting from Erin B. Mee. However, it does not mean that these issues do not merit revisiting; in fact, Chaudhuri focuses more on the unconventional, or what she calls "fringe" (47) issues, rather than the issues of interpersonal conflict and gender subjugation, which arguably every other article on Dattani's plays deals with today.

The fourth chapter, titled *Identity: Locating the Self,* elaborates further on a recurring theme in Dattani's plays and generally in studies on Dattani. Identity and the crises associated with it find a vivid manifestation in the plays of Dattani, which Chaudhuri explicates further in this chapter. She also challenges the ascribing of the "exclusivist identity" and "elitism" to Indian English theatre and how Dattani's arrival on the theatrical scene changes this notion. She then analyses Dattani's plays one by one and discusses the conflicts emanating from the power play between identities.

It is in the final two chapters of the book that Chaudhuri transcends the gamut of scholarships that only deal with the family, identity, and unconventional themes, such as homosexuality. The fifth chapter, titled *Reading the Stage: The Self-Reflexivity of the Texts,* is one of the distinct studies on Dattani that presents the reader with the reasons that have contributed to his success as a playwright. The chapter is an in-depth analysis of Dattani's stagecraft, for which Chaudhuri relies on both the theatricality of the dramatic text as well as the literariness and intertextuality of performance scripts. Through the perspectives of theorists ranging from semioticians Umberto Eco and Kier Elam to

theatre and performance theorists such as Marvin Carlson, she delineates the modalities of interdependence between text and performance. Dattani's drama transcends the level of text because of his association with theatre and also because he writes for the actor. As Chaudhuri notes:

> The fact that Dattani is intrinsically a theatre person, rather than a writer, is evident in the way he is able to structure the stage mechanism effectively and how he, at times, allows the texts to speak for themselves, and look at their own workings and methodology. He employs a language that is often pungent, clear and sharp, pushing the spoken word to its limits, and interspersing them with pregnant silences that only someone with an intimate inwardness with theatre can. (105)

It is for these reasons that Chaudhuri claims that Dattani is not merely a playwright but a craftsman who writes with a director's vision that can be transitioned seamlessly into the scenes on the stage.

The last chapter of Chaudhuri's book again breaks the cliched mould of scholarly frameworks by studying the contemporary relevance of Dattani's plays and their transition into film scripts. She terms Dattani's oeuvre of films, such as *Mango Souffle* (2002) and *Morning Raga* (2004), as "crossover cinema" (115), which against the parallel cinema of Satyajit Ray (1921–1992) and Ritwik Ghatak (1925–1976), is "more disposed to telling stories and communicating, accepting the new shifts in the paradigms in terms of gender, relationships, sexualities and so on" (116).

Chaudhuri's analysis, albeit profound, stops at establishing the reciprocal relationship between the dramatic text and performance through semiotic and intertextual perspectives. This study picks up this strand and extends it further to examine the liminality in Dattani's stagecraft binds the Schechnerian concepts of drama and performance. Dattani's stage is replete with semiotic "icons," "symbols," and "indices" (Biswas 9–10) that help his

texts transcend the label of drama and traverse to the paradigms of script and theatre. However, it is the performativity of his texts rendered visually through his stage directions that aids the overall semiotics of his plays.

Another significant study on Mahesh Dattani's work is taken up by Jisha Menon, a polymath in theatre and performance. Her book *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* (2013) is a fascinating work that presents a refreshing analysis of the narratives of partition and nationalistic ideas in India and Pakistan through the lens of mimesis and performance. She calls these nations "mimetic doubles" (6) that replicate each other in performing the political narratives of the nation. Menon, through the play *Final Solutions* (1992), explores Dattani's treatment of the memories of partition and the communal riots as generated from the performance of the "practices of proximity" that "transform into strident and implacable politics of identity" (3). Having performed the role of Daksha in the first production of the play on the 10th of July 1993, Menon brings an insider's perspective in her analysis of the mnemonics of trauma in *Final Solutions*. She notes in her introduction to the book:

> The character of Daksha offered me a lens with which to traverse the transformation of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed "practices of proximity" into the "politics of identity." Chakrabarty offers proximity and identity as alternative ways of dealing with difference, where identity refers to a congealed fixity and proximity refers to negotiation of difference. When, for example, does Daksha withdraw from the practice of negotiating difference with her neighbor and petrify Zarine as her absolute other? How does this fixity of identity structure the Gandhi home as Hindu and foreclose the possibility of hospitality to the Muslim boys? By tracing the contingent and particular ways in which negotiated practices of proximity transform into strident and implacable politics of identity, Dattani exposes how Hindu liberals, such as Ramnik Gandhi, are unable to attend to the critique of unthinking Hindu privilege launched by Javed and Bobby. (3)

Her close "proximity" with her role helps her analyse the events of the plays both subjectively and also from the objective perspective of an academic, and as readers, we get insights that are usually beyond the grasp of both hardcore academics and professional actors, and which emanate from what Bjorn Thomassen calls a liminal space between theory and practice.

The introduction is followed by her chapter titled *Bordering on Drama: The Performance of Politics and the Politics of Performance* in which she studies the transition of audience into (political) "publics" (22). She examines the performative nature of events such as the Wagah Border Retreat ceremony that appeal to nationalist sentiments. She notes:

> The border ceremonies at Wagah exemplify the spectacular strategies that not only reify and make visible the power of the state, but also insidiously inscribe social power onto the bodies of its spectators. Reading the Retreat ceremony as a spectacular theatre of nationalism allows us to consider the relationship between aesthetic and political representation. The aesthetic representation of the nation attempts to secure the political relationship between the representative and the represented; however, the identical rituals across the border performed by Indian and Pakistani border guards ironically destabilize both accounts of identity within and difference without the nation. (22)

She contests and argues that similar aesthetic performances in both nations make them "mimetic doubles" and, in turn, problematises the polemics of aesthetic nationalism.

In the second chapter, *Ghatak's Cinema and the Discoherence of Bengal Partition,* she turns to the representation of the effects of partition and their creation of trauma through films, such as *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1965). The experiences of the characters on either side in Ghatak's films again create the symbolic allusion to mimetic doubles who experience similar memories of trauma only within different political and social contexts. Other chapters of this book, titled *The Poetics and Politics of Accommodation*, *Somatic Texts and the Gender of Partition*, and

Kashmir: Hospitality and the "Unfinished Business" of Partition, respectively, examine the mimetic performance of nationalism in other modes and genres. *The Poetics*, for example, takes up Mohan Rakesh's short story *Malbe Ka Malik* (*The Owner of the Rubble*, 1960) to present the memories of people who lost their lives and homes during partition. Similarly, the chapter *Somatic Texts* deals with poetry and other texts to represent the gendered nature of the violence during the partition, while the last chapter, *Kashmir,* talks about the folk form of Bhand Pather and how it challenges polarising notions amidst all the political turmoil in Kashmir.

Despite its trenchant arguments and profound contextualisation, we observe Menon's work refer to Dattani's *Final Solutions* as a site of regeneration and representation of the far-reaching impacts of the partition and the violence it generated. Menon's book is not a dedicated analysis of Dattani and his stagecraft, as we saw with Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, but serves the critical purpose of stating the relevance of Dattani's work in the present political context in India and also within the neighbouring countries. This study relies on Menon's analysis for her insights on the performative aspects of the play. The memetic representation of the partition violence through Dakhsa/Hardika's memories and the sequences of the mob allows us to study the spatial and temporal liminality associated with the characters and its influence on their lives.

Other prominent works on Mahesh Dattani include articles, such as Ashis Sengupta's *Mahesh Dattani and the Indian (Hindu) Family Experience* (2005), which studies the urban Indian families as the "shaper of the society" and "the image of the very society – a product of the value system the society stands for and of the cultural discourse it propagates" (151); collections of essays such as *Critical Perspectives on Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives* (2011) edited by Angelie Multani and Kaustubh Chakraborty's *Indian Drama in English* (2011). These collections comprise essays such as those by Ketaki Datta, Samipendra Banerjee, Pathik Roy, Indranee Ghosh, Nilanjana Sen, and

Anindya Sen, which can be broadly categorised as thematic studies of Dattani's plays. Critical secondary sources for understanding Dattani's approach to theatre also comprise his several interviews, such as with Erin B Mee (1997) and with Kuhu Chanana (2011).

1.5. Conclusion: The Trajectory of Scholarship on Modern Indian Theatre

This review of the extant scholarships on modern Indian theatre serves the purpose of a literary signpost, pointing to the prominent scholars and their works that help us retrace the trajectory of modern Indian theatre as well as the three playwrights in this thesis. The most prominent limitation one can find with this review is that it misses out on a big chunk of scholarship available on modern Indian playwrights in other regional languages such as Hindi and Marathi. The other observable limitation is the lack of major studies on Indian folk/indigenous theatrical traditions that could have helped identify the political discourse on folk theatres and their contribution to the development of post-independence traditions of Indian theatre. Nevertheless, in the context of this thesis, this review supports the argument about the dearth of scholarship on Indian theatre in English in general and especially on the tradition(s) of post-independence Indian theatre.

Beginning from the earliest generation of criticism on modern Indian theatre and to critical works as recent as the present decade, it delineates the major taxonomies of scholarship in three categories, viz. the historiographical, the polemics on body politique, and the studies dedicated to individual playwrights creating a robust corpus of secondary literature. The study takes cues from the aforementioned categories of scholarship, especially those that extend the polemics on the reformist agendas of modern Indian theatre, such as Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence*, Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*, and Diana Dimitrova's *Gender, Religion, and Modern Indian Theatre*. The above overview yields that despite

examining in detail the form, content, and agendas of the playwrights in various traditions of Indian theatre, the extant scholarship does not scrutinize the shifting reformist paradigms of Indian theatre and the playwrights who have insinuated the shift in their respective traditions. Fascinatingly, Mohan Rakesh has been criticized for his mild reformative outlook towards the Indian middle-class society. Tanvir has been discussed at length for refashioning Indian modernity and for bringing the folk to the urban proscenium stage. Similarly, Dattani's plays have been studied exhaustively for their themes and representations of issues such as gender bias, patriarchal subjugation, fragmented identities, and prejudices against homosexuality.

This thesis challenges the obvious demarcations and labels to the works of these playwrights and ventures to find the source of their innovative dramaturgy that has led to them being labelled as reformist playwrights. Irrespective of the criticisms of Mohan Rakesh by scholars such as Renu Juneja and Diana Dimitrova and Rakesh's repeated claims about not writing with a social function in mind, we observe all his plays reporting the reality of his times without any fabrications and thus presenting the complexity of the individuals and their conflicts in a newly independent nation. Despite his mild attitude to women's issues, all his plays converge to challenge and subvert the expected gendered roles. Similarly, Tanvir's use of the folk form of Nacha, although seen as an attempt to rejuvenate the urban interest in folk traditions, is contradicted by Tanvir's own trajectory as a playwright-director reveals his liminal experiences as a learner practitioner of the folk form and as a student of acting and direction at Bristol and London. Dattani's themes have been examined time and again for their pervading nature and relevance to the contemporary socio-cultural fabric; however, there are only a few studies that credit him for his role as the liberator of Indian English Drama from the clutches of overt literariness, and even if they do, they do not examine the factors that distinguish Dattani as a playwright. Most significantly, this thesis employs a seldom-used lens to study Indian theatrical traditions – liminality – to study why these

playwrights have been successful despite not claiming to be out-and-out reformers like some of their contemporaries. Therefore, to comprehend the distinct contributions of these playwrights, the thesis approaches their reformative agendas from multiple perspectives and reports that they stem from their liminal positions in their socio-literary context. This approach leads us to examine their plays for multiple connotations of the term reform, which we shall explore in the following chapters, beginning with Mohan Rakesh.

The following chapter on Rakesh sets the tone and the uniformity of the method, which requires us to take an outward-to-inward approach while studying these playwrights. The chapter (and all subsequent ones) begins with an analysis of the tradition to which the playwright belongs to establish the distinct zone marked as the playwright's own and as their point of departure. It then proceeds to the analysis of their works and accentuates the existence of liminal spaces and conflicts as a distinguished method of the playwrights. Following the chapters on the playwrights is the concluding chapter of the thesis that reiterates the findings of this study and attempts to create further nodes for investigation by peers and future generations of scholars.

CHAPTER 2: The Complexity of Reality: A Study of Mohan Rakesh

2.1 Introduction

Born as Madan Mohan Guglani in Amritsar in 1925, Mohan Rakesh emerged as a pioneer of short stories and plays in the 1950s and 1960s. He completed his M.A. in Hindi and English from Lahore. He also translated the Sanskrit classic *Mrichhakatikam* by Shudraka[26] (c. 200 – 400 BCE). Rakesh had been introduced to literature[27] at an early by his father who was a lawyer by profession and an avid reader. In fact, Upendranath Ashk was a family friend of Rakesh's (see *Natya Vimarsh*, p. x). He had a close experience of theatre in his college years and even acted in a production of *Svapnavasawadatta* by Bhasa[28] (c. 4th Century to BCE to 4th Century CE). He emphasized the role of the "atmosphere" in his father's home towards the development of his literary sensibilities in his interview. He said:

> I owe a great deal of my interest in writing to the atmosphere in my father's house. He was a man who combined many cultural and literary activities with his career as a lawyer, and from my early child hood, I had that sort of literary atmosphere around me. I don't think that this atmosphere was primarily responsible for my writing, but it certainly helped me to grow in a manner whereby I felt attracted to this sort of world. I read many writers when I was young and, that way, I found myself trying to express myself through this medium by the time I was about sixteen. **(*Interview* 15)**

His close proximity to literature and theatre from an early age contributed significantly to his evolution as a writer. He started his

[26] Shudraka was a Sanskrit playwright who is renowned for plays such as *Vinavasavadatta* and *Padmaprabhritaka* besides *Mrichchhakatika.* All his plays are believed to have been written between the 4th and the 6th century CE.
[27] Parts of this chapter have been published as a research article in the journal *Modern Drama*, issue 68.1.
[28] Bhasa, too, was a renowned Sanskrit playwright and, along with Kalidasa and Shudraka, made the trinity of Sanskrit drama. His plays, such as *Svapnavasavadatta, Charudatta, Pancharatra,* and *Madhyamavyayoga,* were only discovered in the early twentieth century. He is believed to have lived after Asvaghosa (c. 100–200 CE) and before Kalidasa (c. 400–500 CE).

career as a short story writer, relying on the tenets of realism and the complexity of human existence as the driving force in his stories. The people he had seen around him were complex individuals who were faced with conflicts time and again, and conflicts in real life, especially, seldom had a direct and quick solution emerging from dialogue and heartfelt conversations. His grandmother and her intricate friendship with her neighbours and friends, Phulkor and Balkor[29]. His experiences of the vicissitudes of the death of his father and the experiences he had when his father was alive both present lucidly the complexity of these individuals and the profundity of Rakesh's thought to remember what he calls his "immediate social situation" (*Interview* 16). A brief excerpt from his *Self-Portrait,* translated by Deborah Torch*,* presents to us the evidence of his nuanced understanding of the complexity of reality. He notes:

> The reality of yesterday becomes today's dream; tomorrow's dream is drawn from today's reality. Not one minute of our lives is isolated and free from moments of the past and future. Whatever happens, the mind dwells on what has passed and on the future. Every day of life seems to arrive germinated in the previous day - we are anxious to make the approaching tomorrow rise of itself.
>
> This anxiety, this instability becomes habit. A moment doesn't last in its desire to become the next one. Wherever you are, get up and go somewhere else. Leave whatever you are doing and start something else. If you are sitting and reading, turn the page every two minutes to see where your chapter ends. If you sit down to eat, gulp everything down in four minutes and then go wash your hands. If you drop the glass, realize even before it hits the ground that it is broken. (9)

It is such awareness of his immediate surroundings that Rakesh reflected in his short story collections such as *Naye Badal* (New Clouds, 1954) and his travelogue *Akhiri Chattan Tak* (To the Last Stone, 1953). Rakesh's acute observations of his surroundings and the people in it put him in the league of such writers who departed from the Chhayavadi

[29] See Mohan Rakesh's *Self Portrait* trans. by Deborah Torch (1973).

(romantic) trend of the generations of Sumitranandan Pant (1900 – 1977), Mahadevi Verma (1907 – 1987), and Prasad.

Rakesh is renowned as one of the pioneers of Indian reformist theatre, a league which also includes names such as Vijay Tendulkar[30] (1928-2008), Badal Sircar[31] (1925-2011), and Girish Karnad[32] (1938-2019), and Mahesh Dattani. Coming from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, these playwrights are grouped together by a shared vision: their commitment to presenting contemporary social issues. Why their respective corpus of plays are considered reformist can be answered through G N Devy's[33] words in his introduction to the novel *The Outcaste*[34]. Devy notes;

> Implicit in every literary work of significance is a serious critique of the society within which it takes birth. However, rarely do a number of such works get produced within a relatively short span of time. Rarely do they change not just the established literary idiom but also the thought process and the social ethics of the community of readers. When this does happen, literary history describes the phenomenon as a literary movement. A movement strikes the heart of a social issue in such a manner that it becomes impossible for any sensitive reader to return to the old values with any sense of comfort. (xiii)

Though Rakesh did not create or write for any "literary movement," he made sure that his readers and audiences could relate to the issues presented in his plays. He also made sure that his readers and audiences did not get any easy solutions to the conflicts presented, as is the case in

---

[30] Tendulkar was a renowned Marathi playwright who was known as the angry young man of Indian theatre. His plays such as *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe* (1967), *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1972), *Kamala* (1981), *Kanyadaan* (1983), etc. have won him many awards and honors including the Padma Bhushan in 1984.

[31] Sircar originally wrote in Bengali and has been credited as the progenitor of street theatre in India. He is remembered for his plays such as *Evam Indrajit* (1963) translated by Girish Karnad as *And Indrajit*, and *Bhoma* (1974)

[32] Karnad was one of the most celebrated dramatists in India, renowned for his blend of mythological tales with contemporary issues in his plays such as *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadna* (1971), and *Nagamandala* (1988). He was also a director, actor, and screenwriter. His last appearance on screen was in the Bollywood movie *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017).

[33] G N Devy is an Indian literary critic and scholar known for his books such as *After Amnesia* (1992), and his notable works on Indian literary criticism.

[34] See G N Devy, introduction to *The Outcaste*, by Sharankumar Limbale. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003.

real life. Rakesh emerged as the pioneer of realistic plays that highlighted the complexity and problems of ordinary middle-class urban individuals. It would be a futile exercise to retrace the major influences that led Hindi drama (and Indian drama in general) towards Western realism, as Aparna Dharwadker, Vasudha Dalmia, and Diana Dimitrova have already explored in their works. However, the idea here is to emphasize Rakesh's creation of a distinct liminal space that relied on both realism and the historical narratives of Harishchandra and Prasad. He only rejected the definitive climax and the call to provide the audience with tailor-made solutions to the conflicts, as the preceding generations had done. He knew the traditions of drama (established by Bhartendu Harishchandra[35] and propagated by Jaishankar Prasad[36]) that existed before him closely enough to deviate from them deliberately. As Dalmia states in her *Poetics, Plays, and Performances,* from 1920 onwards,

> […] there emerged two dominant streams in non-commercial Hindi drama […] The one stream continued to deal with historical themes, projecting nationalist aspirations into the past, yet in a language and frame shot through with contemporary concerns […] The other stream dealt with domestic interiors presenting psychological studies of man-woman relationships often coupled with a desire for social reform. (119-120)

It was a confluence of these streams that led Rakesh to search for a new model of Indian theatre and led him toward Western realism[37] and modernism[38], which made a significant impact on the plots and themes

[35] Bhartendu Harishchandra is said to be the founder of modern Hindi drama. His plays such as *Satya Harishchandra* (1875) and *Andher Nagari* (1878) sprung a tradition of Hindi plays that were more literary than performative and were to be later followed by Prasad and others.

[36] Jaishankar Prasad (1889-1937) is regarded as one of the precursors of Modern Hindi drama. He was also a prolific poet associated with Chhayavadi (romantic) movement in Hindi poetry.

[37] By Western realism I mean realism as portrayed in European plays in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. See. Dharwadker, Aparna "*Critique of Western Modernity in Post-Independence India"* in Nandi Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2009, Pp. 56-74.

[38] See. Dalmia, *Poetics and Performances,* 119-120. Dalmia elaborates that the trend for the second stream of Hindi drama 'coincided with and was supported by

in his plays. We shall explore his methods for social reform in the later sections of the chapter. Here, it is quintessential to explore his approach to theatre and how he created a liminal space through his works that resulted in the reformation of modern Hindi theatre.

The present chapter focuses on the evolution of Mohan Rakesh and why we consider him a liminal reformist playwright. An immediate question arises: if only digression from the preceding generations is the parameter, then why should we only study Rakesh as a liminal playwright, and why not Prasad, Ashk, Bhuvaneshwar, and others who also departed from their preceding generations? To answer these questions, we need to recall what Thomassen states about the impact of liminality. He notes that "[l]iminality is a rejuvenating force as well as a force by which traditions are confirmed, solidified, and […] transmitted […]" (185). This quest to "confirm" clear boundaries between different streams of the tradition of Hindi drama becomes challenging when we consider the fluidity of these streams. Vasudha Dalmia[39], for instance, notes in her book *Poetics, Plays, and Performances* that Rakesh, although visibly different from Bhuvaneshwar in terms of the treatment of his themes and agendas, was also profoundly inspired by his "[…] short, ordinary sentences […]" that left "more unsaid than said" and what he left unsaid, touched "the heart most" (121). Rakesh was also influenced by Prasad's historical settings and characterization from *Skandagupta* and *Dhruvaswamini*, as two of his three plays, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* and *Lahron Ke Rajhans*, were set in the times of the Sanskrit poet Kalidasa and the Buddha, respectively. Similarly, Prasad was influenced by Harishchandra's plays, such as *Nildevi* (1881), that glorified Indian antiquity and critiqued contemporary issues. Thus, despite the differences, we observe a definite influence of the preceding generations in the works of the subsequent generation. The differences

translations from John Galsworthy, Bernard Shaw, and, most importantly, Henrik Ibsen,' which explains the influence on the representation of modernist problems in Indian plays of the time, and gradually on a budding Mohan Rakesh.

[39] Vasudha Dalmia is a prominent scholar and critic of Modern Indian Theatre. She is a Professor Emerita of Hindi and Modern South Asian Studies University of California, Berkley.

between each generation were created by their context and their methods for reform. In this chapter as well, as we shall see in the following sections, the most significant reasons for considering Rakesh a liminal reformist are his context and his reformist agendas for his dramatic tradition as well as contemporary society. In the present chapter, we attempt to trace him in his context, both social and literary, and then study his approach to social reform. We also endeavour to answer questions about the functions of his plays: did Rakesh intend to make his plays reformist, or was he simply experimenting with his surrounding reality and consequently ended up portraying the prevalent social issues of his day? What was his stance towards the reality of other societies and communities distant from him? How did he create a balance between the realism of his preceding generations, such as that of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar and that of his contemporaries, such as Vijay Tendulkar? Since he was writing when India was witnessing profound changes in the social and political structures, and there were a plethora of issues, such as casteism, patriarchy, poverty, unemployment, etc., that had equally disastrous effects (if not more) than miscommunication and alienation, why did he refrain from writing about them? Why did he postulate that all of Indian society has become middle class?[40] Did he observe the section of society that lived on the margins and struggled even to fend for themselves? The answers to these questions are found primarily in his plays, in the prefaces to his plays, and in his conversations with his friends[41]. However, prior to seeking any definitive answer, it is paramount to locate Rakesh in the traditions he emerged from and what made him different from his peers.

[40] Rakesh was of the opinion that all of India was becoming middle-class through their ambitions and aspirations; people were migrating to cities in search of jobs, and there was a considerable broadening of the middle-class stratum of the society. See Journal of South Asian Literature's *Interview With Mohan Rakesh* (1973).

[41] Documented as letters in the revised edition of *Lahron Ke Rajhans.* The letters contain his critical thoughts on the unfolding of events and the characters' responses to them. The letters were addressed to his close friend and thespian Shyamanand Jalan who directed and staged Hindi plays in Calcutta with his theatre group Anamika.

2.1.1 Contextualising Mohan Rakesh: The Pre-independence Dramatic Traditions, the Nayi Kahani Movement, and the Different Visions of Reform.

Modern Hindi theatre is believed to have developed during the second half of the nineteenth century. Fascinatingly, there already existed the tradition of the Parsi theatre during the time in the western and later in the northern parts of India, which was a commercially successful enterprise and performed plays in Hindustani (an amalgamation of Urdu and the local dialects of Hindi, including Khadi Boli and Awadhi). Though commercially successful, Parsi theatre was severely criticised by playwrights such as Harishchandra, who believed it was farcical and only meant for entertainment and could never develop a professional Hindi theatrical tradition. Parsi theatre employed techniques of Western drama, such as the proscenium stage, curtains, and backdrops, to portray stories from Indo-Persian folklore. Its scant regard for ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition and its inclination towards Western techniques of dramaturgy brought heavy criticism, and it was not until the early twentieth century that Parsi theatre practitioners began to perform dramas in Hindi. Other major reasons for its criticism by Hindi dramatists included its fascination with spectacle, music, dance, and melodramatic acting, which sometimes also included repetition of the sequence on the audience's appeal[42]. This contempt for Parsi theatre finds a vivid manifestation in Rakesh's words, who notes in his book *Natya Vimarsh*;

> Where Hindi drama developed, after centuries of disruptions, in the tradition inherited from Sanskrit drama, the Hindi stage, on the contrary, developed by inheriting the cheap and rotten Parsi companies, which themselves sprung up by taking inspiration from the inferior Greek stage. Wooden cardboards, four to six coarse rolling curtains, one drop scene and the stage was ready. Even the scenery on the curtains had a

[42] See Rakesh's *Natya Vimarsh* eds. Jaidev Taneja Pp. 35-36. Rakesh states that during a performance of the Parsi theatre Abhimanyu (from the *Mahabharata,* C. 400 BCE) while breaking the circle of enemies falls down delivering grand dialogues and amidst public applause gets up again to repeat the sequence.

> fixed formula. One curtain for a palace whose one side had a fountain. One curtain was a garden which had a river or a pond in the background… People from the Ramayana era, the Mahabharata era, and the modern era had similar costumes. King Dashratha and the demon king Ravana[43] wore similar Kandhari shoes from the Mughal fashion. Rama and Laxmana would fight behind the curtains on the issue of the stage time of their character… (35-36)

Evidently, the Parsi theatre was an enterprise solely functioning to entertain the masses and was not given serious attention by the Hindi playwrights, including Harishchandra, Prasad, Ashk, and Rakesh.

Diana Dimitrova[44], in her works *Gender, Religion and Modern Hindi Drama* (2008) and *Hinduism and Hindi Theatre* (2016), credits the development of modern Hindi drama to Bhartendu Harishchandra and Jaishankar Prasad, who wrote satirical and historical plays with reformative undertones. While Harishchandra relied heavily on Sanskritic poetics and used allegorical narratives such as *Andher Nagari* (1878) to represent the plight of the nation, Prasad presented narratives that glorified subcontinental antiquity. Both these playwrights, especially Harishchandra, can be credited for emancipating the tradition of Hindi drama from the ancient Sanskrit and Parsi theatrical traditions. However, their reformist ideas can be observed largely as a function of their Hindu nationalist vision. For instance, in Harishchandra's *Nildevi* (1881), "his nationalism drew on his reverence for traditional Hinduism," notes Dimitrova, and though Nildevi is portrayed as a "Virangana" (a woman of valour), she "wants to free her husband's body from the enemy to become a sati – that is to immolate herself on the funeral pyre" (26). Jaishankar Prasad's works represented the historical school of Indian Drama. His association with the Chhayavadi (Romantic) movement in poetry was reflected in his drama and was

[43] Both characters from the epic *Ramayana* (C. 8th to 4th Centuries BCE) by Valmiki. Dashratha was Rama's father and Ravana was the main antagonist.
[44] Diana Dimitrova is a Professor of Indology at the University of Montreal, Canada. She is renowned for her rigorous scholarly works on Hindi theatre and Hinduism. She also teaches courses in Buddhism, Sikhism, and other South Asian religions.

marked by "glorification of the remote Hindu past, use of biographical material, appreciation of the natural world, and employment of poetry in old verse forms" (2008, 27). His play *Dhruvswamini* (1933) deals with the plight of a woman (of the same name) who chooses to leave her husband (who gives her to his enemy) and marries his brother Chandragupta. Although both these playwrights had reformist ideas embedded in their works, Dimitrova considers them only "mildly reformative". Harishchandra, while committed to nationalist ideas, was orthodox in his treatment of the issues of women. Prasad, to establish a distinct Indian theatrical tradition, went further and completely denounced any association with realistic plays. Dimitrova notes:

> Prasàd pronounced himself openly against Ibsen's and Bernard Shaw's dramas and wanted to write in the wake of Kàlidàsa and Shakespeare. This also conforms to the politics of an ideological discourse that aimed to establish a national Indian theatre in the colonial and postcolonial periods in order to instil pride in the Indian theatrical tradition by equating it with the Western tradition and often by asserting the superiority of the Indian theatrical tradition over the Western theatrical tradition. (28)

Harishchandra and Prasad were succeeded by a group of dramatists whose works emphasised their affinity with realistic representations of society. These playwrights deviated from the neo-Sanskritic model and instead sketched characters from their life experiences. The most prominent names of this group[45] were Lakshmi Narayan Mishra[46] (1903–87), Upendranath Ashk[47] (1910–96),

[45] Most of these playwrights were Rakesh's senior contemporaries; it is significant to note that Rakesh was an established short story writer during the decades of 1940s and 1950s, and his first play, Ashadh Ka Ek Din, was published in 1958.
[46] Lakshmi Narayan Mishra was a successor of Jaishankar Prasad and is known for plays such as *Sindur Ki Holi* (1933) and *Gudiya Ka Ghar*, a translation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.
[47] Upendranath Ashk (1910-1996) was also considered a pioneer of the Nayi Kahani. A prolific novelist, short story writer, and playwright, he is remembered for his novels such as *Sitaron Ke Khel* (1937), *Girti Divare* (1947); short story collections such as *Kale Sahab* (1950); and plays such as *Quaid* (1943-1945) and *Anjo Didi* (1953-1954)

Bhuvaneshwar[48] (1912–57), and Jagadish Chandra Mathur (1917–81). These playwrights are considered the pioneers of the realistic and naturalistic tradition of Hindi drama. Nevertheless, they all had an astutely different understanding of reform. For Ashk, Mathur, and Bhuvaneshwar, it was about the liberation of women by giving them choices to decide their own fate. While Mishra, albeit contemporaneous to Prasad, wrote plays that were influenced by the modern dramatic tradition of the West. "His critique of Prasad," writes Dimitrova, "and his admiration for Ibsen and Western theatre played a considerable role in the formation of the second major school of modern Hindi drama, the pro-western, or pro-Ibsen school, the main representatives of which in the 1940s and 50s were Bhuvaneshwar, Mathur, Rakesh, and Ashk" (31). Dimitrova, however, makes an interesting claim about Mishra, whom she says, despite being influenced by Ibsen and his problem plays, could not transcend the boundaries of social norms to provide his women characters equal agency as that of his men.

> The practice of child marriage and the prohibition against the remarriage of widows were condemned by Hindu reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Sindur Ki Holi* [The Vermillion Holi, 1934] Mishra promotes the ideal of Hindu widowhood and child marriage as models for modern women. Thus his dramatic work is an interesting instance of an artistic encounter with Western tradition that results in innovations, experimentalism, and openness in dramatic form but retains conservatism in the interpretation of women's issues. (33)

The other playwrights in this school had at least one distinct feature in common. They all provided their women characters with choices. Bhuvaneshwar in *Straik* (*Strike* 1938), Mathur in *Reedh Ki Haddi*[49] (roughly translated as *The Spine*, 1938), and Ashk in *Qaid* (1943-45), *Udaan* (*Flight* 1945), and *Anjo Didi* (*Elder Sister* Anjo 1955) portrayed characters who were empowered and could exercise their will. Mishra,

[48] Bhuvneshwar Prasad Sharma, known for plays such as *Strike* (1938) was another prolific short story writer and playwright who contributed to the Nayi Kahani movement. He is also credited to have brought the tradition of sketching independent women characters in Hindi drama.

though writing about social realities, could not break the orthodoxy of tradition in his treatment of the women characters.

Rakesh, on the other hand, started writing plays at a later stage than most of these playwrights but continued to follow the model of complex characterisation and sketched characters that he had observed in his "surrounding reality" (*Self-Portrait*). Rakesh's approach to his characters in this sense can be seen as parallel to Bhuvaneshwar and Ashk. Both these playwrights drew characters, especially women, who were not subservient to the males and the nationalist agenda. Bhuvaneshwar, whom both Rakesh and Ashk admired,[50] was inspired by August Strindberg's[51] concept of the battle of the sexes. He brought unprecedented instances of women choosing their partners and created triangles between the woman, her husband, and her lover[52]. Ashk removed the façade of divinity from his women characters and empowered them to act according to their own free will. Dimitrova notes;

> Ashk's interpretation of women as the embodiment of Sakti is innovative. He does not divinize the empowered women in his plays, thus removing them from humanity, but renders them human and realistic in form. The plays suggest that these women should be part of everyday life, of an average Hindu family. They are worthy of emulation not only at the theological and soteriological levels (in the way that female bhakti saints are generally received)1 but also at the social level – in the context of real life. (50)

Rakesh's characters were also intricately sketched and portrayed as individuals operating of their own free will. The only major difference between his method and that of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar is that Rakesh

---

[50] See Dalmia's Poetics, Plays and Performances Ch. 3 *Neither Half Nor Whole*, Pp. 120-121. She notes that Rakesh was deeply influenced by Bhuvaneshwar, especially by his craft of using short unfinished sentences that served the purpose of leaving more unsaid than said which would later become a significant aspect of his own writing.

[51] August Strindberg (1849-1912) was a Swedish playwright and novelist and was a notable exponent of modernist and naturalist chamber plays. His notable works include *The Red Room* (1879), *Inferno* (1897), *A Dream Play* (1902), and *The Ghost Sonata* (1908).

[52] See Dimitrova's *Gender, Religion, and Modern Hindi Drama,* Pp. 45.

focused explicitly on portraying reality as it was and offered no solution to any of the predicaments his plays presented.

Arguably, one of the most developed traditions of realist theatre in India after independence was found in Marathi theatre led by Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar. Aparna Dharwadker credits Tendulkar for refashioning realist plays between the 1950s and the 1970s. Tendulkar's plays, such as *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (*Silence! The Court is in Session*, 1968), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Ghasiram Kotwal* (*Inspector Ghasiram,* 1972), and *Kanyadaan* (*The Gift of Daughter*, 1983) were some of the most prominent examples of realist dramaturgy in India. Similarly, Mahesh Elkunchwar, also considered one of the founding figures of modern Marathi theatre, wrote plays such as *Sultan* (1967), *Holi* (1969), *Raktapushpa* (The Flower of Blood, 1971), and *Sonata* (2000) that epitomised realist theatre in India. As Dharwadker notes, "Tendulkar's generation in Marathi theatre therefore epitomizes the position that realism is the indispensable modern mode for understanding, coping with, and representing the post-independence present" (271).

If we were to search for a playwright who perfected realism as a tool for social reform without handing out solutions akin to the first-generation realist playwrights such as Lakshmi Narayan Mishra, Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar, all the evidence gathered in the introduction to this thesis and the first chapter[53] would point to Vijay Tendulkar and his generation of Marathi theatre. Tendulkar's theory of realism was very similar to that of Rakesh in terms of the emphasis on their 'surrounding reality'[54] and its reproduction on stage. However, one stark difference between Rakesh and Tendulkar's realism was their approach to the issues they presented. While Tendulkar, in his plays such as *Silence!* went all out to critique the patriarchal subjugation of women who did not fit the label of ideal women as defined by conservative social norms.

[53] Referring to the trajectory of modern Indian theatre and the agendas of reform in the schools of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar in Chapter 1.
[54] See Mohan Rakesh's *Self-Portrait*, p. 12.

Rakesh, on the contrary, in his plays such as *Adhe Adhure*, refrained from an all-out assault. Tendulkar, fascinatingly, despite not providing tailor-made solutions, emulated Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar's radical solutions to social issues. As Samik Bandopdhyay[55] notes:

> Tendulkar studies power and violence in spaces institutionally defined […] The institutions that are exposed with their power mechanisms include media (*Kamala*), performance (*Silence! The Court is in Session*), the family (*The Vultures*), the state (*Ghasiram Kotwal* and *Encounter in Umbugland*), society and morality (*Kanyadaan*), and sexual mores (*Sakharam Binder* and *A Friend's Story*). (*Collected Plays in Translation* xlii)

Tendulkar's strong critique of unequal and unjust power relations in society is contrasted by Rakesh's subtle pointing towards these issues. Power, for Rakesh, takes a Foucauldian[56] form, and operates on a similar plane with knowledge. The knowledge of one's 'surrounding reality' can expose the prevalent power dynamics and one doesn't have to be an activist or a legislator to do it. He was so subtle that he attracted severe criticism[57] challenging his quietism against social and national issues as magnanimous as the partition[58]. Rakesh countered these allegations in his *Interview,* when he said:

> Today, we clamor for national integration, but there is no more national integration today than there was at the time of partition. When we started writing, the problem of partition was not a major problem facing the country; therefore, the certain impressions that one had of partition and the emotional disturbance one carried - as I personally did - have been covered up by the slow dust of the emerging reality of this country […] My contention is that partition killed perhaps a few hundred thousand,

[55] Samik Bandopadhyay renowned literary historian and scholar, critic and translator. His scholarly contributions are diverse and range from essays to books and translations of prominent Western philosophers such as Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937).
[56] See Foucault's *Two Lectures* (pp. 78–105) in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon.
[57] Several scholars, including Renu Juneja and Cecilia Cossio, have pointed to Rakesh's partial enfranchisement of his women characters. I elaborate and contest this argument in the second part of the chapter.
[58] The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

> while the post-partition developments in this country have killed millions, and, in one sense, killed many more of us somewhere within ourselves. (21–22)

Another significant point of departure from Tendulkar's realism was Rakesh's approach to the use of history and mythology. Tendulkar seldom turned[59] to history or mythology as a method to represent contemporary issues. Contrastingly, two of the three plays, *Ashadh and Lahron* by Rakesh, used (semi-) historical settings to present inherently urban conundrums. Rakesh's idea of developing language that was able to express the playwright's intimate understanding of reality and his objective distance from that reality made his approach to realism a liminal characteristic of his dramaturgy.

Thus, among the major proponents of the realist school of modern Indian theatre, we see Rakesh at a "betwixt and between" position, bridging the methodological lacunae between the realism of first-generation Hindi playwrights and the astute realist methods of Vijay Tendulkar. We shall see in the following section how his ideas of realism, which emerged from the Nayi Kahani[60] movement were also liminal and significantly influenced his reformist agendas.

However, before understanding Rakesh's position as a reformist playwright, it becomes significant to grasp his contribution to the short story genre in Hindi. It was his short story collections, such as Akhiri Chattan Tak (To the Last Stone, 1953) and Naye Badal (New Clouds, 1957), that established him as a writer of the modern consciousness and turned his observations of people and their surroundings into beautifully crafted stories, especially those from *Akhiri Chattan Tak*.

---

[59] He did turn to folk theatre techniques in some of his Marathi plays. For a detailed study of the use of folk in Tendulkar's plays, see Kathryn Hansen's *Folk Traditions and Modern Indian Theatre* (1983).

[60] The Nayi Kahani or New Story was a literary movement in the 1950s. Marked by its departure from the preceding Chhayavadi (Romantic) traditions in poetry and short story, it had a crucial role to play in the crystallisation of Rakesh's ideas as a playwright.

During the decades of the 1930s to the 1950s, the short story was the predominant genre in the Hindi literary tradition. Gordon C. Roadarmel[61] notes in the introduction to his book *Modern Hindi Short Stories*[62] (1972) that "the nineteen-fifties brought an unusual number of new writers concentrating on the story in Hindi, and they tended to be more experimental, more questioning, more sceptical than the previous generation…" (4). This new generation of authors felt "…that the older writers had been too romantic, too idealistic, and too philosophical…" (5). These writers' scepticism about the methods of the older generation led them to confront their own reality. Thus, converging their ideas and writings into a movement that was reflective of their social context and was termed the Nayi Kahani (new story movement). The Nayi Kahani movement was one of the most profound influences on Rakesh's writings, the evidence of which is present in both his short stories and plays. Rakesh considered the Nayi Kahani movement not a movement but a result of the "restlessness" and a "desire to catch the mood of our (their) time."[63] This restlessness drove him and his peers to adjust the lens of story-telling on the inward journey of the characters. These writers stopped looking for the conflict and its consequences in the external world of the characters and began to look for a representation of their internal struggles. As Roadarmel states;

> Many of the characters in these stories are cut off in some way from traditional securities of family and community, and are left drifting, groping, aware of an emptiness but unable to identify the sources of misery or to act effectively to relieve their inner suffering… Pursuit is a common theme, and the victim a frequent character. The impotence of the individual against the forces of society is perhaps a universal theme

[61] Gordon C. Roadarmel (1932-72) was a renowned scholar, critic, and professor at the Department of South Asian Studies, University of California, Berkley. He is remembered for his translation of Premchand's *Godan* (1936) as *The Gift of a Cow* and his *Bibliography of English Source Materials for the Study of Modern Hindi Literature*.
[62] See. Roadarmel, Gordon C. introduction to *Modern Hindi Short Stories* (1974). The book is an anthology of Hindi short stories that consists of one of the most comprehensive descriptions about the Nayi Kahani movement in the introduction.
[63] Refer to note 12.

> of fiction today, but these stories provide unusual insights into both the common and the unique elements of the modern Indian experience. (2)

Cecilia Cossio, in her essay *Contradictions of the Feminine in the Writing of Mohan Rakesh,*[64] states the social situations that resulted in the Nayi Kahani movement, what it expressed, and who it was about. She notes;

> When independence had finally been achieved and the Indian subcontinent partitioned in 1947, the drive for unity that had kept India's struggle against British rule going for so long lost all its impetus. Over ten years later, the wounds open[ed] up by partition had still not been healed as the country failed to develop a healthy economy and society… This critical situation, which was one of the most serious in the history of contemporary India, had extensive repercussions on the middle-class intellectuals… Despite accounting for most of the educated population, the middle classes seldom had the opportunities to which they felt entitled, while the increasing middle-class unemployment rate was a cause for concern… The outcome was a deep feeling of frustration, impotence and uselessness: the perfect breeding ground for the ideas of the *Nayi Kahani*. The movement, then, was the exasperated voice of the disillusioned, financially insecure, urban middle classes chagrined at their failure to realize their social and intellectual aspirations. (107–108)

Mohan Rakesh, along with Nirmal Verma (1929-2005), Rajendra Yadav (1929-2013), Bhisam Sahni (1915-2003), and Kamleshwar Prasad Saxena (1932-2007), was considered the pioneer of this new movement. Cossio, nevertheless, credits the triumvirate of Rakesh, Kamleshwar, and Rajendra Yadav as writers presenting "a disorderly yet fairly revealing picture of the situations that gave rise to the *[N]ayi [K]ahani*" (108). Kamleshwar and Rajendra Yadav are found to distance themselves from their subjects and "set themselves up as "others" – witnesses, critics, researchers…". She notes;

> Kamleshwar tends, in fact, to take a "public" view, in which man – or in this case the petit bourgeois – is always at the centre of things, so as to

[64] See *Literature, Language, and the Media in India* eds. Mariola Offredi. Pp. 107-116.

> convey the problems of individuals within the urban context of contemporary India… Rajendra Yadav is concerned with reflecting critically on the role and function of the intellectual in the context of the society in which he lives. But this preoccupation with assigning a specific role to the writer and intellectual leads him to prefer, even to the point of obsession, critical reflection to creative practice. Such an intense need to be present as a critic at every step in the creative process ends up weighing down Rajendra Yadav's writing, just as the need to bear witness to social conditions often leads to an overly didactic tone in Kamleshwar. (108-109)

Rakesh, on the other hand, is observed as the most authentic figure of the movement by Cossio. She states that, unlike Kamleshwar, "neither is he openly committed to social issues," nor is he obsessed like a critic "with the relationship between the writer and his literary creation"[65] like Yadav. In fact, she finds Rakesh as the most important "subject" in his writing which is visible in his unaltered representation of his surroundings.

> Whether dealing with the absurd tragedy of the massacre following the partition of India or the gradual social delay in the 1960s, the inevitable abuses in the battle for survival in the metropolitan environment or the consequent growth in feelings of alienation and indifference, Mohan Rakesh doesn't leave untouched anything of the harsh reality in which he lives; on the contrary, he narrates it in a more penetrating way than other apparently more "committed" authors. (109)

Roadarmel's detailed introduction to the salient features of the Nayi Kahani movement and Cossio's dissection of the approach taken by its leading writers points us to the undermining philosophy of Rakesh's writing, which he described as "the emergence of an idea through the reality itself, not driving the idea into some sort of realistic pattern, but discovering the idea inherent in the reality itself" (*Interview* 16). This philosophy of objectively reporting reality was to become the cornerstone of his writings and was also extended to his plays. It played a pivotal role in the shaping of his reformist agendas.

[65] See Cossio's *Contradictions of the Feminine*, p. 109.

The Nayi Kahani movement drove the writers towards an objective language hitherto unachieved in the short-story genre of Hindi literature. Despite its objectivity, it possessed an intimacy that could arise only from the author's close interaction with his themes and subjects. Rakesh claims it to be the most significant contribution of the movement, as he says;

> […] I think one of the biggest contributions of the Nayi Kahani Movement was that it was able to create an intimate, objective language. This was a most difficult thing, because as the language grew in the earlier period, it grew either at the hands of writers like Premchand, where it was not objective or very sensitive, or, on the other hand, it was polished by writers like Jayashankar Prasad and Agyeya, where it got sophistication and sensitivity but not intimacy. Theirs was a distant language. So in our experiments with the Nayi Kahani, we tried, on the one hand, to give an objective view to this objective experience; and, on the other hand, we tried to give an intimacy to a sensitive language which could also be both objective and subjective, for want of better words[66]. (*Interview* 18)

The objectivity of portrayal and the intimacy of the language (with reality) – the achievements of the Nayi Kahani movement - extended to Rakesh's plays and were a significant reason for his plays to be considered realistic observations of the middle-class society. Especially, the intimacy with the reality of the times was not something found in the plays of his predecessors, such as Prasad, who had resisted these concepts (reality, conflict, and individual struggle), "…as ideological importation from the west and as being incompatible with the Indian system of values" (Dalmia 124). On the contrary, these elements made the main themes of Rakesh's plays, who believed that the primary objective of his plays was to reflect the mood of his times. As evident in Cossio's assertion in her essay;

> Among the themes of the *nayi kahani*, the breaking of traditional family ties and the lack of appropriate values to replace them with represent a

[66] See note 12.

> central issue. Of particular importance in this respect is the evolution of relationships between men and women. (109)

The movement's influence on Rakesh's objectivity is also found in his portrayal of disintegrating relationships within his surrounding reality which was evident in his works across genres. In the words of Cossio;

> Male-female relationships are the main subject not only in plays like *Asarh*[67] *ka ek din* (1958), *Lahro ke rajhans* (1963), and *Adhe Adhure* (1969), but also in novels *A*(*n*)*dhere band kamre* (1961), *Na anevala kal* (1968), and *Antral* (1972). Many of his short stories also revolve around the same theme: *Akhiri saman, Aparic*(*h*)*it … Suhagine*, *Uski roti*, *Vasna ki ch*(*h*)*aya me*, etc… Mallika the heroine in the play *Asarh ka ek din,* and Balo, the protagonist of the short story *Uski roti*, are two outstanding examples of the author's exploration of this theme… (110)

Rakesh developed a fascination for a raw expression of reality, rejected allegory and idealism, and turned inwards in search of subjects they had experienced first-hand. However, the projection of one's reality as a relatable social incident required him to present the stories objectively. In Rakesh's own words:

> […] One departure from Premchand was that the reality of the times, or the life situation in which people lived, was not reflected in the short story […] (for them) the short story meant the elaboration of an idea […] On the other hand, our emphasis was on the emergence of an idea through the reality itself, not driving the idea in some sort of realistic pattern, but discovering the idea inherent in the reality itself. (*Interview* 16)

The realisation of reality in its context, if, on the one hand, allowed Rakesh to present individuals and their stories in a raw form, then, on the other, it also forbade him from transcending his social reality by

[67] The incongruities in the spelling of the titles result from the use of different symbols for the same sound in different parts of the country. Interestingly, there are no symbols in the English phonetic system for certain Hindi sounds such as "ada" as in Sadak/Sarak (road) and "dh" as in Dhvani (sound). Similarly, the sound "rh" in the word *Asarh* is also written as "dh" or "ddh" and hence the word can also be written as *Ashadh.*

writing about people and communities that were by no means middle-class. He claimed in his interview that being born in the middle-class city of Amritsar, he could not portray the village life and the problems pertaining to it in his works authentically[68] and hence, would be deceiving himself if he attempted to do so. His assertion (in the same interview) about a sociological phenomenon that the whole of Indian society was becoming middle-class in the post-independence period appeared more an assumption than a verified claim about societies other than his. Nevertheless, his experiences, coupled with his explorations of the Nayi Kahani movement, made his observations realistic which were reflected first in his stories and then in his plays. The movement also led to a significant shift in the author's outlook toward society and its problems which was evident in the issues he portrayed through his works. As Roadarmel continues:

> Major religious, social, and political problems are not of primary concern. Instead, these writers tend to turn inward, portraying loneliness and estrangement, social disruption, urban anonymity, bureaucratic indifference, and a general loss of individual identity. (2)

This transition toward prioritising internal conflicts over external ones is what Vasudha Dalmia has called the individuation of characters and the emergence of the rounded personality[69]. Especially in the plays, he did not create characters that were austere, noble, and idealists, standing true to what they believed was right and consciously or unconsciously symbolising the plight of mother India. The evolution of a rounded personality included the representation of both their fortes and flaws; they were prone to making complicated decisions and choices. A vivid example of such personalities were his characters, both women and men, who were not idealistic heroes clinging on to their beliefs and principles in any circumstance; instead, Rakesh sketched them as

[68] Refer to note 12.
[69] See *Neither Half Nor Whole* in Dalmia's *Poetics Plays and Performances*. Dalmia does not explain clearly what she means by the term rounded personality, however, her descriptions of the contours of characters and the conflict arising due to their individuation help us establish that the term signifies characters depicted in all their complexity similar to real persons.

individuals he had observed around him. They were susceptible to human emotions, giving in to circumstances that led them to err more often than not. The binaries of right and wrong in such scenarios were transcended, and an easy verdict was not made available to the reader.

Rakesh has been criticised by several scholars such as R L Nigam, Renu Juneja, and also Dimitrova for failing to emulate Bhuwaneshwar and Ashk's methods of reform and for not providing his women characters equal proportions of power. Nevertheless, their distinct approach to reform is what makes these playwrights unique. Bhuvaneshwar and Ashk set out for the emancipation of women by subverting the power dynamics between the two sexes. They broke the stereotypes of the submissiveness of women by giving them control and authority in their plays, and in doing so, they showed the audience their idealist visions of society. Thus, we can argue that their idea of reform was an amalgamation of their reality and their imagination of an ideal society, that gave women an equal franchise. Rakesh, on the contrary, talked about the ground reality – the existing dynamics of power and how it created conflict around him. In other words, while his contemporaries showed what a reformed society would look like, Rakesh presented a raw picture of how the society actually was. The following section of the thesis studies his portrayal of reality, his treatment of his characters, the questions he raises to the readers/audience, and how he transitions his observations of reality into his appeals for reform.

2.1.2 The Emergence of Mohan Rakesh: Carving a niche through realism and liminality.

We have established in the previous section, the trajectory of modern Hindi drama founded by Bhartendu Harishchandra, refined and embellished by Jaishankar Prasad, contemporized by Upendranath Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Shrivastava, and globalized by Mohan Rakesh. We are also aware of the criticisms and reservations against the Parsi theatre by the Hindi playwrights despite both conventions using

the same theatrical models and techniques, viz., the Western proscenium stage. In this section, we shall explore Rakesh's reformism of the social fabric and the liminal avenues from where his reformist ideas take a concrete form.

Aparna Dharwadker, in her *One Day in the Season of Rain* (2015), sums up precisely, the distinct position that Rakesh occupies and the need to attribute to him the place he deserves in the domain of critical scholarship on post-independence Indian theatre in English. She notes:

> There are two critical perspectives that are especially pertinent to Rakesh and his drama, but have been only erratically associated with him so far. He is not only a 'modern' writer but a postcolonial modernist who defines a circumspect position for himself in relation to the effects of British colonialism, Euromodernism, and the complex literary history of a major modern Indian language such as Hindi, which in turn is embedded in the literary culture of the subcontinent at large. (15)

The "circumspect position" defined by Rakesh is what this thesis argues as liminal and explores and examines. Although Dharwadker goes on to vividly describe this position in context to his first play *Ashadh*, the thesis picks up the strands of her analysis and connects them to his other two plays. It further explores the factors contributing to his "position" in terms of his literary context, which spans from the 1940s to the 1960s.

The core argument this thesis makes is for the liminal stature and methodological approach of Rakesh and the subsequent playwrights in this study. The term liminality, as defined by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 and Bjorn Thomassen in 2014, presents us with a range of descriptions that include the definition and application of the concept by both anthropologists and scholars of theatre and performance. Scholars such as Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Erika Fischer-Lichte have defined and used the concept of liminality as they deemed fit for their purpose of examining rituals, performances, and the relation between the performers, performance, and the spectators in theatre, respectively. In this chapter, I do not dive deep into the arguments for and against their definitions of liminality, especially the Turnerian concepts of

structure and anti-structure. Instead, I extract the essence of the concept as it has survived till now, a separate space, a transitional phase that lies "betwixt and between situation or object" (*Thomassen* 7), institutions and structures that opens "the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction" (1). Also, the problem with relying overtly on Van Gennep's, Turnerian or Schechnerian definitions means we ought to treat the concept in opposition to the different schools of modern Indian theatre, clearly defining the coinciding boundaries between these schools to mark them as structures. Another significant issue arises when I use Vasudha Dalmia's concept of "streams" (119) to define the context of these playwrights which are inherently fluid and are influenced and shaped in correspondence with the preceding generations. Therefore, liminality, as defined in the introduction to the thesis, primarily acts as a lens to identify the distinct space created by Rakesh and the subsequent playwrights in this study, which allows us to trace the sources of their reformism.

To call Rakesh a liminal reformist is to understand his point of departure from the previous streams of Hindi drama through his innovative experimentations on stage that redefined modern Hindi theatre. Having accomplished this objective in the previous sections, now through a close reading of his three celebrated plays, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*, *Lahron Ke Rajhans*, and *Aadhe Adhure* in the following sections, I endeavour to comprehend his methods of objectively reporting reality, the projections of contemporary issues into a distant past, and the application of liminality both in the context of the preceding generation of playwrights and in his plays.

2.1.3 Historical Settings and Contemporary Conflicts: The Liminal Temporality.

Rakesh was one of the significant contributors to the genre of drama in the post-independence era, whose works present credible evidence of the transition from the previous traditions of dramatic writing. Dalmia highlights his withdrawal through the transition observed in the plays post the era of Jaishankar Prasad.

> The major transformations consisted in the radical shift away from the depiction of the idealised character and reality… The emphasis in the following decades was on the evolution of the rounded personality and individuation of character, and the sharp conflict this individuation engendered. (118)

These transformations also point to the departure of playwrights from the previous generations and can be observed in the way they were fiercely rejected by Jaishankar Prasad. He "rejected the new realist vogue of the 1930s because he saw it as trivialising reality and being excessively pessimistic in outlook" (Dalmia 119). Rakesh, on the contrary, believed in the representation of the events and the lives of the characters through his observations of life, which he called - surrounding reality. However, it is challenging to label him as a part of any particular stream in Indian drama because neither did he align with the methods of his predecessors such as Harishchandra, Prasad, and Ashk, nor did he ever himself claim that his motive was to write plays with a social function. As R L Nigam[70] comments in his essay, *Mohan Rakesh: A Study*[71] (1989), "[t]his adoption of the experimental method constitutes Rakesh's real point of departure and is key to our understanding of his work and its quality […] (66). Rakesh's distinct position in the canon was not without intersections with the streams he willingly departed from. On the one hand, two of his major plays, despite his repeated rejection of the revivalist strain prevalent in Indian theatre during his age, were based on semi-historical narratives. On the other, all his experimentation on the stage converged to represent the prevalent social ills – specifically those permeating the lives of the (semi)-urban middle-class women who fought their way to independence, only to be pulled back by the stringent social norms. He chose to place the modern, ambitious man in as far a setting as that of Kalidasa and Mallika[72] in *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (roughly translated as *A Day in the Rainy Season*).

---

[70] R L Nigam was a critic and wrote contributions for the journals *Enact* and *Thought*.

[71] Essay from the collection published by Sangeet Natak Akademi in September 1989 on the occasion of Nehru Centenary Drama Festival, titled as *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors*

[72] Kalidasa and Mallika are the central characters in the play *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*.

He then placed the dissolution of a marital relationship in *Lahron Ke Rajhans* (translated as *The Swans of the Waves*) during the time of the Buddha. It was in his third play *Adhe Adhure* (roughly translated as *Half and Incomplete*), that he presented modern characters in a contemporary setting.

An overview of the settings of his plays presents credible evidence of the influence of the preceding generations of Harishchandra and that of Prasad, in the works of Rakesh. Both Harishchandra and Prasad valorized the past in *Nildevi* and *Dhruvaswamini,* respectively. These plays appealed to the nationalist consciousness of the masses by glorifying the valour of Indian queens against invaders and also called for the enfranchisement of women in the struggle for independence. *Nildevi* utilized the character of the same name who killed the invading antagonist Abdul Sharif to retrieve her husband Suheldev's body from Sharif's captivity. Similarly, in *Dhruvaswamini,* Prasad presented the bravery of Queen Dhruvaswamini, who, with the help of Chandragupta, defeated the invading King Shakaraj. Besides the (semi –) historical narratives, the plays also presented through the female characters the plight of Mother India, who was perfectly capable of defending herself against the colonial forces.

This pattern of projecting contemporary sensibilities in the distant past was also used by Rakesh in his first two plays. *Ashadh* was set during the times of King Chandragupta II (c. 375–415), and the poet Kalidasa, arguably the face of classical Sanskrit theatre, was used as a character possessing similar artistic qualities as his historical counterpart. However, Rakesh's Kalidasa was affected by modern problems that emerged more from within the individual rather than external sources. The play begins with the stage directions describing Mallika's house, which is in a deteriorating condition, followed by a description of the scenic charm of the village in Kalidasa's words. Fascinatingly, if we remove from the stage directions the context of the names of the characters and the timeline, we might observe a similarity

between Rakesh's descriptions and several rural parts of India during the late twentieth century. For instance, Rakesh notes in the opening stage directions of the play[73] (in Dharwadker's translation):

> An[74] ordinary room. The walls are made of wood, but their lower portion is plastered with smooth clay. Hindu swastika symbols are painted here and there in vermilion. The front door opens into a dark entranceway. On either side of the doorway are small niches containing little unlit clay lamps. A door upstage left leads to a second room. When this door is open, only one corner of a simple bed is visible. Both doors are also plastered with clay, and are decorated with outlines of lotuses and conch shells in vermilion and deep yellow. Upstage right is a large lattice window through which lightning is occasionally visible. (69)

The above description of a village home is followed by several similar descriptions, including Kalidasa's allusion to the sources of his motivation for writing poetry, in which he longs for his connection with his roots. He says:

> […] I feel that this village region is my true ground. I'm connected to this land by many links. Among these links are—you, this sky and these clouds, the greenery here, the young deer, the herdsmen.
>
> *He pauses and looks at Mallika.*
>
> If I leave this place, I'll be uprooted from my land. (107)

The above stage directions and dialogue present a strange case where a setting appears both archaic and contemporary simultaneously. Does it mean that such a setting, which projects a modern individual's conundrum in the past, makes the play anachronistic? Or does it turn the play into a historical narrative because of the presence of a character like Kalidasa? Interestingly, the answer to both scenarios is no. On the contrary, Rakesh makes the play transcend the definitive markers of time

[73] The thesis uses Aparna Dharwadker's translation of *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (*One Day in the Season of Rain*) throughout. The translations for the other two plays are mine unless stated otherwise.

[74] The translation used here is done by Aparna and Vinay Dharwadker. See *One Day in the Season of Rain* trans. Aparna Dharwadker, 2015. Although I have translated certain fragments from the plays, I shall be using Dharwadker's translation of *Ashadh* for consistency. For the other two plays, the translations used are mine.

and renders a timeless appeal to it. To elaborate, the play never specifies a timeframe for its characters, Kalidasa and Mallika. Most studies that argue for the play's setting to be established during the reign of King Chandragupta II do so because of the tentative dates of Kalidasa's life that align with the reign of the Gupta King. Rakesh himself stated that he never intended to use Kalidasa as a historical character but as someone whom the audience could instantly relate to. He said in his *Interview*:

> […] I must say that I've never written a word that has no relevance to my time. […] For example, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*, I think, is not about Kalidasa. It's mostly imagination, though I've tried not to go beyond the cultural facts and have used a branch of research which I believe has been rejected. But it suited me to use this particular branch of thinking in which I have made Kalidasa governor of Kashmir and all that goes with that theory. But in this play I wanted to portray the dilemma of the present-day writer, a writer lured by the sort of temptations being offered by the state, as well as both other agencies, and his commitment to himself. Therefore, poor Kalidasa has been unnecessarily dragged in, slightly demoted from his high pedestal for the sake of my dominions. But the play is about the contemporary mind […] (32–33)

Rakesh's assertion constructs a compelling argument for the fluidity of the temporal dimensions in the play. The setting in *Ashadh* functions as a tool for distancing the audience from the issues presented and to create an objective view of the complex interpersonal conflicts. Hinging on the thresholds of antiquity and modernity, Rakesh, without explicitly stating the timeframe, makes the play relatable for contemporary audiences. Thus, the play, through its setting, in Thomassen's words, "engage[s] in a project of 're-fusion,' bringing together the various symbolic elements into a whole and communicating meaning to an audience […]" (5). This process of re-fusion of historical symbols creates rather a liminal temporal dimension in which the readers and spectators traverse between the worlds of the ancient characters and their own contemporary sensibilities.

The liminal dimensions of space (settings) are somewhat shredded in *Lahron Ke Rajhans* with a reified use of the historical characters, but the liminal location of the conflicts remains unchanged. Rakesh, in this second play as well, uses historical symbols of Buddha and Nand. He uses Buddha as an idea, a perspective in opposition to another perspective, represented by Nand's wife Sundari. Nand, on the contrary, is the conflicted individual who remains indecisive towards either of these perspectives. Rakesh states that Nand's conflict is between his carnal desires and his spiritual longings:

> […] I wanted to use the name of Buddha, though Buddha is not actually a character in the play […] I also used this legend because that story lent itself to a particular sort of interpretation. The struggle between Buddha and Sundari, Nanda's wife, is another thing I wished to make use of. These two became the symbols for the situation I find myself in today, torn between two forces. It is exactly this struggle in myself that I wished to portray. You find the same sort of thing even in Sartre, for example. Lucifer and the Lord. If you were to say that this is just a historical play, you would not be doing justice to the man. (*Interview* 33)

The settings of the Kushana era (c. 1st –3rd centuries CE) from Asvaghosa's *Saundaranand* (c. 1st – 2nd century CE) are manoeuvred to suit the conflicts of modern individuals in *Lahron*. Similar to *Ashadh*, the temporality of the conflicts in the play turns liminal. If it was a conflict between Kalidasa's ambition and his non-recognized but tranquil life, for Nand, it is his conflict between choosing his domestic life or his spiritual longings. Unable to achieve either, Nand leaves to find his own path, and the play ends with a Sartrean[75] no exit note.

A significant question arises: is only problematising the setting and the temporality of the interpersonal conflicts the only application of liminality by Rakesh? Is it enough evidence for the liminal space that he creates for himself through such experimentations outside the preceding traditions of Hindi drama? Or does the concept integrate with other

[75] See Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. (1989)

critical aspects of his dramaturgy? We shall explore these questions in the following section with reference to his third play *Adhe Adhure*.

2.1.4 The Middle-Class Conundrum: Liminal Subjects and *Adhe Adhure*.

Rakesh's third play, *Adhe Adhure*, was published in 1969, at the turn of a decade when the nation was still grappling with vast socio-political turmoil. A large chunk of the population living across India wanted to move up the social ladder and were mobile, moving from villages to the cities. Another paradigmatic shift was the integration of women into the work force the workforce, which in turn challenged the centuries-old power dynamics in the Indian socio-cultural milieu. The play captures and presents the essence of these conflicts of power between 'Man' and 'Woman'[76] while navigating through the complexity of familial relationships. It is a realistic rendition of the restlessness of a large section of the Indian population trapped in the lacuna of the middle class.

To understand the subject and the target audience of *Adhe Adhure*, we need to understand the class markers that constitute them. Renowned anthropologist Sara Dickey, in her book *Living Class in Urban India* (2016), delineates a framework for the study of markers of the middle class in the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Her study spans from 1985, when she first visited India, to the late 2000s, when the domain of the Indian middle class has evolved considerably. Although her work only focuses on the identification and classification of the markers of the middle class in Madurai, the framework she develops can be drawn upon any other city in India to identify the middle-class sections of the population. The "wide variety of characteristics" she uses "to identify an Indian middle class include income, durable property and assets, occupation, structural position (typically, relation to the means of production), consumption ability and/or expenditure, cultural and social capital, and attitudes" (125). The integration of Dickey's theorization

[76] Rakesh names the characters in *Adhe Adhure* as Man and Woman and mentions that the characters of men should be performed by one actor.

with Rakesh's stage directions creates a lens for us to examine the subject of Rakesh's plays – the middle class – and what makes the subjects so relatable to the audience even in 2024.

Rakesh's notes in the opening stage directions of *Adhe Adhure*:

> *A room used for several purposes in which almost all the broken relics of the past standard of the house – a sofa set, a dining table, a cupboard, and dressing table, etc. – have somehow managed to hold a space for themselves… it appears that that convenience has been arranged by compromising with several kinds of... The objects comprise a broken cot, one or two logs, a shelf with old-torn books, and a study table and chair. Mattresses, curtains, tablecloths, and bedsheets are worn, torn, and stitched so that one cannot decide if their not being wouldn't have been better than their being?*[77] (*Adhe Adhure* 24)

The directions create a picture of a house in a dismal condition and wanting to hold on to the remnants of a past time when circumstances were better. The dilapidated situation of the house is created despite an earning member, who, in this case, is the woman, Savitri. The husband, Mahendranath, lost his job long ago and has also failed at several attempts to establish a business. The financial crisis of the family also gives rise to conflicts of power due to the expected gender roles in Indian society. How Rakesh uses this conflict as an appeal for social reform is a question to be dealt with in the second part of this chapter. Presently, we shall focus on the construction of the middle-class image in the play through such markers that he mentions in the stage direction.

How far-reaching and precise Rakesh's depiction of the middle class in the play is can be gauged by Dickey's description of the situation of her friend's home in Madurai. She notes:

> Clothes were strung over lines of rope, a few pots were stacked in the corner next to a woodburning cooking pit, combs and talcum powder

[77] See. Rakesh, Mohan. *Adhe Adhure.* Delhi, Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2017.

> stood on a shelf with a tiny mirror, and lithographs of Hindu deities hung on the walls. I saw several upended reed mats that I knew would be unrolled at night when everyone slept side by side on the floor. (21)

While, the differences in the two descriptions of the middle-class household are obvious, they are more literary than materialistic or spatial. Rakesh describes them in the context of a Hindi-speaking family in a locale that never specifies the city[78] where Savitri's family is residing. The similarity of class markers in these descriptions, including the mattresses, curtains, table cloths, comb, talcum powder and the tiny mirror, points to the fact that the middle class in India is a diverse range that is extremely challenging to quantify. Henrike Donner corroborates the assertion when she notes that "[…] even the most cursory glance at contemporary India reveals that the communities and individuals described as being middle-class in fact differ widely not only in terms of economic position and consumption practices but also in terms of status and values" (3). The diversity and range lead us to contemplate the middle-class and its existence in Donner terms as "instable" (5)[79] and the instability in turn associates with it the characteristics of liminality.

If the stage directions about the setting of the play create strong anticipation in the readers for the middle-classness of Savitri's family, the directions in the opening scene substantiate the compromising lifestyle of middle-class families in India. Rakesh notes:

> *[…] There is a school bag lying open on the cot with half the books and notebooks scattered outside. A couple of old magazines, a scissor, and a few cuttings of some pictures are kept on the couch. There's a Pyjama lying on the backrest of a chair. The woman enters, balancing many things, some of which are for the house, some work-related, and some for herself. She looks exhausted from the day's work and tangled*

[78] Nevertheless, it is by consensus that scholars believe the locale in *Adhe Adhure* to resemble Delhi. It was in Delhi that the first performance of the play was held in 1969.
[79] See Donner's *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life* (2011).

with walking carrying so many things. She comes inside, keeps her things on the chair and glances at the room.

Woman: *(Sighing from exhaustion)* Oh ho ho hoh! *(A little disappointingly)* No one at home again. *(Looking towards the door inside)* Kinni!... how will she answer if she isn't even here? *(Looking at the bag on the cot)* This is how she is! *(Picking up a book from the bag)* She tore a book again! She doesn't even hesitate to think that new books can't be bought daily! *(Coming near the couch)* And Mr. Ashok does this for a day's living! *(Looks at the pictures*) Elizabeth Taylor… Audrey Hepburn… Shirley MacLaine. He is living with these pictures […] (*Adhe Adhure* 29–30)

The description, on the one hand, presents a disorganized picture of Savitri and Mahendranath's house, on the other, it presents a section of the middle class that many other families from the lower strata of the middle class might envy. It also contrasts the descriptions of the middle-class homes in Madurai by Dickey, which are found lacking even the broken couch and the cot. The contrast, again, accentuates the diversity and vastness of the middle class in India. Dickey notes:

> […] the category is a contested one; but not only is there agreement that occupations and consumption practices can place people outside of the middle class, the boundaries themselves (which vary predictably depending on the speaker's relative location within the middle class) are neither arbitrary nor highly elastic.
>
> […] middle-class standing is defined by a family's economic and social security, its distance from wealth on the one hand and from mere survival or subsistence on the other ("wealth" and "subsistence" being, however, relative terms), the uses to which any discretionary income is put, and the ways in which individuals use the "goods" they acquire—in other words, how well they perform middle-class identity. Middle-class people stated that members of the upper class have substantial assets, including family wealth, capital, and other property, whereas middle-class people have a monthly income (or, in some cases, a reliable daily

> wage) and perhaps a small amount of property, and the poor at best have daily wages and sufficient earnings for a day's expenses. (127)

Dickey's observation fits precisely with Savitri's family, which is distant from wealth as well as from poverty. As mentioned above, this "paradoxical" state of the family places it in the liminal spaces of the Indian social milieu from where the transition to both the upper and the lower classes is possible. This argument becomes significant when taken in the context of Rakesh's contemporary social situations and with reference to a bigger frame, the immense after-effects of independence on society.

The representation of conflicts and issues in all of Rakesh's plays requires a focus on liminality, including the liminal social class in India, which constitutes the core subject – the middle class. His plays were written for and present the conflicts of the liminal middle classes in the country. A chronology of the performance of his plays also reveals that his plays were first performed in cities such as Delhi and Kolkata, where the majority of the population was the urban middle class. Rakesh wrote at a time when the middle class in India was emerging considerably, if not rapidly. He used their liminal status to problematize and present the complexity of social issues that societies across the nation had to grapple with. We shall examine in the following section the issues he presented, his methods for social reform, and how liminality emerged as a key concept to his reformist agendas.

2.2.1 Understanding Rakesh as a Reformist Playwright.

It is evident that Rakesh had a distinguished approach to reform in comparison to his contemporaries and his predecessors. Especially Ashk, who arguably seems the leader of radical vision in Hindi drama, created a parallel reality to show the audience the outcomes of his reformist visions. It was not a utopian vision but rather an optimistic one, which was achievable, provided the society emulated Ashk's methods of letting women be free and in control of their lives. Rakesh, on the contrary, decided against presenting his vision of a reformed

society and instead decided to mirror reality to provide his audiences with objective insights into the complexity of human relationships. For his time, Rakesh's vision of reform, while not as loud and bold as Ashk's, was enough to challenge the power dynamics in society. In the following sections, we study the nuances of Rakesh's reformist playwrighting, his contrasting methods to those of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar, and the criticisms against his ideas and to what extent are they valid? Through a close reading of his plays, we contest Nigam's assertion that Rakesh's plays did not have a "social function" (66). Despite these claims and Rakesh's own admission that he did not aim to create a literary movement as defined by Devy. This study, as we shall observe below, reports that all his ideas converge to make his plays an avant-garde reformist literature. His aim was to capture and critique his 'surrounding reality' – his experiences and observations of people in his vicinity, and while doing so, he aimed to highlight the suppressing traditions, the suffocating individuals – both women and men, and the disintegrating familial bonds.

Rakesh's plays were also a testament to the paradigm shift in Indian society in its first two decades of Independence. Rakesh, a keen observer, took the responsibility to capture and represent this shift on stage. However, he did not intend to change anything majorly or to bring about a revolution in society; instead, he believed that his function was to recapture, as he notes in his essay, *Looking Around as a Playwright* (1966);

> My function as a playwright is not to mould but to recapture; not to fabricate something around it, but to discover its own perspective. I find myself under the sway of this 'something' happening - to me as well as around me; something that is a force, a conflict and a terrible irony. At every step it strikes me down, but again lifts me to my feet-by that contradicting and negating itself. What is this great 'something'? I do not know. It is in the air, in the age, in me. I know it is there, but cannot give it a name. Maybe I want to write drama only because I cannot give it a name. (18)

The experimental nature of his work extended the ambit of his plays from being called observations of society to being renowned as one of

the pillars of reformist literature in India. In search of an Indian theatre different from the conventions (of the theatre) that he had grown up with, Rakesh's experiments emphasised capturing the reality of his times and then presenting them as the core subjects of his dramatic corpus. These subjects often gave the reader a subtle push towards questioning their perspectives about what they contemplated as the consequence of a conflict. Through this push, Rakesh was able to challenge the established system of thought in the minds of his readers that might or might not have required reforming[80]. As Lewis A. Coser writes in his article *Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change* (1957):

> A group or a system which no longer is challenged is no longer capable of a creative response. It may subsist, wedded to the eternal yesterday of precedent and tradition, but it is no longer capable of renewal. (199)

The renewal of the existing system of notions was the sine qua non for social reform, which in turn required specific sources that had the potential to generate friction between what the readers/audiences perceived and what was being presented. In the present section, the thesis endeavours to trace these sources and reasons that drove the reader towards introspection and thus turned Rakesh's plays into reformist literature.

2.2.2 Representing Social Issues through Conflict: Understanding Rakesh as a Social Reformer.

Social reform, in a broad sense, can be understood as a significant shift or transition in an existing tradition, situation, custom, and beliefs of the people. This transition often comes with resistance and causes friction between those seeking change and those in a privileged position due to the present circumstances. As Coser notes, "change, no matter what its source, breeds strain and conflict" (204). In this section

[80] The reason for this ambiguity is the difference in perception and response of different individuals to the same situation. Some readers/audiences might have found it very difficult to accept what Rakesh presented in his plays, while some may have already had a progressive bend and would have shared the playwright's vision for the changes required in society.

(and in the following chapters on Habib Tanvir and Mahesh Dattani), I rely on Van Gennep's tripartite laws defining "*rites of separation, rites of transition*, and *rites of incorporation*"[81] (11) to test the liminality of the conflicts in the plays. More precisely, this section focuses on the rites of transition in the three plays[82]. It is significant to note that the sub-categorisation provided by Gennep in terms of Sympathetic, Contagious, Animistic, Dynamic, Direct, or Indirect rites[83] is strictly integrated into and meant for the fabric of ritualistic ceremonies to mark individual and social transitions from one state to another. To elaborate further, Gennep notes:

> A betrothal forms a liminal period between adolescence and marriage, but the passage from adolescence to betrothal itself involves a special series of rites of separation, a transition, and an incorporation into the betrothed condition; and the passage from the transitional period, which is betrothal, to marriage itself, is made through a series of rites of separation from the former, followed by rites consisting of transition, and rites of incorporation into marriage. The pattern of ceremonies comprising rites of pregnancy, delivery, and birth is equally involved. I am trying to group all these rites as clearly as possible, but since I am dealing with activities I do not expect to achieve as rigid a classification as the Botanists have, for example. (11)

Thus, considering all these caveats, it is safe to stick to the rites of transition for examining the characters' lives and their conflicts in this study to comprehend the reformist undercurrents.

Rakesh's plays, when studied through the lens of social reform, yield fascinating reasons for why they have been termed reformist. Through a close reading of his three plays, we observe that Rakesh, besides creating friction of thoughts, also highlights and challenges the power dynamics and gender bias. His three plays show a gradual disruption of the disproportional distribution of power between the two genders. *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* has an intelligent, strong, persevering, and yet subservient woman in Mallika. *Lahron Ke Rajhans* has a balanced equation of power between Nand and Sundari, who doesn't let the

[81] See Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (The Rites of Passage), pp. 1–14.
[82] And the plays in the subsequent chapters.
[83] Refer to note 54.

thought of compromising or self-effacement for the sake of her marriage get to her. In *Adhe Adhure*, Rakesh subverts the power dynamics and gender roles, and thus, Savitri, the bread earner for her family, is always at loggerheads with Mahendranath and other males around her.

However, we focus primarily on the elements Rakesh actively highlighted in his works to be clearly understood and then reflected upon by the readers/audience. The most prominent aspects that Rakesh uses to encourage social reform are conflict, both external and internal; lack of communication and its effect on human relationships, alienation, class struggle, and gender dominance. All three of his plays present these themes in varying degrees; for instance, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* presents Mallika's alienated existence and Kalidasa's internal conflict and the unequal power relations between them. His internal conflict leads him to abandon his position as the administrator of Kashmir and return to his village and to Mallika in anticipation of a new beginning. Similarly, his second play*, Lahron Ke Rajhans,* highlights the conflict of an individual (Nand) torn between two different perspectives of life, represented as earthly (by Sundari, his wife) and spiritual (by Buddha, his cousin). While *Adhe Adhure,* the only play that Rakesh places in a modern setting, presents to the readers the struggles of a working woman (Savitri), who feels alienated in her family but falls prey to the patriarchal forces functioning around her.

Conflict, both outside and inside the characters, is one of the most prominent themes in Rakesh's plays. His plays revolve around the representation of conflict, capturing the effect it has on the actions of the character and the events in the play. Also, the spaces from which these conflicts emerge, are primarily created by two binary opposite values, desires, and bonds. His first play, *Ashadh ka Ek Din* presents conflicts of both kinds. Kalidasa's, inner conflict arises from the space between his ambitions and then his renunciation of it to return to his roots. He is presented as a discreetly ambitious and prodigiously talented man. On

the one hand, his skill as a poet gets him recognition from the King[84] of Ujjaiyini. On the other, it makes him ambitious. His ambitiousness gives rise to an internal conflict of choice, and eventually, he leaves the village. This internal conflict of Kalidasa is expressed vividly in the decisions he makes throughout the play. For instance, in the first act, when Kalidasa is adamant about not leaving the village, he is persuaded by Mallika to go to Ujjaiyini and receive the honours and emoluments from the King. Similarly, in the second act, when he visits the village briefly and returns without seeing Mallika, he reveals in the third act that he did not see Mallika because he was afraid that eye contact with her could make his consciousness more unstable. As he says:

> Kalidasa**:** […] I didn't want to pass through this place on my way to Kashmir. I felt at the time that this region, this range of mountains and valleys, would take the form of a mute question before me. Still, I couldn't resist the temptation. But I didn't experience any joy in being here. I was repelled by myself. I was also repelled by all those people who celebrated the day of my visit with festivities. That was the first time my heart and mind longed to be liberated. But it wasn't possible to be liberated then. I didn't visit you that day because I was afraid your eyes would make my restless heart even more restless. I wanted to save myself from such a situation. It could have had any kind of consequence. I knew what effect my failure to visit you would have on you, what others would say to you. Even so, I felt reassured that you wouldn't have any negative feelings in that respect. And I left with the hope that there would come a day when I'd be able to say all this to you, and convince you about the conflicts in my mind […] I didn't realize that conflict doesn't limit itself to just one person, that change doesn't move only in one direction. That's why I've a great sense of futility about being here today. (*One Day* 160)

Kalidasa's internal conflict pushes him towards ambitiousness after he leaves the village. His ambition drives him further towards desolation,

[84] Though Rakesh never specifies the historical period during which his Kalidasa lives but studies of the life of the poet and dramatist Kalidasa show that he lived during the reign of Chandragupta II (c.380 – c.415 CE)

which creates another conflict of choice resulting in his return to Mallika at the end of the play. Dimtrova notes about his circumstances;

> […] he fails to take the opportunity to come back to his beloved. At the end of the play, he assumes wrongly that his conflict is with time because he has come too late: Mallikà has had a baby. In reality, it is his abandonment and betrayal of Mallikà and their mutual love that causes his self-alienation and results in artistic inability. (36)

What is very strongly noticeable in the overall arc of Kalidasa's character is a rite of transition that does not result in further incorporation, as suggested by Gennep. Kalidasa's rites of separation begin with his departure from the village, and he only returns to the mise-en-scene towards the end of the third act. His absence from the stage marks his liminal passage with the possibility of returning to Mallika. He returns but in an even more desolate state than at the beginning of the play, as evident from Mallika's assertion:

> MALLIKA: No, you haven't gone off to Kashi. You haven't renounced the world. That's not why I told you to leave this village. … I also didn't ask you to leave so that you could go and take on the burden of governance somewhere […]
>
> You may be detached from life, but I can't be detached from it now. Can you look at life with my eyes? Do you know how these years of my life have been spent? What I've been witness to? What I was, and what I've become? (*One Day* 152–153)

Mallika's assertion points to both Kalidasa's rites of separation and her own liminal space, which is again a digression from the liminal passages of characters in other genres[85]. For both Mallika and Kalidasa, the enduring liminal phase results, at best, in their reunion, even momentarily and, at worst, in a more bitter separation than the first act.

[85] The digression in the state of characters after their ordeal through the three rites should be gauged by recalling the other studies, such as by Kristen McQuinn, where characters such as Bilbo (from *The Hobbit*) and Coraline emerge triumphant. McQuinn calls it the positive impact of liminality where "[i]dentity is found or evolves in one's liminal space […]" (17).

It is here that Rakesh (and other realist playwrights in general) depart from the other conventions of Indian drama. Their adherence to the complexity of reality and the rejection of the method of happy endings[86] meant that their characters seldom broke out of the conflicts, as is usually the case in real life. Nevertheless, Rakesh, in both *Ashadh and Lahron*, digressed from outright realism by returning to (semi-) historical characters. To explain, one can recall Raymond Williams' assertion when he notes that in modern naturalist drama:

> "[…] there was an emphasis on *social extension*: a deliberate breach of the convention that at least the principal personages of drama should be of elevated rank […] there was the completion of a decisive secularism […] a steady exclusion *from the dramatic action* of all supernatural or metaphysical agencies. Drama was now, explicitly, to be a human action to be played in exclusively human terms. (84)

In Rakesh's case, the "principal personages," and the "dramatic action," despite suggesting an "elevated" divine rank, are made contemporary in cause and effect. The issues presented, however, are "in exclusively human terms" (Williams 84), marking a digression from both his contemporary generation and his predecessors.

Thus, Rakesh uses Kalidasa's conundrum to push a thought regarding ambition into the minds of the readers. He does not call for an outright reform of the notion of ambition but asks a simple question: Should the price of ambition not be reconsidered in today's day and age?

In contrast to Kalidasa, Mallika's conflict insinuates from the liminal space between expected gender roles in her society that ask for subservience, and her individuality as a strong-willed woman. She is found ensnared between the choices of enduring her suffering or choosing to stop waiting for her beloved, Kalidasa. In the opening scene of the first act, Rakesh establishes her as a strong, confident woman who does not pay much heed to society's slanderous chatter. Mallika's

[86] As was the motto of Sanskrit drama.

argument with her mother, Ambika, in the first act, provides evidence of her independent mind:

> MALLIKA: What do they say? What right do they have to say anything at all? Mallika's life is her own property. If she wants to destroy it, then who has the right to criticize her?
>
> AMBIKA: When have I said that I have the right?
>
> *Mallika turns her head sharply and tries to suppress her agitation.* […]
>
> AMBIKA: I know that, today, even you don't have any rights over yourself. But I can't bear such a huge transgression.
>
> *Mallika crosses her arms over her knees and rests her head on them.*
>
> MALLIKA: Ma, I know there's unpleasant talk. I also understand your unhappiness. And yet I don't feel guilty. I've followed an impulse and chosen one emotion out of many. For me, that one bond is greater than all other bonds. I'm really in love with my emotion—which is pure, tender, eternal.
>
> *Ambika's face becomes distorted.* (*One Day* 76)

Despite the "unpleasant talks", Mallika puts faith in her love for Kalidasa. This argument establishes Mallika as an emotionally strong woman. Rakesh also displays her intellectual capabilities through her comprehensive readings of Kalidasa's works, which she understands better than Rangini and Sangini, the scholars of the state. Her strong will and self-respect also manifest in the second act when Priyangumanjari, Kalidasa's wife and the princess of Ujjaiyini, visits her. Mallika humbly denies her offer to marry her off to one of the courtiers and relocate to the capital to live a luxurious life:

> PRIYANGUMANJARI: But I believe you're worthy of much more than this. … Before I arrived, two court officials had come here. A twisted smile appears again on her lips. I didn't send them as a mere formality. Have you seen both of them?
>
> *Trying to figure out her meaning, Mallika looks at her uncertainly.*
>
> MALLIKA: I've seen them.
>
> PRIYANGUMANJARI: We can arrange for your marriage to whichever one of them you find suitable. They are both capable officials.
>
> MALLIKA: Your Highness!

Clutching the bark manuscript pages to her chest, she retreats a few steps towards the window seat. Giving her a level look, Priyangumanjari walks slowly towards her.

PRIYANGUMANJARI: It's possible that you find neither of them suitable. But these aren't the only two officials in the kingdom—there are many others. Come with me. Anyone you wish to marry . . .

Mallika sits down on the window seat and, with suppressed agitation, bites her lip.

MALLIKA: Please stop discussing this subject. (135–36)

Following this conversation, her strong character is eventually overwhelmed by the death of her mother at the beginning of the third act, and she succumbs to her circumstances[87].

Thus, the protagonists in the play are found trapped in liminal conflicts from which their identities do not "evolve" (McQuinn 17) and are instead lost. Rakesh drives home the idea that ambition (in the case of Kalidasa) and the lack of it (in the case of Mallika) should be reconsidered in the context of the price one pays.

Also, Rakesh's portrayal of Mallika as an intellectually strong and yet subservient woman reflects his observations of the treatment of women around him and is a testament to his subtly reformative agendas. Cossio also corroborates the assertion that Rakesh highlights situations where women are suppressed by tradition.

> What emerges clearly in the author's works is an image of a woman as the victim of a tradition in which she is allowed to exist only for others […] An educated and profoundly poetic young woman, Mallika is ready to forego her own happiness so that her companion Kalidas can rise to fame, alone […] (110)

Dimitrova criticises Rakesh for not providing Mallika with the necessary means to challenge Kalidasa's actions. She notes;

> The dramatist does not question these notions of stereotyped gender roles. The only way out that he can envisage for the female protagonist

[87] Towards the end of the play, Mallika subtly points out that her circumstances have led her to prostitution. See *One Day in the Season on Rain*, p. 153.

> is motherhood and acceptance of her fate. When Kalidasa leaves Mallika the playwright portrays her as finding comfort in her child. Even then, she remains passive. Not even in her thoughts does she dare to reproach Kalidasa or rebel against him or forget him. Rakesh's interpretation of the relationship between Kalidasa and Mallika, and of the heroine's character, points to the author's rather conservative and traditional stance regarding women's issues. (38)

However, what Dimitrova does not point out is that Rakesh's conservative and traditional stance resonates with the position of women during his times. He reports his observations but refrains from advising any solution to the predicaments of his characters and instead leaves it for the readers to find. This reader response to a conundrum enacted on stage contradicts Dimitrova's previous assertion when she notes;

> As readers and audience, we receive information that enables us to perceive the dramatists' views on the subject matter. Most often, authors imbue their characters with their ideals and ideas. If the characters are well constructed, we find ourselves either agreeing or disagreeing with them, liking or disliking them. In this way, we internalize the ideas and respond to the messages that the playwrights convey in their work. (71)

Besides, the no-solution method also gives Rakesh the opportunity to highlight the suppressive power relations between the two genders in Indian social milieu. While Kalidasa is free to choose his path to fame and success, Mallika's choices, though a result of her despondency, bring questions about her commitment. Dimitrova questions Kalidasa's actions as male privilege. She notes;

> A question arises about the ethical dimensions of his actions: what gives him the moral right to ruin her life? What compensates for his failure to fulfil his obligations to her as a woman – that is, to make her his wife? Was he able to live his life as he chose because he was considered a gifted artist or because he was a man, not a woman? Might the relationship between Kalidasa and Mallika be seen in the light of the power structures of ancient Indian society, which entitled men to more freedom in their actions and which judged them according to moral criteria that were different from those defined for women? (37)

Rakesh also uses external conflict in the play that is visible in the opposite ideologies of the other characters, for instance, in Ambika and Mallika's argument about the latter's relationship with Kalidasa; in Kalidasa and the Royal gentleman Dantul's confrontation about the claim on the fawn; in Kalidasa and Vilom's strong arguments about being successful in life. It gives the readers a reflection on their conflicts in their social proximity, the constraints of society on an individual, the weight of social expectations, and the responsibilities of single motherhood.

In the play, *Lahron Ke Rajhans* conflict affects Nand – both externally and internally. His conflict of choices and indecisiveness leave him on a square to be engulfed by all the directions. However, as soon as he begins to walk toward one, it tilts on its axis, and he has to retrace his steps[88]. Nand remains swinging in the space between the two perspectives of life – Sundari (representing the earthly perspective) and the Budhha (representing the spiritual perspective). The conflict in the play is established in the very first scene when Rakesh writes in his stage directions;

> When seen from the front, there is a square platform in the background on the right-hand side, on the left, a hammock and a fish-shaped seating. In the front, towards the right, is the wine chamber and towards the left is the makeup chamber — two candlesticks in two different sections of the front and the back. One's head is mounted with a male figurine, arms spread and eyes towards the sky. The other's is mounted with a female figurine, arms folded into the body, eyes towards the earth. (*Lahron* 51)

Through this stage direction, Rakesh establishes from the beginning that Nand (symbolised by the male figure) is torn between the two perspectives. While Sundari (the female figure looking downwards) represents domestic life. This tussle of two different dimensions of life

[88] See. Rakesh, Mohan. *Lahron Ke Rajhans.* New Delhi, Rajkamal Prakashan, 2017, p. 129.

manifests itself both spatially and temporally. For Nand, it is his internal conflict that leads him to his liminal space[89]. Most clear evidence of Nand's internal turmoil is found in the last act of the play during his heated arguments with Sundari when he says;

> SUNDARI: Is it that profound the true meaning? [...] No, it isn't that profound. There is nothing more in it to know than what I have learned […]
>
> NAND: **[**…] There is, is, is! A little bit more than that. And since you insist on knowing, it's better that you know more […] I have known for long that I am not meant to live here only. This as well that I am not meant to live away from here. Where, how much, on which point I am meant to live, I have not been able to answer to myself yet […] you think you are the centre in whose orbit I revolve like a constellation. But I find myself akin to a broken constellation which nowhere has a centre nor has an orbit […] (Rakesh, 129).

For Sundari, her ordeal begins during the first act itself when she organises the Kamotsava[90] on the day Buddha's wife, Devi Yashodhara, accepts asceticism. Her tussle with spirituality is grounded in her belief that a wife's attraction should be strong enough to keep her husband attached to domestic life and its duties. As evident from her conversation with her chambermaid Alka:

> SUNDARI: If Prince Siddhartha has returned as Gautam Buddha, shouldn't Devi Yashodhara be credited for it?
>
> ALKA: Devi Yashodhara should be credited for it?
>
> SUNDARI: No? If Devi Yashodhara's attraction could hold Prince Siddhartha, wouldn't he have remained Prince Siddhartha today?
>
> ALKA: Please don't say such things, my Lady.

---

[89] Nand leaves the palace on Sundari's behest to meet with Buddha and get clarity on his thoughts. However, Buddha coerces him into initiation as a disciple and then Nand goes to the forest with suicidal thoughts, fights a tiger, returns to the palace with a shaved head, and then leaves the palace again after a bitter argument with Sundari.

[90] See *Lahron Ke Rajhans*, pp. 51–60.

> SUNDARI: […] It is as simple as this, Alka! A woman's attraction makes a man, a man. Her repulsion makes him Gautam Buddha. (*Lahron* 59–60)

The conversation provides comprehensive evidence of Sundari's belief in her own love for Nand and her confidence that Nand won't emulate Buddha. While the readers and audience are unaware of what happens with Nand in his liminal zone, they can observe Sundari closely during her ordeal after Nand departs from the palace to seek Buddha's counsel. Nand's departure and Sundari's conviction about his accepting asceticism create a perpetually increasing void which Gregory Bateson[91] calls "*symmetrical* schismogenesis" (176), which implies the creation of a lacuna due to the parallel behaviour of the concerned individuals. The parallel behaviour in Sundari and Nand's case is fueled by the lack of communication about Nand's whereabouts before he returns to the palace. The failure of communication makes Nand unable to convey his thoughts clearly to both Sundari and Buddha. He continues in the monologue that when he is with Buddha, his mind wants to be with Sundari, and when he is with her, his mind wanders to Buddha's shrine, proving true, in the process, the argument for the liminal characteristic of his internal conflict. He feels incomplete with either and wants them to accept him in his totality and not just as a person they want to see. This failure of communication, according to R L Nigam, is layered, as he says;

> This failure of communication has three aspects, namely, a failure to understand oneself, a failure to understand the other person, and a failure of each to understand the other. As a consequence, each goes about weighed down by his/her mauled sensibilities and injured susceptibilities. The situation is altogether too much for them. They cannot either control or transcend it; it controls them… (67).

[91] Bateson (1904–1980) was a British anthropologist who worked extensively on the tribes in New Guinea. His prominent works include *Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972)* and *Mind and Nature* (1980).

In this scenario, both Nand and Sundari are overwhelmed by the desire to make the other understand their side of the situation and ignore the other's perspective.

Another visible conflict in their relationship is the conflict of power. While Rakesh claims it is a conflict of perspectives, it evidently turns out as a conflict of power dynamics between the male and the female in a marital relationship. Besides the question on the meaning of relationships, Rakesh moves a step further in this play and provides Sundari with equal provisions to exercise power which we find missing in the case of Mallika. Her act of asking Nand to go to Budhha and clear his mind reflects her authority and confidence in her love. It is Nand who comes out as weak and indecisive at this moment and is unable to take a firm stance until he is forcefully initiated by Buddha.

Both Nand and Sundari are defeated by a lack of understanding of each other, and the play ends with Nand leaving the palace while Sundari breaks into incessant tears. R L Nigam makes an interesting comment on this ending and says that since the characters cannot control or transcend the situation, "They cannot act decisively. There is often a dead-end conclusion to a Rakesh play which is often taken as the existentialist 'no-exit' idea" (67). However, in his argument, Nigam fails to include the reformist undercurrents that run parallel to the "no-exit idea". The conflict of choice that Nand goes through and the lack of communication and understanding that complicate his marital relationship might look like a dead-end situation on the outside, but they also make the readers ask themselves several questions. What does it mean to have a relationship? Is it always living together? Or is it living away from each other and loving the memories of each other only? Why can't one be spiritual and possess sensuality at the same time? Is it a sin to have carnal desires and spiritual aspirations running through one's heart simultaneously? These questions, when put together, give us the reason for the dead-end conclusion of the play. Rakesh, again, succeeds at asking questions that make the readers reflect on some aspects of their personal relationships.

Unlike *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* and *Lahron Ke Rajhans,* the conflict that predominates the plot of *Adhe Adhure* is the conflict of a dysfunctional family. The source of this conflict is several factors converging and contributing to the disintegration of Savitri and Mahendranath's marital relationship on the one hand, and on the other, their relationship with their children. The factors include arguments in the family and the lack of communication, especially between Savitri and Mahendranath, elitism and class difference, asserted by Mahendranth's friend Juneja and Savitri's Boss Singhania, and gender stereotypes and power dynamics in a patriarchal society. These issues, again, emerge from liminal sources such as Savitri's position as the breadwinner for her family and the expected gender roles of women as homemakers.

Also, *Adhe Adhure* is the first play that directly addresses the liminal subject of contemporary India – the middle-class[92] and their predicaments. As theorised by Sarah Dickey and Henrike Donner, Savitri's family epitomises the contemporary middle class and its salient characteristic of being placed at a distance from "wealth", and "mere survival or subsistence on the other" (*Dickey* 145). Their struggle for subsistence is emphasised by the stage descriptions of the deteriorating condition of their house. This struggle creates further rifts in the family and also emphasises the latent social issues such as gender norms and class dynamics in an urban Indian society.

Arguably, the most potent manifestation of liminality in the plays is made through the characterisation of the male characters. Barring Savitri's son, who is young, Rakesh mandates that all other male characters should be played by the same male actor. He notes:

> M.B.S: (The Man in Black Suit), who also plays Man 1, Man 2, Man 3, Man 4. Age approximately forty-nine or fifty. The facial expression is polite yet satirical. Sartorial choices as Man 1: shirt and trousers. Carrying the agony of losing one's battles in life. As Man 2: Trousers and a round-neck blazer. Content with

[92] See section 2.1.4.

> himself, yet in doubt. As Man 3: Trousers and T-shirts. Carrying a packet of cigarettes. Chain smoker. The comportment reflects the philosophy of living for one's convenience. As Man 4: Trousers and an old long overcoat. An astute realisation of his old age on the face. Deceitful. (*Adhe Adhure* 23)

This distinct method of characterisation to use one actor for multiple roles does more than hinting at Rakesh's use of the actor as a liminal vessel connecting multiple individuals. It also highlights a crucial aspect of the function of men in Savitri's world, which is to represent the contemporary patriarchal society that finds it hard to accommodate an independent woman who challenges the established norms of power dynamics. All the males in Savitri's life "perform"[93] a similar role which culminates with them asking her to accept the status quo.

Besides Savitri's status in the structure of her family and society, her family's class status and the difference in context to Juneja's or Singhania's position is expressed in the play from the first act when Rakesh describes the deteriorating condition of Savitri's house in stage direction. The description of the room symbolises an inherent struggle of the family members to come to terms with their present social status, and it also predicts the opportunistic manifestations of higher social status by their friends and acquaintances. The struggle to maintain a standard of living for Savitri and her family is evident in their arguments. For instance, in the first act, when Savitri declares that her boss, Singhania, will be visiting them, two different reactions from her and her husband are observed. While Savitri finds her boss' visit a matter of pride, Mahendranath, on the contrary, finds this visit awkward, and Savitri states that he absconds from meeting her boss every time he visits their home.

> **Man 1:** Whenever he has visited, have I said anything to you?

[93] The term perform, here refers to the performance of gender roles. See Judith Butler's *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*.

Woman: Because you are ashamed that both the times you were not present at home.

Man 1: So, What? Can't a man have business outside?

Woman: *(Busy)* Surely you will need to take care of some business today as well.

Man 1: Well… I do have to go today… but if you want me to stay here then… (Rakesh, 1969).

Mahendranath's inhibitions in meeting Savitri's boss result from their class difference. His wife has a job while he doesn't, which makes him feel inferior to both his wife and her boss. Even though facing her wife is a quotidian exercise, facing her and her boss together appears an uncomfortable enterprise to him.

Elitism in the play is presented through Savitri's boss on his visit to her house. As soon as Singhania enters the stage, we are made aware of his demeanour full of bossy flamboyance. However, his pedantic behaviour is described vividly by Savitri's son Ashok as evident in the following dialogue;

Woman: … When I request people to come to our home, you begin to mock them and draw their caricatures – I cannot tolerate such things now. Not at all.

Boy: If you cannot tolerate it, then why do you call such people at home whose coming here…?

Woman: Yes-Yes… Tell me what happens when they come?...

Boy: Whose coming here belittles us even more in our own eyes than we already are. (Rakesh, 1969).

Another significant source of conflict in the play is the power dynamics in a patriarchal society where gender norms dictate men as the breadwinners of the family while women are defined as homemakers. In the second act, we are informed by Binny (Savitri's elder daughter) how Mahendranath, when he was earning, used to abuse Savitri physically. However, with Savitri earning, Mahendranath finds it challenging to vent his anger on her and instead leaves the house for a couple of days.

This shift in power dynamics causes a conflict between the two individuals responsible for maintaining the balance in the family. Mahendranath's reluctance in accepting Savitri as the head of the family coheres to what Coser notes as the individual's 'share of gratification', as he writes, 'Conflict ensues in the effort of various frustrated groups and individuals to increase their share of gratification' (203). Mahendranath's reluctance and exasperation are visible in the first act when he equates himself to a 'rubber stamp'[94] to be used according to other people's wishes. He uses his past as a means of gratification in his present when he asks what he has received after all these years of carrying the burden of life and family.

The conflict of power dynamics and gender stereotypes is expressed most strongly in the last act, in the dialogue between Savitri and Juneja. While Juneja accuses Savitri of controlling Mahendranath and holding him into her clutches, Savitri, on the contrary, fascinatingly, does not blame only Mahendranath or Juneja for her struggling life but instead says;

> **Woman:** Haven't I said it to you! All of you… all of you! Alike. You are all very alike! Only the masks are different, but the faces? Everyone has the same. (Rakesh, 1969).

This remark from Savitri shifts our attention to the patriarchal subjugation working around her. Interestingly, Rakesh specifies in the stage direction that all the male characters except the son are to be played by one actor, which hints at the similar functions of males in Savitri's world. The play emphasises Rakesh's reformist principles by highlighting several intricate concerns that remain pertinent even in the present society, such as the discrimination against women irrespective of their economic and social status. After reading or watching the play, one is left with many questions regarding patriarchy, the gender roles in a family, and the intricacies of human relationships. Rakesh's portrayal

[94] Mahendranath in the present scene refers to himself as a rubber stamp but is countered by Savitri who says that even a rubber stamp provides authority and prestige to the people using it which he has never done for anyone in the family.

of women in his plays might appear occasionally weak, but it only reiterates his observations of the position of women in his society. Rakesh, in *Adhe Adhure*, problematises the concept of gender roles but doesn't offer any solution to it. However, while exploring the problem through Savitri's experiences, he highlights the sources of conflict and the role of this conflict in reforming social constructs. John Dewy (as quoted by Coser) writes in his *Human Nature and Conduct* (1930) that 'Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving. Not that it always effects this result; but that conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity[95] (300).'

A major chunk of criticism against Rakesh arises from his treatment of women characters and the agency that he denies them. Cossio writes in this regard;

> In comparison between the "new" independent liberated woman and the traditional dependent woman completely devoted to her husband, the author ends up favouring the latter, thus suggesting that he is bewildered when faced with a female figure who departs from the well-established norm. (111)

Cossio's assertion while stands undeniably true when we observe the pattern of his women characters – Mallika, Balo, Sundari, Bacan, Bina, Savitri – all have been denied their share of power. However, this unbalanced equation, again in compliance with Rakesh's methods, compels us to ask ourselves: how much even have we been able to make the power dynamics since the time he wrote? It appears comfortable for one to align with Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar because they offer tailor-made solutions to the audience. Ashk's Anjo emulates "Mira"[96] in her devotion to hygiene, Bhuvaneshwar's Stri can rebel (strike) against her husband. However, since Rakesh wants us to look at the problem first and then find a solution by ourselves, it becomes difficult for one to align

[95] See. Dewy, John. *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology.* New York, The Modern Library, 1922, Pp. 300.
[96] See Dimitrova's *Gender Religion and Modern Hindi Drama*, Pp. 49-50.

with his methods. The subtly subversive tone of his plays is highlighted by Dimitrova, who notes;

> Rakesh's artistic design attempts to reinforce the religious ideal of submissive and self-effacing womanhood as a model for Hindu women. However, the literary texture of *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* [and similarly his other plays] fails to convey the meaning intended by the dramatist. Rather, in effect, it subverts conservative Hindu notions of womanhood by showing that the religious model of the loyal and submissive wife, the pativrata, has become outdated. (39)

Dimitrova's criticism also gets limited by the very lenses she uses in her work *Gender, Religion and Modern Hindi Drama*. While she clearly defines Mallika as an ideal "Sita", she does not include Sundari or Savitri in her analysis simply because they do not fit any of her lenses which also include Mira, Sati, and Shakti[97]. Rather, they are as complex individuals as one could find around themselves. Their portrayal as humans is what makes Rakesh a reformist in equal terms to that of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar.

2.2.3 Conclusion: The Legacy of Mohan Rakesh.

To conclude, we can begin with an assumption – the case of Hindi drama ithout Mohan Rakesh. To comprehend this assertion, we need to recall the trajectory of modern Hindi drama starting from Bhartendu Harishchandra, followed by Jaishankar Prasad, to Upendranath Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Shrivastava, and then culminating with Rakesh's experimental Hindi drama. If we consider a scenario where this tradition doesn't include Mohan Rakesh, it feels natural to draw the inference that a major playwright who contributed significantly to the establishment of Hindi theatre as a performative arena would not be a part of this complex tradition. Another inference that follows is that Hindi drama would not be in its present shape, whereas Rakesh stands as one of the most performed playwrights in India.

[97] All of them are powerful women figures from Hindu mythology.

Rakesh stands as a distinct figure in the tradition of Hindi theatre as well as in modern Indian theatre. His contributions as a playwright, short story writer, teacher, journalist, editor and thespian create for him a unique space outside the defined boundaries of Hindi theatre. He departed from the previous traditions of Hindi drama that included Harishchandra and Prasad's neo-Sanskritic, Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar's Western realist, and also the nascent tradition of folk-revivalist theatre. His goal was to create a new stream of Hindi drama that was more sensitive to contemporary reality than his preceding generations and was not merely a living room didactical discussion on social and familial issues. As Vasudha Dalmia notes:

> Rakesh seemed to be out of step with his times in that he resisted the moves which would help the modern stage to overcome the restraints of the 'naturalistic' stage as the proscenium stage was called then. It was surely a move that accorded well with his own efforts to move beyond the confines of the living room to the 'non-realistic or ultra-realistic'. (140)

However, his departure from both the established and the bidding traditions of theatre in India was merely a rejection of these 'streams' of theatre. Instead, he drew upon every stream of Hindi theatre that existed before him and paved the way for further experimentation on the stage. He drew upon the revivalist strain of Prasad in the manner he extracted Kalidasa, Nand, and Buddha from their respective timelines to project the sensibilities and conundrums of modern men and women. He also drew upon Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar's realistic representations of social issues, especially those highlighting the issues of women. He utilized antiquity as well as contemporary settings to the complexity of the human mind and the way it responds to conflicts.

All these paradoxical amalgamations in Rakesh's plays converged to create a space between the various schools of Hindi theatre, which was inherently liminal and ushered the tradition of modern Hindi theatre into a transitional phase, giving a new direction to it. Liminality in Rakesh's context is a multi-modal concept that can be

observed at work both in his literary and social contexts. In social terms, Rakesh himself could be seen as a person who had experienced the immense socio-cultural and political after-effects of independence and who emerged during a decade when India was undergoing far-reaching socio-political turbulence. In his literary context, liminality finds application in all his plays, in his anachronistic settings, characterisation, the class of the target audience, and the issues he presents through his plays. As a spatial concept, liminality is applied to Rakesh's settings, which are both quaint by design and contemporary by reflection. The locale of the past is constructed through contemporary imaginations, and it helped Rakesh create some distance between his audience and contemporary issues to achieve an over-the-top view of the conflicts presented. As a temporal concept, liminality can be observed in the deliberate imperfection of the timelines in his semi-historical plays, which makes it obvious that he wants to achieve fluidity of time in his plays. As a phase of chaos and transition, it could be observed in his characters, who are always found trapped between two perspectives, situations, or choices, such that either of them could change the course of the play. It should be evident from the previous sections that for Kalidasa and Mallika, Nand and Sundari, and Savitri and Mahendranath, all their conflicts emerge from their recalcitrance to accept the changes around them and decide based on the circumstances. For the most part of their stories, they are found going back and forth between two choices and choosing neither, which results in a state of paradox and confusion. The only transition this results in is the characters eventually choosing to confront their conflicts. This in turn becomes the catalyst for the abrupt and anti-climactic endings of the plays in which the audience and readers were left with more questions than answers and a sense of introspection.

From *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* to *Adhe Adhure*, all his plays reporthis observations of his surroundings and the people in them. In his representation of Kalidasa, we find the modern ambitious individual, leaving his roots for opportunities and recognition only to realize that it

is a price too high to pay. Through Nand, he presents the conflict between desire and religiosity, domestic responsibilities and the freedom of an ascetic life, and between community and individuality. Through Buddha, he presented the domineering presence of ideologies in our lives.

The women characters in Rakesh's plays deserve a separate study as complex individuals with strong minds and will. Although Rakesh has been criticised for not allowing them enough agency and space to exercise their will, what this study achieves is to trace the context of such representation. Rakesh sketched all the characters as he observed them in his surroundings, and his women characters also emerged from his proximity. What is somehow neglected by the critics is that a playwright or any writer cannot write escaping their context. So, the women characters Rakesh portrayed were a reflection of his society. As evident from his *Self Portrait*, their confinement and lack of expression of their opinions was how the social norms around them dictated women to follow.

Rakesh does not take the extra step like Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar to make his women characters break the chains of conservative norms holding them from a free existence, as in *Anjo Didi* (The Elder Sister Anjo) and *Straik* (Strike). For he only believes in capturing and presenting reality. Ashk's Anjo in *Anjo Didi* emulates "Mira," the sixteenth-century saint poetess who left her in-laws' family and devoted herself to Lord Krishna in her devotion to hygiene; Bhuvaneshwar's Stri in *Straik* rebels against her husband. Rakesh understood the challenges of staying true to his philosophy of sensitively portraying his 'surrounding reality'. He stated in his interview that both the progressives and the non-progressives rejected him. He stated:

> […] set of die-hard Progressives called us non–Progressive or anti–Progressive because we did not align ourselves with their way of thinking, which stated that writing is to be done according to slogans and manifestoes. On the other hand, we also were condemned or rejected by those writers who were non-Progressives because, according to them,

> we were not neutral to the problems of our times, the immediate things around us. That is to say, we did not, in their thinking, go to complete abstractions. Their view of non–Progressive thinking was that the writer should not have anything to do with the social situation around him; the writer should be above the immediate social situation. So it was a difficult situation in which we were all the time trying to establish our viewpoint. This viewpoint was simply that we did not belong to that die-hard Progressive school of Progressivism, but yet, we were basically "Progressive." We called ourselves Progressives because most of us, including me, agree with the philosophical aspects of Marxist thinking, that somehow, order has to be obtained in the world where these class distinctions which handicap the individual's growth right from the beginning would disappear. (*Interview* 23)

Also missing from the critics' perspectives is Rakesh's bigger pattern of subtly subverting gender roles and challenging social norms through his female characters. When observed closely, we notice Rakesh starting from the intellectually and emotionally strong but subservient Mallika in *Ashadh*, followed by the indomitable Sundari in *Lahron,* who doesn't let the thoughts of compromise to save her marriage curtail her decisions and is an equally free character as Nand. Rakesh then proceeds to subvert the tradition in *Adhe Adhure* with Savitri, who is the only earning member of the family. Cecilia Cossio accuses Rakesh of reverting to a socially orthodox, submissive woman "when faced with a female figure who departs from the well-established norm" (111). Cossio's assertion stands undeniably true when we observe Rakesh's women characters – Mallika, Sundari, and Savitri – who have all been denied their share of power and often end his plays in tears or a state of confusion. However, Rakesh's women characters do subtly intervene in their immediate realities through the avenues that are available to them. Savitri breaks traditional norms when she refrains even from attempting to convince her husband to stay with her after bitter arguments. Sundari decides against pleading with her husband to stay with her and encourages him to face his conflicts. Similarly, even though Mallika surrenders to her circumstances, she does not surrender to the demands of Kalidasa's spouse, Priyangumanjari, to go to the kingdom and live in

the palace on the condition of marrying another employee of the King rather than Kalidasa. If she isn't a royal Queen, she is the governor of her own life. His methods can be best elaborated in his own words when he says in his *Preface* to *Lahron Ke Rajhans*:

> Where orthodox values overshadow the common sense of people, to hope there is futile. Our traditions are such that we always want to see our caste symbols on a superhuman plane. Any demonstration of humanity in them hurts us. The primary reason for this is that we do not believe in our own humanity and do not have faith in our reality. Since we do not have hope from ourselves, it appears impossible that something significant can be achieved while existing on the human plane. (*Lahron* XIV)

The legacy of Mohan Rakesh lies in the subtlety of his methods. He did not claim to be as radical as his senior contemporaries, including Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, and Girish Karnad, nor did he ever attempt to bring about a revolution. His method included a sharp observation of his immediate surroundings and reporting them as realistically on stage as possible. He focused on moments and phases that were liminal and captured the intensity of conflicts in interpersonal relationships. His contribution to modern Hindi theatre lies in his creation of a transitional space that initiated an objective, realistic stream in modern Indian theatre. He was a trendsetter and an experimenter who was limited by his context, yet he pointed out the social issues pervading the Indian middle-class society. His method of objective realism was to be overshadowed by the next generation of playwrights who rediscovered a new paradigm of Indian theatre through folk-performance traditions in India.

After Rakesh (and his realist generation), there emerged a group of playwrights who pioneered the revivalist movement termed "theatre of roots" (Awasthi 48) by Suresh Awasthi, director of the National School of Drama (1986–1988). The movement arose in opposition to the realist school of Indian theatre. It moved towards rural performance traditions to find a new way of attracting audiences other than the urban realist drama's living room discussions. The movement brought to the

fore several playwrights, including Habib Tanvir, Karnad B. V. Karanth, and Ratan Thiyam, who explored the realms of folk performance traditions to create a new, vibrant stream of Indian theatre. However, similar to Rakesh's departure from the extant traditions of Hindi drama, one playwright emerged from this movement who has been credited for "refashioning" (Malick 132) Indian (theatrical) modernity.

Despite his binary opposite methodology and approach to theatre, Habib Tanvir can be traced as radical a trendsetter as Rakesh. While other playwrights from the roots movement relied on bringing folk elements to the urban audience, Tanvir went a step ahead and amalgamated the two models of theatre in India. His methods were unprecedented. Like Rakesh, he rejected both the previous traditions of drama and the overt reliance on folk forms for his theatre. In the following chapter, we study Tanvir as a liminal reformist who created a space outside his tradition through his innovative dramaturgical methods and ushered in a new stream of Indian theatre. His methods of social reform also included liminal concepts such as Bakhtin's "carnivalesque reversal" (*Rabelais and His World* 10) that relied on the "destruction of identities" and "the suspension of the structure of social order" (Thomassen 92). As Dharwadker calls Rakesh "a post-colonial modernist who defined a circumspect position" for himself, Tanvir, in the same strain, defined a new space that was circumspect to both Indian and Western modernity. As we shall see in the following chapter, his ideas of theatre transcended national boundaries and were also equally successful in as far a place as Edinburgh, where he won the Fringe First Award in 1982.

Chapter 3: Reforming the Roots: Habib Tanvir

3.1 Introduction

Re-tracing the trajectory of modern Indian theatre, we arrive at certain intersections that are liminal in their very framework. These categorizations and their lucid definitions by critics such as Ananda Lal, Nandi Bhatia, Vasudha Dalmia, and Diana Dimitrova encompass probably all that can be called Indian theatre, and yet the vast diversity of the socio-cultural fabric of the nation makes it impossible to fill all the voids leaving us with questions that converge our attention to the junctions mentioned above. There remain several pertinent questions (some answered and some not) regarding the monumental structure called modern Indian theatre. Nevertheless, for the sake of uniformity and the focus of this chapter, we are bound to narrow our gaze to a few that bring to our attention an entirely new direction of theatre in the decades following the Indian independence. This new direction was a response to the realist schools of theatre and was led by prominent playwrights and directors such as Habib Tanvir[98], B. V. Karanth, Ratan Thiyam, K. N. Panikkar, and Girish Karnad.

Vasudha Dalmia, in her *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*: *The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (2006), defines vividly the different streams of theatre extant during the decades preceding and following the independence. Her descriptions, though confined mostly to the arena of the newly emerged Hindi theatre and the hugely successful commercial enterprise of Parsi Theatre, elucidate clearly the difference in the purpose of these theatrical streams. She notes in the introduction that;

> […] Playwrighting in Hindi had sought to distance itself from the commercial Parsi Stage, which also used colloquial Hindustani but with scant regard for matters of correct usage in one direction or another, whereas these were issues to which Hindi in its modern print form reacted very sensitively. [p.2].

[98] Some parts of this chapter have been published as conference proceedings of the *IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2024*.

Dalmia's assertion points to the core argument of this study. What were these issues that the theatre of the times was reacting to? Were these only relevant for the structure and organisation of plays for the purpose of entertainment, as in the case of Parsi theatre, or were the playwrights responding to the complexities and intricacies of society along with the theatrical dimensions? Did the playwrights take into consideration the reformist functions of their plays, or were they simply recording and reporting the fluxes of their time? Playwrights such as Mohan Rakesh and his contemporaries had a hugely different idea of reform than what we are going to see with Habib Tanvir (1923 – 2008) and Mahesh Dattani (1958–). Although their reformist agendas are parallel, their methods were poles apart which provokes one to ask: Were they reformists by choice? Or did they set out to report the ebbs and flows of their contemporary society and instead ended up presenting a picture that struck at the hearts of social issues and turned into what G. N. Devy[99] calls a "literary movement" (xiii).

To comprehend this contrast better, we need to problematize the idea of reform in terms of literature. In the words of Devy, a work of literature becomes reformist when it makes it impossible for the readers to return to the old values and traditions without any sense of discomfort. Novels such as *The Outcaste*[100] (2003) by Sharankumar Limbale[101] (1956–) and short stories such as *Draupadi*[102] by Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi (1926 – 2016) are a few remarkable examples that create this sense of discomfort about social ills pervading Indian society since centuries. In a similar sense, we study Habib Tanvir for his trenchant ideas of social reform. Nevertheless, the term reformist in this study also has dual connotations, as we saw with Rakesh. The first is that it examines Tanvir for challenging the paradigms of the

[99] G N Devy (1950–) is a renowned Indian theorist and critic known for works such as *After Amnesia* (1993). He is also the recipient of Sahitya Akademi and Padma Shri awards.
[100] Originally published in Marathi under the title *Akkarmashi* (1984).
[101] Marathi novelist and critic.
[102] Originally published in Mahasweta Devi's short story collection *Breast Stories* (1997).

contemporary dramatic traditions – both the "theatre of roots" (Awasthi 48) and the realist theatre. The second is the perusal of his plays as reformist literature and their intervention in the discourse around contemporary social issues. How his experiments led Indian theatre towards a new direction in which the folk and the urban could co-exist as equally integral elements of a theatrical performance. Then, I study Tanvir's reformist agendas for society and his appeals for reform in his plays, especially in *Charandas Chor* (1975).

Tanvir states in his interview[103] with Anjum Katyal that his journey as a playwright and director began with *Agra Bazar* (The Agra Market, 1954) and then moved to the production of *Mitti Ki Gadi* (The Clay Cart, 1955-56), an adaptation of the Sanskrit classic *Mrichchhakatikam* written by Shudraka (C. 4 – 5 CE). It was followed by *Gaon Ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damad* (The Village's Name is In-laws House, My Name is Son-in-law, 1958), which, according to Tanvir, laid the foundation of arguably his masterpiece, *Charandas Chor*. What is missing in this assertion is the vast context of the evolution of the plays and how Tanvir reached the final production of these plays, which he calls his "milestones" (*Charandas Chor,* 20). His journey, from Raipur to Nagpur, to Bombay (Mumbai), to Delhi, and then finally to Bhopal, where he established the Naya Theatre company in 1959, is full of episodes that help us understand why he is a reformist. We shall explore both facets of his reformist vision in the later sections of this chapter; however, warranting our immediate attention is the question of what makes Tanvir the most appropriate choice to be placed between Mohan Rakesh and Mahesh Dattani.

Anjum Katyal[104] sums up precisely the socio-cultural scene when Habib Tanvir started doing theatre. She notes in her introduction to the book *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*:

[103] See Tanvir's interview with Anjum Katyal titled *My Milestones in Theatre* in *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*,
[104] Renowned theatre scholar and critic. She has translated several of Tanvir's works including *Charandas Chor.*

> […] It was a period of nation-building, not just in the areas of economy or the political arena, but also in the cultural field. Arts practitioners and theorists were deeply involved with the issue of what constituted Indian culture for our nascent nation-state. How was one to balance the heft of tradition and heritage with the needs and sensibilities of the current, the present-day? How could arts be modern and contemporary and still remain distinctly 'Indian'? Theatre in India had faced the same questions. (viii-ix)

The question of accommodating contemporariness into Indian cultural heritages (in this case, theatre) arises from the dogma of tradition versus modernity and the criticism of Western influences on Indian theatre. Though it is futile to debate the impact European stage-craft had on Indian theatre by the time Tanvir came of age, it should not stop us from rethinking the response that the Indian playwrights, especially those who emerged in the wake of independence, had to the European influence. The answers begin to emerge from the various streams of theatre that propagated around the decades on either side of independence. One was the dominant stream of proscenium-style theatre, while the other was a re-staging of the Sanskrit classics. As Katyal states:

> On the one hand, there was the colonial legacy of Western-style proscenium theatre, which stylistically ranged from classic naturalism to the modernist and avant-garde, and in terms of content from pure spectacle to political plays with a strong message and social critique […]
>
> On the other, thanks to the rediscovery of Sanskrit texts and traditional performance forms instigated by the orientalist-led exploration of ancient Indian culture, there was a strong interest in indigenous performance conventions and forms. (ix)

The above descriptions of the different approaches to theatre provide a brief sketch of the turmoil that Indian theatre was witnessing after independence. They also make apparent the interstices created by the vague bifurcation of the urban-proscenium theatre and the folk performance traditions, which created a void between the vibrant

performance traditions of rural India from the urban realistic theatrical models.

In the present chapter, I study the liminality associated with this new model through its position in the folk-urban divide. Folk being the buzzword during the 1960s and the 1970s, was an inherently urban phenomenon[105], utilised for the urban stages and audience and by the urban dramaturgs. The fissures in the various models of response to realist schools of theatre lead us to Habib Tanvir, arguably, the most liminal figure in the traditions of post-independence Indian theatre.

Born as Habib Ahmed Khan in 1923, in Raipur, Chhattisgarh[106], Tanvir grew up interacting with drama – both regional and European[107]. He was also acquainted with the folk theatre form of *Nacha.* Like several other folk performance forms in India, *Nacha* is also inherently rural and is performed by folk actors and musicians. Roughly, it is a combination of four to five performances strung together and runs throughout the night. The songs are often composed by folk musicians and have satirical fervor and comment on contemporary social issues. He received his higher education from Nagpur and Bombay and wanted to become an actor in Hindi films. During 1945–46[108], he came to Bombay and joined the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), where he worked with the likes of Balraj Sahni[109] (1913–1973) and Zohra Sehgal[110] (1912–2014). In the early 1950s, after the organisation broke into factions and a number of leaders were arrested, he moved to Delhi, where he produced his first play, *Agra Bazar*, in 1954.

---

[105] See Dalmia's chapter titled *The Nation and Its Folk* in her *Poetics, Plays and Performances*, pp. 163–64.
[106] Formerly a part of the state of Madhya Pradesh.
[107] Tanvir mentions in his memoir about having played the role of Arthur from Shakespeare's *King John I* while he was in high school. See Tanvir's *Memoirs*, p. 19.
[108] See, *Memoirs*, p. 251.
[109] One of the founding members of IPTA, Sahni was also a renowned thespian and actor. He is also remembered for his roles in films such as *Kabuliwala* (1961), *Waqt* (1965), and *Garm Hava* (1973).
[110] Sehgal was a renowned Indian actress, dancer, and choreographer known for her work in IPTA and later in films such as *Dil Se* (1998), and *Veer Zara* (2004).

By the time Tanvir came of age, the reformist paradigms in modern Indian theatre had been altered significantly. The primary source for plays in the pre-independence era, history and the glorious past, was replaced by the mundane contemporary reality. The nationalist agendas had been replaced by social issues, and the plight of the nation was replaced by the plight of the individuals trapped in their own psychological conflicts. The various urban traditions of theatre across India had assimilated the proscenium stage and other Western techniques into a mould of their own. The trajectory of Tanvir's emergence as an experimentalist during this period and his stature as one of the pioneers of the roots movement provides us with credible evidence of his reformist vision towards his tradition and society. Counter to the established idioms of Tanvir being an inherently urban playwright with heavy inclinations for folk, the chapter argues that Tanvir's position was liminal from every perspective. His was a theatre of balance through which he found a unique method to bring together the rural and the urban in equitable proportions. Through a study of his play *Charandas Chor*, the chapter argues for his distinct position, first between the urban-realist schools of drama and the folk performance traditions. It emphasises his reformation of the contemporary models of drama and establishes him as a bridge between the folk and the urban traditions of theatre. It then studies the liminality associated with his reformist methods and observes that, like Mohan Rakesh Tanvir also did not believe in providing solutions to the conflicts presented in his plays on one hand, and on the other, also departed from the choice of Rakesh's subject, viz., the middle class. Tanvir's theatre was by and for the people, especially the plebian populace and its liminality is defined by its capability to connect with audiences ranging from the Satnami sect[111] and villagers in Chhattisgarh to the metropolitan population of Edinburgh. Nevertheless, before examining his reformist agendas, we

[111] A sect comprising primarily of ascetics from the lower castes of India. Their only god is truth.

need to retrace Tanvir among the various versions of the theatre of roots and the contemporary traditions of Indian theatre.

3.1.1 'Refashioning' Modernity: The Tradition, Folk and the Contemporaries

Javed Malick, a scholar and critic of Indian theatre, in his book *Diverse Pursuits: Essays on Drama and Theatre* (2021), credits Tanvir for "Refashioning [Theatrical] Modernity" (132). He notes:

> […] Tanvir was not only evolving a new style and idiom for his own work, he was also, in some ways, redefining the very concept of modernity, particularly in relation to Indian theatre. He was against the post-colonial project of modernity which tended to exclude from the focus of its attention large areas and large sections of ordinary Indians who lived outside metropolitan centres. (134)

Most of the plays produced before Tanvir came of age (especially in the Hindi-speaking belt of the country) were largely influenced by European dramatic traditions. The allegorical narratives, such as *Andher Nagari* (The Doomed City, 1881), about the plight of Mother India bound in chains of colonialism were written by Bhartendu Harishchandra and revivalist neo-Sanskritic plays such as *Chandragupta* (1928) and *Dhruvaswamini* (c.1931) by Jaishankar Prasad.

With respect to the context of the Indian theatrical tradition of his time, Tanvir appears distinctly different from that of Mohan Rakesh and other stalwarts, including Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008), Girish Karnad (1938–2019), Badal Sircar (1925–2011), and Mudrarakshas[112]. Barring Badal Sircar, who wrote street plays, and Mudrarakshas, whose works were also influenced by the folk form of *Nautanki,* all these playwrights wrote for the urban proscenium stage. While Tanvir's plays were also produced on proscenium stages, he stood remarkably distinguished in

[112] The sobriquet of the Hindi playwright and activist Subhash Chandra (1933 – 2016). Born in Lucknow, he is known for his anti-establishment and social satires in the form of plays such as *Ala Afsar* (based on Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General*, 1979)

terms of how he integrated the proscenium stage with the folk stories he presented. As Malick notes:

> These two dimensions of Tanvir's work—i.e. his predilection for the folk and his modern and democratic consciousness […] are not two separate currents or aspects of his theatre […] He combined and interwove them into a style of theatre which was unique in the sense that it neither followed the European model nor did it blindly copy any traditional Indian form. His approach to folk cultural forms was neither revivalist nor antiquarian. (134)

The "refashioning" happened not only in terms of the unification of the folk and the urban elements, as Malick states in his book, but also at the level of composition and the structure of his plays. This method of bringing the folk (or rural) with the urban was also used by Tendulkar, Karnad, and Sircar in their plays. Malick's assertion is complemented by scholar Kathryn Hansen, who notes in her essay, *Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre* (1983):

> […] Tendulkar utilized the Tamasha form and its characteristic language patterns. The play contained the conventional gan (invocation to Ganapati), gaulan (scene between Krishna and the milkmaids), and povada (a song form), but characters such as Mukunda (Krishna) were given satirical treatment and references to contemporary urban life filled the dialogues […] Another approach can be seen in Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana*, written originally in Kannada in the early 1970s. Based on the tale of transposed heads from the Kathasaritsagara, Hayavadana is a symbolic drama employing several conventions of Yakshagana, such as the half-curtain which is carried onstage to introduce new characters, and the Bhagavata or narrator, who introduces the story and comments on the action throughout the play […] A more radical avenue is represented by Badal Sircar's movement toward a " Third Theatre," which he conceived as a theatre of rural-urban synthesis. Sircar's goals were to abolish the proscenium arch stage, to emphasize physical movement of the actors over words, and to rely upon only the simplest techniques of lighting, costuming, and staging […] This mode of presentation

> relied on none of the conventions of rural theatre, but it was aimed at establishing within an urban context the same sense of communal involvement and ritualistic action often found in folk theatre. (79-80)

Hansen's analysis culminates with the study of Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* as she establishes Tanvir as the most distinct proponent of this new stream that relies on harnessing the exuberant folk elements in theatre. She notes further that Tanvir's play,

> "[…] does not appear to borrow directly from Nautanki. Rather, the play creates its own atmosphere of colorful intensity through a variety of dialogues, poems, song, and dances – all taking place in a bustling Agra marketplace in the year 1810." (85)

Unfortunately, Hansen's study stops at *Agra Bazar,* and her focus delves more into the context of Nautanki[113] and the other folk forms. Her essay does not take into account the context of *Nacha* in Tanvir's work, but she establishes the contrast between his approach to folk and that of his contemporaries, which in turn creates a space – a liminal space – in which Tanvir redefines the paradigms of modern Indian theatre.

We shall explore further in this section how unorthodox Tanvir's methods were in terms of composing the plots. It is essential to accentuate the use of the word composition here because Tanvir seldom wrote entire plays. He utilized the gamut of folk stories, improvised them through repeated performances, and then stopped when he felt his actors had reached a zenith in terms of performing the sequence. Another significant facet of Tanvir's theatre is that it can be observed bridging the void between the urban proscenium theatre (influenced by the Western stage) and the indigenous folk traditions of India, created by what scholar Aparna Dharwadker[114] calls the "repudiation of theatrical

[113] A folk theatre form from the state of Uttar Pradesh.
[114] A celebrated theatre critic and scholar, Dharwadker is the author of *One Day in the Season of Rain* (a translated version of Rakesh's *Asadh Ka Ek Din,* 2015) and several other critical writings on Indian theatre.

modernity" by cultural nationalists, in her essay, *The Critique of Western Modernity in Post-independence India*[115] (in Nandi Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader*). She notes:

> The repudiation of theatrical modernity by Indian cultural nationalists in the post-independence period rests on three principal arguments, […] modern westernized theatre was an alien imposition that did not and cannot flourish in India; the end of colonialism offers the best opportunity for correcting this aberration; and the renewal of Indian theatre depends on the revival of indigenous, culturally authentic traditions. (61)

Dharwadker discusses and nullifies these arguments stating that "the urban theatre succeeded […] because it was a new form of representation with seemingly endless potential […] and because it became, in certain locations, a viable commercial institution" (68). Nevertheless, the essay clearly points to the divide between urban and folk forms of theatre in India in the wake of independence.

Habib Tanvir's works can be traced as his response to these interstices created by the folk-urban divide in the theatrical streams post-independence. Katyal provides an apt assertion for his significance in the genre of post-independence Indian theatre when she notes, "Habib Tanvir's most important contribution to the Indian theatre scene, I feel was his intervention in the fundamental discourse of modern and contemporary Indian theatre – its direction and its form" (*Charandas Chor and Other Plays* viii).

In terms of direction, Tanvir produced an entirely novel stream of theatre that was hitherto not attempted by other playwrights of his generation. Having established the contrasts between different streams of theatrical traditions, the study shall further explore these contrasts in function.

Similarly, Tanvir departed from (or rather extended) Rakesh's tradition and created a novel stream by integrating the urban with the

[115] See Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader* (2009). Pp. 56-74.

folk form of Nacha. Tanvir's oeuvre provides significant evidence of the new direction he gave to modern Indian theatre. His plays, specifically his "milestones," *Agra Bazar, Gaon Ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad,* and *Charandas Chor,* all depict his innovative approach to composing a play. They were all compiled not from a single story but were sieved from multiple sources. His first play, *Agra Bazar,* for instance, was a combination of the poetry of the eighteenth-century Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi and the environment that Tanvir experienced while visiting the Delhi Market. It dealt with the conflict between the plebian concept of poetry placed against the cultural elites' vision of it. Tanvir's account of the circumstances while composing the play presents a vivid picture of his fresh approach to playwriting. He notes in his introduction[116] to the play;

> While composing the play in 1954, I did not have an ensemble of either professional or folk actors … When we would rehearse on the open stage in Jamia, the audience, besides students from Jamia, also consisted of men and women from the nearby village of Okhla. Some villagers, along with their goats, would cross through the open auditorium to go to the banks of Yamuna. I told them, "You can watch the rehearsals from up close, take your goats, and find some space to sit on the stage". The women obliged happily and moved swiftly to find a good view on the stage. Soon, they were followed by the men and children from their families. The set was already prepared by Kalam Sahab, and thus, the drama was played[117]. (17)

As fascinating as Tanvir's composition of the play, its first performance at Delhi's Ramleela Maidan was equally fascinating. He continues:

> When the play was performed at Delhi's Ramleela Maidan before a crowd of thousands, the stage had the same village ensemble. Jamia's real paan (betel-leaf) seller as the Paanwala, an actual tailor in the tailor's role, and the donkey's silent presence throughout the play at the potter's shop left a profound impact on

[116] See Tanvir's *Agra Bazar*, pp. 17–18.
[117] The translations are all done by the author unless stated otherwise.

> the audience. The play's practicality and realism were elevated to another level when this silent and patient donkey scattered its dung on the stage. Now, the stage had both drama and its fragrance. And this dramatic fragrance also reached the audience … which the people seeing for the first time were left deeply amazed with. (18)

His next milestone, *Gaon Ka Naam Sasural*, was also developed in a similar fashion by clubbing together different short folk skits and performances. Tanvir states in his interview with Katyal that he "welded three stock *Nacha* comedies" (*Charandas Chor* 38) to develop a play. The first was *Chher Chhera,* a tale of young boys who go about asking for donations during the time of Paus Purnima (full moon) and ask for donations from people to perform the ritual. The second, *Burwa Biwa* was the story of an old man who tricked a girl's father to marry her. The third was named *Devar Devarin* (38) and was about the nomadic tribe of Devars. Besides these skits, Tanvir also used a ritual of Gauri-Gaura that was about a song invoking Lord Shiva and his wife, goddess Parvati. All these skits were "welded" together and a story evolved in which the young boy from the first skit fell in love with a girl whose father got tricked into marrying her to an old man. The boy and the girl's father schemed and went to the old man's house as Devars, and then, with the help of the Gauri-Gaura ritual that would send people into a trance, they got her back. As fascinating as it sounds, this method of composition of a play was unprecedented in the short history of modern Indian theatre. Its distinct characteristic of blending the urban stage with folk comic skits and rituals is also acknowledged by Malick. He notes;

> The production which was thus created was a delightful blend of stock comic skits and gags, traditional songs, dances and temple rituals. It was titled Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad, an almost wholly improvised stage play which was not only remarkable for its hilarity but also for the rare treasure of delightful Chhattisgarhi folk music and dances that it offered. (*Diverse Pursuits* 159)

Almost all his plays have been composed in an identical manner through a string of improvised performances of the rudimentary folk story by his folk actors. Tanvir's unorthodox composition of his plots and how he shapes them into complete plays marks the transition he initiated, culminating in an overarching presence of the folk-urban synthesis at the Nehru Centenary Festival of 1989. The liminal space that Tanvir's works belong to is represented by their distinctness in form – tragedies and comedies or tragi-comedies presented upon an urban stage with rural/folk cast; improvised content and adapted folk songs that concern the lives of the plebian populace; and meaning – the reformist motives of his plays that originate from his association with Indian People's Theatre Association[118] for almost a decade.

Tanvir's approach to presenting a practical and realistic version of the play accentuates his distinct position as a reformist playwright whose works were of, for, and by the people. His was a praxis-oriented theatre. He never indulged in developing literary drama and then changing it to a script for performance. Instead, his plays were developed through rehearsals and several impromptu performances by the folk actors. The fact that his plays were several mini scripts stitched together as one whole script leads us to another pertinent question.

Another redefining technique that Tanvir employs is the use of rural Chhattisgarhi dialect. All his plays are performed in Chhattisgarhi instead of Hindi. Tanvir realized his actors were failing (with the initial rehearsals) because of the imposition of a different language. They had been performing in their mother tongue all the while and a sudden transition to another language meant a transition from their natural skills. Tanvir notes:

> It took me time to realize two basic approaches to working with these folk actors: mother tongue and freedom of movement […] I realized that those who were responding to an audience for years

[118] IPTA was a left-wing cultural organisation that was established in 1943 – 44. It was devoted to presenting social issues through plays, especially those concerning the ordinary populace.

> in this manner could never try to unlearn and rigidly follow the rules of the movement and that was one reason why Thakur Ram, a great actor wasn't being able to be natural.
>
> Another reason was the matrubhasha – he wasn't speaking in his mother tongue, so it jarred my ears, because he was speaking bad Hindi and not Chhattisgarhi, in which he was fluent […] Once I realized it, I used Chhattisgarhi and improvised, allowed them the freedom and then came pouncing down upon them to crystallize the movement – there you stay. (*Charandas Chor* 33–35)

Having established his position as a reformer within the broader contemporary traditions of the theatre, now I shall proceed to examine Tanvir as a liminal playwright in the context of the other stalwarts of the roots movement, including Ratan Thiyam, K N Panikkar, and Girish Karnad. However, prior to studying Tanvir, it is paramount to navigate some significant arguments regarding the movement that generated a strong discourse on keywords such as tradition and modernity in relation to modern Indian theatre.

3.1.2 How Many Traditions? How Many Roots: The Contrasting Polemics.

The intersection between European theatre and Indian stories resulted in the genesis of modern Indian theatre during the nineteenth century. This resulted further in the acclimatisation of the techniques of Western dramaturgy in the foundational paradigms of Indian drama. Paradigms of theatre that earlier comprised religious or secular stories, the performers, and the audience that surrounded the performers now also included the proscenium stage, backdrops, curtains, sceneries, and mechanical accoutrements to emphasise light and sound. The Western techniques of dramaturgy, after the nineteenth century were normalised in the various streams of modern Indian theatre and were used by almost all the prominent traditions, such as the Parsi theatre and the Hindi and

Marathi realist theatre[119]. Thus, to say that studying the trajectory of modern Indian theatre is to study the arrival and integration of the proscenium stage in India, would not be an exaggeration of the influence of Western dramaturgy on Indian dramatic forms and methods. This assertion points to the question: what was the response of the Indian dramaturgs to this amalgamation of Western theatrical techniques with Indian stories? Since the Parsi theatre companies and the realist playwrights such as Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar relied on the proscenium stage and the allied techniques, was there an attempt to produce plays that also brought Indian dramaturgical techniques to the proscenium? Did such an attempt reject the proscenium altogether? How did it negate the influence of Western techniques to emphasise Indian dramaturgy?

The answers to the aforementioned questions can be found in a movement institutionally curated in response to the realist "streams" (Dalmia 119) of theatre. The movement was termed the "theatre of roots"[120] (Awasthi 48) and intended for the formulation of a new model of theatre that relied more on indigenous forms than Western realist methods. Awasthi described the emergence of this movement as a consequence of the "violent dislocation" of Indian theatre from "tradition". He notes:

> The modern Indian theatre, a product of colonial culture, felt an intense need to search for roots to counteract its violent dislocation from tradition. Directors like B.V. Karanth, K.N. Panikkar, and Ratan Thiyam have had meaningful encounters with tradition and, with their work, have reversed the colonial course of contemporary theatre, putting it back on the track of the great Natyasastra tradition.1 It sounds paradoxical, but their theatre is both avant-garde in the context of

[119] This classification refers to the professional theatre companies such as Anamika (in Kolkata), Dishantar (Delhi), Little Theatre Group (Kolkata), Prithvi Theatres (Bombay) who emerged after the independence and used the proscenium stage as the readymade space for production. There were also amateur theatre groups belonging to the national institutions such as the National School of Drama who had their open air theatre/auditoria available for such productions.

[120] See, Suresh Awasthi's *'Theatre of Roots': Encounter with Tradition* (1988).

> conventional realistic theatre, and part of the 2,000-year-old Natyasastra tradition. (48)

This description immediately draws our attention to the keyword "tradition," which appears in stark contrast to Eliot's connotation[121] of the term, of a structure consistently shaping the past and being shaped by it that this thesis relies on and uses in context to modern Indian theatre. For Awasthi, the term tradition inclines more towards the *Natyasastra* than that of rural performance traditions and the other latent traditions of theatre during the middle and early modern era of Indian history.

However, there exist contradictions among scholars regarding the function and purpose of the movement. For instance, for Awasthi, the "theatre of roots" was a "liberation from the Western realistic theatre" and an "encounter with tradition" (48–49) then on the other hand, Professor Satyabrata Rout calls it an amalgamation of the Indian and the Western theatres. He notes that the purpose of "theatre of roots" was:

> […] to create a synthesis between the Western theatre practices and the Indian tradition. […] The purpose of the movement was not to going back to tradition again but to explore the tradition with new interpretations, artistic sensibilities with modern thoughts and ideas which could enrich the contemporary theatre practices in post-independence India. This was to bring out a genre of theatre: indigenous by its nature and a representative of contemporary Indian society. (1)

Another purpose of the 'theatre of roots' is explained by scholar Erin B Mee who, while agreeing that it was a movement for synthesising the Western and Indian theatrical practices, also believes that it was not only a movement for liberating Indian theatre from the Western realist theatres but also an "impulse" (*Theatre of Roots* 5) that turned into a decolonisation project. She notes:

> […] the theatre of roots movement – a post-Independence effort to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by challenging the visual practices, performer–spectator relationships, dramaturgical

[121] In the Introduction, I clarify the usage of the term as described in T. S. Eliot's *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1919).

> structures and aesthetic goals of colonial performance. The movement sought new ways of structuring experience, new ways of perceiving the world and new modes of the colonizers […] the roots movement challenged colonial culture by reclaiming the aesthetics of performance and by addressing the politics of aesthetics. (5)

Mee's assertion is countered by Aparna Dharwadker, who considers these allegations on realist theatre as a form of "cultural nationalist critique of theatrical modernity" (*Theatres* 139). Her issue is essentially with terms such as "violent dislocation" and "liberation" (Awasthi 48) and with the stance that the roots movement (re-)defined Indian theatrical modernity. She argues that,

> […] various strands of this traditionalist argument converge into one dominant assertion: the formal, aesthetic, and representational principles of indigenous performance genres offer the only possibility of an authentic alternative modernity in Indian theatre, and the playwrights and directors who have chosen to experiment with the traditional (precolonial) repertoire represent the most significant theatre work of the post-independence period. (138)

There are a plethora of other points on which Dharwadker counters these arguments, such as by Mee[122] and Awasthi. She goes to the extent of calling their perspectives "antimodern" (*Theatres* 139). All these perspectives and counter-perspectives on the movement provide a robust source of engagement to the reader with the privilege of hindsight. They also point to the radical and traversing nature of the movement itself, which was potent enough to generate such strong reactions from either side. These contrasting perspectives also point to the liminality associated with the movement and the playwrights. We need to comprehend the other major aspects of the movement and the distinctions in the methods of the contributing playwrights, which shall automatically foreground the liminal figures within the movement. In the next section, I study the different approaches to the use of actors and

[122] It is essential to note here that Mee's book was published in 2008, three years after Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence*. My argument here refers to the general stance of the hardcore advocates of the roots movement who claim that it marked the reinvention of modern Indian theatre

to text-performance relationship to understand how Tanvir changed the dynamics of dramaturgy within his tradition.

3.1.3 The Characters/Actors in The Theatre of Roots: Theatrical Reality Redefined.

In her defence of Indian theatrical modernity and the meticulous analysis of the polemics of tradition versus modernity, Dharwadker invokes Tanvir, but only momentarily and for his "circumspect" (138) position on post-independence Indian theatre and the experiments with folk theatre. This circumspect position is what infused liminal characteristics in Tanvir's theatre and also the movement. The first significant characteristic of this movement was the transition from realist living room dramas towards stories from folklore and mythology that were manoeuvred to project contemporary reality and issues. An epiphenomenon of this characteristic was the transition from urban to rural settings. Playwrights associated with the movement turned towards rural settings and locale in their plays. All the playwrights and directors who contributed to the movement were of the opinion that Indian realist theatre had failed to accommodate the sensibilities of the rural people. Hence, playwrights such as Tanvir and Karnad located their plays in village settings rather than in urban living rooms. Karnad, in his essay *The Indian Theatre*, went on to critique plays based in living rooms on the grounds that the concept of the living room was mis-fitting to how Indian households operated. He notes:

> In the West, the living room has come to represent the last refuge of the individual, the safe and sure center from which he can confront the sociopolitical processes of the outside world. The living room in an Indian home serves exactly the opposite purpose: it is the deliberately neutral space in which, in a show of formal cordiality, the family keeps at bay people from the outside world. Nothing is meant to happen in an Indian living room […] (341).

The argument here stems from the use of the term Indian. Playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar have already argued for the sustenance of the realistic model, stating that they wouldn't write characters whom they

had not witnessed around them. However, the same technique of characterisation was also argued for by Karnad in his memoir *This Life at Play* (2021). He states he was admired several times by his friend Krishna Basrur and other contemporary playwrights for his life-like characters. Tanvir, in this regard, emerges as a liminal figure between the realist playwrights and the major proponents of the "theatre of roots." His method of characterisation was a departure from both the realist traditions and other playwrights in the roots movement. We know the typology of characters in the realist traditions of theatre from the previous chapter, I shall focus here on the differences between Tanvir's characterisation and of other significant contributors to the roots movement to explore Tanvir's liminal status between the two major "streams" (Dalmia 119) of modern Indian theatre.

Erin B Mee points through Haisnam Kanhailal's[123] assertion, that Ratan Thiyam, a stalwart of the roots movement, felt that "he had to train his actors in performance genres that reflected the true flavour of Manipuri tradition" (8). Tanvir's ensemble did not require any formal training as they were already trained in the folk performance tradition of *Nacha* and most of them were hereditary performers belonging to the tribal and other lower caste strata of Chhattisgarh. The characters in his plays were also drawn from the same rural settings as that of his actors. To top it all, Tanvir even approached the technique of characterisation ultra-realistically in his play *Agra Bazar* when he cast real beggars for the roles. He notes in his second preface[124] to the play:

> […] I found two real fakirs, Jogram and Lalchand, who sand begged in the streets of Ajmer […] They were real authentic fakirs in every respect. They did not have the traditional cloak and the begging bowl, which we had to provide for them. But their singling style and their body odour were quite true to form. (*Other Plays*[125] 2–24)

[123] Another renowned Manipuri director. He founded the theatre company Kalashetra in Manipur in 1969.
[124] Tanvir's preface was translated by Javed Malick in *Habib Tanvir: Charandas Chor and Other Plays* (2018). I shall be referring to this translation throughout the chapter and the thesis.
[125] Acronym for *Charandas and Other Plays.*

Similarly, the other characters in the play, such as the Paan (Betel) seller and the crowd, were people from the nearby village of Okhla. Tanvir notes about his first production that there were nearly seventy-five people on stage, which included, "street performers, singers, and ordinary folk […]as well as students and teachers of Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi (37). Another significant case of realistic characterisation is observed in *Charandas Chor*, in which Tanvir relied on dancers from the Panthi Nritya Party led by Toran Bai from Durg to perform the Santami dance rituals. Thus, in his choice of actors, Tanvir takes an unprecedented "betwixt and between" (Thomassen 7) approach departing from both the realist and the "traditionalist" (*Theatres* 145) theatres.

Tanvir's radical transformation of the methods of casting is also accentuated by the contrasting present repertory of actors in his theatre group, Naya Theatre. Nageen Tanvir[126] laments that her father's method of recruiting folk actors and performers has been gradually replaced with actors from urban backgrounds and negligible training in the folk performance traditions they are required to play. This crucial aspect of Tanvir's dramaturgy is surprisingly missing from all the conversations revolving around the debates on tradition and modernity, Western realism and Indian traditionalism, urban-centric theatre, folk-centric urban theatre and folk theatre. Neither Mee, Dharwadker, Katyal, nor Javed Malick talks about the marginalised backgrounds of Tanvir's actors for whom Tanvir traversed the length and breadth of Chhattisgarh. While renowned thespian and director, Sudhanva Deshpande, in his essay *Habib Tanvir and the Actor*[127], does talk about Tanvir's actors, he emphasises more on Tanvir's manipulation of their artistic talents. He notes:

> It took him 13 years of struggle […] before he hit upon an alternative way of working with his actors. This was premised upon two great

[126] Habib Tanvir's daughter. I had the opportunity to interview her on December 23rd, 2024. She spoke candidly on several aspects of Naya theatre, including the present leadership group and the diverse ensemble of actors.
[127] See *Habib Tanvir and His Legacy in Theatre* (2024), pp. 133–43.

> learnings– that his actors had to be given the freedom to speak in their native Chhattisgarhi, rather than, as he was forcing them to do in Hindi, which sat ill on their tongues; and they had to be given freedom of movement, which meant, in a sense, that blocking had to flow from the actor to the director rather than the other way round. Once he had discovered these two key principles, Tanvir's theatre blossomed. (134).

Similar arguments about his actors' illiteracy, their background as hereditary folk performers, and their adaptability to the urban stage with the help of Tanvir have been made by Katyal and Malick. However, as Nageen Tanvir pointed out in her conversation. Given their humble backgrounds, it was very hard for these actors and Tanvir to gain acceptance, especially from the so-called urban audience. She emphasised that it was only after these actors had won Tanvir the Fringe First award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1982 that they received some recognition from the contemporary prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi (1917–84), who invited the troupe for dinner.

3.1.4 From Text to Performance to Performances as Texts: Redefining Playwriting.

Another strikingly obvious characteristic of the roots movement was the transition from dramatic texts to performances as texts in which playwrights and directors presented stories from folklore and mythology or stories that had been performed for generations by the artists of that folk performance tradition. Mee and Dharwadker, again, counter each other over the relevance and context of each of these methods of composing plays. It is by virtue of their arguments that we, the readers, get to observe how distinct Tanvir is in his approach to playwriting. It again becomes essential to note here that highlighting this contrast in their perspectives does not intend by any means to prove that one approach is better than the other. Instead, it only serves to underline what Victor Turner calls "liminal entities," which are "[…] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). In this case, Tanvir emerges as the liminal entity

in his approach to composing plays between two "structured […] institutional arrangements" (Thomassen 7) represented by the realist playwrights and the roots playwrights.

Mee notes:

> Panikkar's[128] rehearsal process supports his performance-driven productions. The most significant aspect with regard to the treatment of text is that his company, Sopanam, rehearses without a script. Panikkar writes his plays on scraps of paper or in notebooks he has scattered around in his house. When he is finished, he puts the scraps in order and gives them to a member of the company to transcribe. This is the script used in rehearsal. […] On the first day of rehearsal, Panikkar discusses with the actors what he has written and reads parts of the play aloud to them. The focus of the conversation is on his vision as director. Thus, the actors begin rehearsal with a more or less full knowledge of what the director wants, but only partial knowledge of the text. (101)

Panikkar's approach emphasises a few key points about the craft of playwriting in the roots movement, viz. a. the relationship between director and actors at the level of writing, b. the emphasis on rehearsals, and c. the director's vision of the plot.Another approach to the method of playwriting was demonstrated by Karnad, who, despite utilising the mythological corpus of stories, relied on writing his plays as dramatic texts that then turned into scripts, a method resembling that of the realist playwrights, such as Rakesh. Mee notes about Karnad's writing technique:

> […] Karnad employs a linear narrative structure, the proscenium stage, the fourth wall and human characters, strategically placing them in a play with a structure of concentric circles, several nonhuman characters, an acting style that occasionally breaks the fourth wall and references to *darshan*, a way of seeing in Hindu ritual practice." (143)

Tanvir, on the other hand, took Panikkar's methods of composing plays to a different level. He did not write his plays like the realists, nor did he create a rough script for himself to direct the actors. Instead, his method required stitching together several short

[128] The playwright-director Kavalam Narayan Panikkar.

performances. The fact that his plays were several mini scripts stitched together as one whole script leads us to another pertinent question. How do we see his plays: as a dramatic text, a script, a theatrical text, or a performance? The answer comes from Richard Schechner.[129] Schechner defines these concepts in his article[130] as concentric circles, with *'Drama'* being the smallest and innermost circle and '*Performance'* being the outermost.

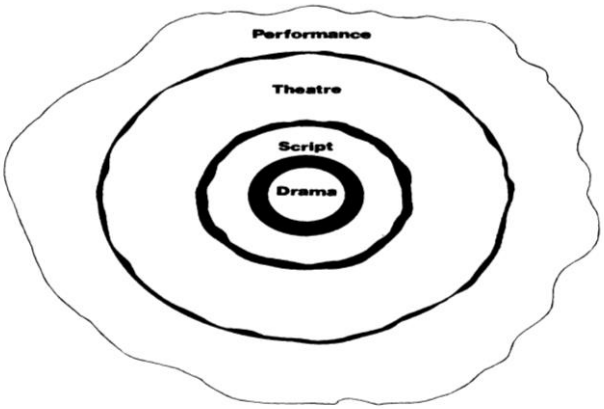


Figure 1. Schechner's Diagram - concentric circles of Drama and Performance.

Schechner notes:

> **Drama:** the smallest, most intense (heated-up) circle. A written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map. The drama can be taken from place to place or time to time independent of the person who carries it. This person may be purely a "messenger," even unable to read the drama, no less comprehend or enact it.
>
> **Script:** all that can be transmitted from time to time and place to place; the basic code of the event. The script is transmitted person to person and the transmitter is not a mere messenger; the transmitter of the script must know the script and be able to teach it to others. This teaching may be conscious or through empathetic, emphatic means…

[129] One of the founding figures of performance theory, Richard Schechner is a connoisseur of several performance arts around the globe. He spent a considerable amount of time studying the Ramlila and Raslila form of Nautanki (a folk art from Uttar Pradesh) in India.

[130] See. Schechner's *Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance*. The Drama Review: TDR, 17.3 (1973): 5–36.

> **Theatre:** the event enacted by a specific group of performers; what actually occurs to the performers during a production. The theatre is concrete and immediate. Usually, the theatre is the response of the performers to the drama and/or script; the manifestation or representation of the drama and/or script.
>
> **Performance:** the broadest, most ill-defined disc. The whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance – the precinct where the theatre takes place to the time the last spectator leaves[131]. (7–8)

When these lenses are applied to Tanvir's plays, we observe a disruption of the perimeters of these circles. Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* emerged from a workshop in Bhilai (in Chhattisgarh). The play was based on a story titled *Sachchai Ki Bisat* (The Web of Truth) by the Rajasthani folklorist Vijaydan Detha. Tanvir did a rough version of the play in the open at a ground in Bhilai, which was 40 minutes in length, before the crowd of Satnamis[132]. Then it was called *Chor Chor* (*Charandas Chor* 44). Later the play was to be adapted into a movie by Shyam Benegal,[133] and another rough version of the play was performed by improvising and adding several scenes. It was not until 1974 that the play was produced in its final version at Kamani Auditorium, Delhi. The anecdote explains how Tanvir weaved together several short performances to develop *Charandas Chor* as a full play, thus distorting the first circle of "Drama". His play was indeed a plan for the script, but it was never a drama (text). The play cannot be considered even a proper script as Schechner states that a script can be transmitted from person to person. In this case it was only Tanvir and his folk ensemble who could transmit the story. The play only turned into a script after it was performed for the first time in Raipur, thus, reversing Schechner's concentric circles.

---

[131] See Schechner's *Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance*. The Drama Review: TDR, vol. 17, no. 13, 1973, pp. 5-36.
[132] A religious sect in India whose motto is Satyanam or he whose name is truth.
[133] Benegal (1934–2024) was a renowned film director and screenwriter. He is known for his contributions to parallel cinema in India. His most-known works include *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), and *Bhumika* (1977).

As a matter of fact, none of his plays from *Agra Bazar* to *Charandas Chor,* and also the ones that came after, such as *Ponga*[134] *Pandit* (Fake Priest) and *Zehrili Hawa* (Poisonous Air), were developed from a dramatic text to a theatrical performance. Instead, some of them were derived from folk stories such as *Bahadur Kalarin* (Bahadur the Wine Seller) and *Charandas Chor*, and others, such as *Agra Bazar* and *Gaon Ka Naam Sasural,* were developed from folk songs and skits. All these plays traverse the boundaries of Schechner's circles and bind them together. However, given the manner of their composition, the navigation takes place from "Performance" to "Drama" rather than vice versa. This reverse development of his plays problematizes the standard domains of drama and performance and, thus, highlights Tanvir's liminal approach to dramaturgy, "opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction" (Thomassen 1).

3.2 Tanvir as a Social Reformer: Integrating Liminality and Social Satire in *Charandas Chor* (1975)

We have established the socio-cultural scenario of the newly independent India when Tanvir began writing, his praxis-based approach to playwrighting, and his enthusiasm for presenting plebian issues on stage. While these characteristics are apparent in all his plays, *Charandas Chor* has carved a distinct niche for Tanvir. This section shall explore Tanvir's social reformism through a discussion centred on *Charandas Chor*. It begins by studying the plot of the play and the inherent liminality of the story. It then studies through the characters Tanvir's reversal of social hierarchies pointing to the carnivalesque[135] and liminal tendencies in his plays. Lastly, it reiterates the similarities between Rakesh's and Tanvir's social reformism, a model drawing

[134] The play was originally part of the repertoire of Chhattisgarhi folk stories and was extracted by Tanvir for a full-length play in the late 1980s. Its other title was *Jamadarin* (The Sweeper) and targeted the caste system.

[135] Mikhail Bakhtin describes the term as celebrating "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions." See Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World,* trans. by Helene Iswolsky (1984), 10.

inspiration from the Western realist playwrights that forbids providing solutions to the conflicts presented.

The play might appear as a moral fable about a thief who grows consciousness to avoid getting caught by the constable and thus takes four vows before a guru to survive. His vows include: i.) never to eat from a golden plate, ii.) never to lead a procession on an elephant, iii.) never to marry a queen and iv.) never to accept the kingship of a state. Although taken in jest, these vows withstand and come true as the story unfolds. Eventually, he has to confront them all, and possessing a morally incorruptible character, Charandas, to keep his vows, refuses to adjust to the ebbs and flows created by circumstances. He cannot compromise his actions in fulfilling these vows, which eventually leads to his assassination. The play turns out to be a potent satire on the social hierarchies and the assumed etiquettes of the social elites. From the moment we see the introductory dance of the Satnami dancers, and Charandas sets foot on stage, there is never a dull moment in the play that lets go of the audience's attention. The play takes the form of a subtle social commentary that creates "spatial" and "temporal" liminality, "[…] in which sacred symbols are mocked at and ridiculed, in which authority in any form is questioned, taken apart and subverted […]" (Thomassen 1). In the following sections, I explore the play for the application of the spatial-temporal dimensions of liminality and how it points to social issues.

3.2.1 The Genesis: Liminality in Stage Design and the 'Rites of Passage'.

The genesis of *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor* presents substantial evidence of Tanvir's method of creating his plays. *Agra Bazar* was developed through improvised performances on the open stage of Jamia with teachers, students, and the villagers of Okhla as participants. *Charandas Chor* emerged from his experimentations and improvisations on the Rajasthani folk story by the folklorist Vijaydan

Detha[136]. Javed Malick provides a detailed account of the genesis in his introduction to the play. He notes;

> *Charandas Chor* had a long and interesting genesis, involving a protracted process (about two years) of experimentation and improvisation before it reached its final shape in 1975. Briefly, Tanvir had first heard the story in 1973 from the writer-folklorist Vijaydan Detha, who had in turn, recorded it from the oral cultural tradition of Rajasthan … Tanvir presented this far-from-finished attempt at an all-night function of the Satnamis [a religious sect] in the open-air Bhilai maidan [ground], incorporating into it a number of *panthi* songs and instantaneously improvising some others. This became the first, embryonic form of the play. It was about fifty minutes in duration and Tanvir called it *Chor, Chor*… (10–11)

The description of the play's composition makes it evident that Tanvir's method of creating a play inverts Schechner's concentric circles of 'Drama' and 'Performance'. It is also corroborated by what Bjorn Thomassen considers a sine qua non for liminality;

> On the one hand, liminality involves a potentially unlimited freedom from any kind of structure. This sparks creativity and innovation … On the other hand, liminality also involves a peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters, in which hierarchies and standing norms disappear… (1)

Also, recalling Gennep's "rites of passage" (11), we observe that Detha's story *Sachchai ki Bisat* (The Web of Truth) follows a similar journey through the tripartite stages. It was first a short story which was separated and turned into a rough plot, and after several experimentations and improvisations, it finally turned into the play *Charandas Chor*. Thus, the play's emergence from a liminal space of creativity and innovation that Thomassen describes results in a new

[136] A renowned folk writer who was bestowed with Padma Shri and Sahitya Akademi Award.

approach and, while doing so, subverts the "standing" norms of post-independence Indian theatre.

The folk story that Tanvir presents through *Charandas Chor* is a testament to his reformist vision for society. The original source of the story is Rajasthani folklore, as mentioned earlier. A crucial difference was that in Detha's version, Charandas was killed, and the guru accepted the queen's offer to become her consort and the king. In Tanvir's version, Charandas was executed by the Queen's order and was revered and deified by people who built his statue and started worshipping him as a saint. Tanvir gives a fascinating account of this difference and the consequences it caused. He states in his interview with Katyal;

> […] I didn't even stick to the story. Vijaydan Detha, who related the folktale, is also angry. His chor gets killed, but that's not the end. The queen takes the guru as her consort and the guru accepts, because, in the story as written by Detha, in order to save face she proposes to the guru and the guru who is worldly, becomes her consort. That's the way the story ends. Vijaydan's argument is valid enough, that if you are showing present-day conditions, evil continues, hypocrisy continues, the raj must continue with all its corruption, nepotism, everything; your story is romantic. He may be right there, but I wanted a cruel end. I wanted to say something different… on the subliminal level the effect of Yama[137], and I analysed it later… the word Yama coming so often in the sequence 'Give Death its Due', and then death coming really unexpectedly. People were stunned. (*CC*, 47)

In *Charandas Chor*, it is the moral concept of evil that we are faced with. In Detha's version, the evil continues as the guru and the queen perpetuate a morally corrupt action. In Tanvir's version, although he says he wants an abrupt anti-climactic ending by killing Charandas and establishing him as a saint. What has been overlooked is that Tanvir, in an attempt to bring the evil to a stop, initiates a new "evil action" (Russell 32) in the villagers' veneration for Charandas. Thus, the very

[137] The God of death in Indian mythology.

grounds of the conflict between Detha and Tanvir's version of the story are nullified since Detha's vision of the continuation of the evil is fulfilled by Tanvir, his intentions notwithstanding.

Tanvir's presentation of the cardinal sins of greed and lies through the characters of Munim, the Queen, and the wealthy landlord is his modus operandi to resonate with the plebian in his plays. In *Agra Bazar*, this conflict, although philosophical, between the plebian and the elitist concept of poetry is visible and brings all the characters on an equal plane despite the conflict. In *Bahadur Kalarin*, he presents a beautiful rural wine-seller and her son who is entangled in the Oedipus complex and tries to wedding his mother. Similarly, in *Charandas Chor*, it is a poor thief who stands erect and incorruptible while others, including the Queen, ministers, clerks and wealthy landlords around him, fall prey to the cardinal sins.

Besides the story, Tanvir's innovative approach also becomes evident from his stage design. The stage for *Agra Bazar* was the open-air auditorium and then a make-shift stage in Delhi's Ramlila Maidan. For *Charandas Chor*, it was "a stage and, mounted on that stage, a rectangular platform which is nine inches high, six feet wide, and twelve inches long, with just foliage or a leafy branch of a tree behind it" (*Charandas Chor*[138] 11). Including such a minimalist stage design helped Tanvir to allow the actors to move freely and perform the scenes and dance. The rectangular platform also served the purpose of allocating a separate space for rituals and was also used as an elevated seat for the guru and the queen. Tanvir notes in the stage direction of the first act;

> "The guru sits down on the platform, spreading his mat. His followers begin to gather around. A few of them come up and touch his feet, then join the others who start to sing a hymn" (*CC* 70).

[138] Henceforth referred to as *CC.*

Ironically, this elevated platform is also the space from where most of the evil actions take shape and alter the course of the play. The conversation between Charandas and the Guru in the first act reveals that the Guru is least interested in preaching spirituality and good conduct and instead longs more for *dakshina*[139].

> CHARANDAS: You're the one who told me not to lie, guru-ji.
>
> GURU: Well, congratulations, oh truthful one! Arrey, beta, I was asking about something else. I want to know what you've thought of by way of guru dakshina.
>
> CHARANDAS: Oh, that. *(Placing his cloth bundle before the guru)* Here, take it all, guru-ji.
>
> GURU: Such a fat bundle! Baap re! […] Arrey, beta, what use is all this to, me? All your guru needs is a loincloth.
>
> CHARANDAS: Guru-ji, all you see is the clothes. Reach inside and see what you find – here, a golden thali[140].
>
> […]
>
> CHARANDAS: […] Just put it away before the Havaldar[141] catches sight of it.
>
> […]
>
> GURU: Ah, you are doing me a favour, are you?
>
> CHARANDAS: Guru-ji, everyone who goes to jail comes out strong and healthy.
>
> GURU: […] Forget it son – just give me cash.
>
> CHARANDAS: All right, guru-ji. I have two rupees seventy-five paise on me […] Here, take it.
>
> GURU: Arre–only seventy-five paise! You just said you had two rupees and seventy-five paise. (*CC* 83–84)

This conversation, on the one hand, reveals the corrupt nature of Guru-ji, and on the other, also points to the ambiguousness of the "6ft deep,

[139] Offering made to the Guru/saints for their teachings.
[140] Plate.
[141] Constable.

12 ft wide, and 9 inches high" (*CC* 60) rectangular platform. This duality in the connotations of the elevated platform makes it a liminal space made sacrosanct on one side by the Satnami rituals and dancers and a space of greed and corruption on the other by the likes of Guru and the Queen.

Also liminal is Tanvir's use of his actors on the stage. While we observed in the Parsi theatre traditions, the implementation of techniques such as curtains, backdrops, and sceneries to present different settings. The realist theatre of Rakesh and Tendulkar had elaborate stage directions which required an abundance of furniture and other props to present a living room. On the contrary Indian folk theatre traditions such as Nacha and Jatra have traditionally rejected the idea of props and sceneries. In fact, there still is no stage in several forms of Nacha, and troupes go from house to house to perform, where they are surrounded by the audience on all sides. Tanvir's method meets all these approaches midway as he rejects sceneries and curtains and extra furniture and props. Tanvir believed in creating imageries and scenes through the actors' bodies. He had witnessed the *Nacha* actors changing the locale by merely circling the stage. Although a counter-argument can be made that Tanvir's not using stage props and furniture was a function of the folk performance art he harnessed on stage, Tanvir negates it by stating that he found a sense of liberty by not using props and sceneries. He notes:

> […] I didn't have to explain scene changes. Initially, I used to hang things, which would keep dropping and going up to suggest a locale… I felt that the descriptions of the Sanskrit poets who wrote these plays[142] are so vivid and so beautiful, so graphic, that in your imagination, before your mind's eye, any kind of picture of which you are capable can be thrown up. One differing from the other, in the auditorium, in the audience. Now that liberty, that faculty, will not be given full play if you paint the scenery on the stage. … (*CC* 27–28).

[142] He talks about his stage construction for his version of *Mrichhakatikam* a play by the ancient Sanskrit playwright Asvaghosa, believed to have lived between the 2nd and the 3rd centuries BCE.

His reluctance to use painted sceneries and place other props on stage is also termed a "strategy" by Siddarth Biswas and further substantiated by Javed Malick, who affirms that this strategy "… allows the actors and their performances to be foregrounded" (*CC*, 12). The proscenium stage is inherently urban in dimensions and design; however, the presentation of folk songs and dance and the actors' manoeuvring of this stage integrated it into Tanvir's liminal space and registered a new mode of utilization of the proscenium arena.

Charandas Chor has been performed both on the proscenium stage, creating a wall between the audience and the actors, as well as on the streets of Edinburgh, where it was indeed surrounded by the audience. His use of the proscenium is also marked by spatial liminality, as the stage turns into a free space for the actors who are not bogged down by the technicalities of their movement and perform with the rules of their inherited traditions.

3.2.2 The Characterisation: The Rigid, Comical Charandas.

Charandas is a likable character. For all his follies, mischievousness, and deceitful conduct, he emerges as a person with strong principles. Tanvir notes that it is Charandas' affinity to his principles that makes him an extraordinary individual. However, a thief should not be adjudged good, though, nor can a queen be vile. We are again in Tanvir's unique space, where he challenges the social hierarchies by reversing the affiliated qualities. The thief is honest and just, the Guru is materialistic, the Munim[143] is greedy, and the Queen is deceitful. Tanvir presents a "carnivalesque reversal"[144] of society where a thief stands equally with the ruler of the kingdom. Tanvir brings Gandhi, Jesus, and Charandas on an equal plane. He notes;

> I also had this other idea in mind, that there's this man called Socrates who died for truth, and accepted it, but wouldn't budge from his path of truth. There was Jesus Christ – same thing. There was Gandhi, who also stuck to his principles, and died. Here is a common man – an unheroic,

[143] Treasury keeper.
[144] See, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984), 10.

simple man who gets caught up in his vows and though he fears death, can't help it and dies. (*CC* 48)

Charandas is placed in binary opposition to the character of his guru, who adapts to circumstances and eventually ends up being the queen's consort. The contrast in their characters becomes vivid in the following conversation between Charandas and his guru;

CHARANDAS. I swear in front of everyone gathered here from now on I'll never tell a lie. That's a solemn vow. I stand by it.

GURU. Well Done! Bless you, my son. May you live long. (Gives him the mantra.) Now, beta, let's come to brass tacks. What're you thinking of for your guru?

CHARANDAS. I am thinking, guru-ji, to each his own. You're flourishing in your own way –

GURU. What d'you mean?

CHARANDAS. Well, I steal at night, in the dark, stealthily, entering homes through holes in the wall – while you sit here in broad daylight, openly, with a crowd of people around you. And you make much more than I do.

GURU. Shut up! (*CC* 82).

It is this conversation with the Guru that sets in motion a key characteristic of Charandas, which Henri Bergson calls "mechanical inelasticity"[145]. His vows turn him into a static character who reacts similarly to any situation, lacking a crucial skill to survive – adaptability, which adds a comic dimension to the character and the play. His craft of stealing, which should be the subject of ridicule, becomes a purpose of relief, and his rigidity to hold on to his vows becomes the source of the comic. Bergson corroborates with the assertion that "[a] flexible vice may not be so easy to ridicule as a rigid virtue. It is rigidity that society eyes with suspicion" (138)

Contrastingly, all other characters around him are dynamic and evolve into different people than they were at the beginning of the play.

[145] See Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1913), 10.

The Guru, who is supposed to practice asceticism and altruism, takes every opportunity to ask for cash and, in the original story by Detha, even accepts the offer to be the Queen's consort. The Munim, whose duty binds him to the safekeeping of the state's treasure, is found to steal. Lastly, the Queen, who should be the symbol of nobility and enviable values, stoops low to frame Charandas and orders his assassination. The question is, what does this arc of the characters convey? It vouches for Tanvir's liminal outlook towards the contemporary socio-political situation. It is futile to establish what Dharwadker[146] has already argued that the "theatre of roots" was originally rooted in the idea of right-wing cultural nationalism. The participating playwrights, especially Tanvir and Karnad, who had instilled in them the ideologies of the cultural left and institutions such as IPTA, rejected, at least in treatment of the subject, the latent motives of the right wing. Probably that's why, Tanvir, the flag bearer of the roots movement, was attacked[147] by right-wing groups near Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh for staging his play *Ponga Pandit.*

Another of Bergson's key concepts in *Laughter* is the idea of "inversion" (85), or the "theme of the of the robber robbed," in which "the root idea involves an inversion of roles, and a situation which recoils on the head of its author" (95). Charandas' rigidity in adhering to his vows leads him on a path of self-destruction. Charan, the thief, ultimately concedes defeat as his vows backfire, and he loses his life. Despite the abrupt tragic end, his static arc only escalates his troubles one after the other. First, he has a scuffle with the landlord, and he steals his sacks of grains. As evident from the following dialogues:

> CHARANDAS: I'm telling you to give this poor man some food. You have more than enough.

[146] See, Dharwadker's chapters titled *Alternative Stages: Antirealism, Gender, and Contemporary "Folk" Theatre* (pp. 310–351) and *Intertexts and Countertexts* (pp. 352–390), in *Theatres of Independence* (2005).
[147] See Sudhanva Deshpande's article, *Habib Tanvir under Attack*. Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 38, no. 35, 2003, pp. 3620–21.

LANDLORD: You only have to ask, and I'll comply– is that what you think?

CHARANDAS: I'm warning you– you'd better listen to me or I'll rob you of all your rice.

LANDLORD: You dare threaten me?

PESEANT: Do as he says, malik[148], or he'll turn things upside down. (*CC* 89)

Following the episode with the landlord, his troubles amplify when he steals from the treasury and is arrested. He still denies adapting to the situation and escalates further his troubles when he turns down the queen's offer. His last conversation with the Queen reifies the argument of inelasticity and inverts the situation to his disadvantage, as evident in the following dialogues:

QUEEN *(checking that no one's about)*: My life is empty without you, Charandas! I want to marry you. *(Charandas pulls away.)* Look, don't say no. You've refused me everything I've asked of you so far. Please agree to this one request […] Don't refuse me, Charandas.

[…]

CHARANDAS: Rani-sahib[149], I can't agree to this. Please excuse me.

QUEEN: Why? Don't you like me?

CHARANDAS: Don't say such things, rani-sahib! You're so beautiful, and I am a man, after all, not a saint! (*CC* 120–121)

Charandas summarily rejects the Queen's pleas to marry her, citing the vow he took to never marry a Queen, after which the she requests him not to disclose this conversation to anyone, and Charandas again reminds her of his vow to never lie.

CHARANDAS: What's the request?

QUEEN: Never reveal what has passed between us to anyone, otherwise I will be ruined! Promise me this.

[148] My Lord.
[149] Your Majesty.

[…]

CHARANDAS: You're forgetting something.

QUEEN: What?

CHARANDAS: I've taken a vow to always tell the truth.

QUEEN: Vowed to tell the truth! […] You can do that only if you live to tell the truth!

CHARANDAS: Rani-ma!

QUEEN *(rushes to the platform)*: Dead men tell no tales! […] (*CC* 122)

Charandas's vows, supposed to keep him on the good track, turn hostile to him towards the end of the play and eventually lead to his assassination. Bergson calls this a failure "[…] to adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present" (11).

The character of Charandas is the disruptive liminal force which challenges our assumptions of good and evil. In the words of Turner, he only classifies as "liminal *personae* (threshold people) […], and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (95). It is hard to label him into any straight-jacketed terms as he consistently defies orders and "arrangements" (Thomassen 7). His 'rites' of passage begin as soon as he takes those vows, and his liminal space results not in him being incorporated into society but in his death. Through Charandas, we get a glimpse of Tanvir's own persona who remained true to his principles, so much so that he was attacked by the very people who hailed him as the pioneer of the cultural revivalist movement.

3.2.3 Music as a form of Social Commentary: The Role of Songs in *Charandas Chor*

Music remains one of the least discussed subjects in Tanvir's repertoire. The songs interspersed in Tanvir's plays are more than devices of entertainment integrated with the simple stories from folklore. Their function and purpose in Tanvir's plays transcend their

intermittent presence in the narrative. Tanvir's background played a crucial role in his use of music in his plays. His fascination for music can be traced to multiple sources of which the folk form of Nacha and his interactions with the music at IPTA are the most prominent. He grew up in an environment which encouraged Gazhals and Shayari[150]. He notes in his memoir that he grew up listening to poetry from his maternal uncle, Kale Mamu, and his elder brother. He notes:

> My elder brother, Zaheer Ahmed Khan, also composed poetry and had adopted the poetic title 'Vahshi'– or Savage – which was very apposite. He would compose ghazals, naats, and hujoos. One of his satires, '*Akar kar mar gaya'* – 'He died of stiffness [of pride],' was fascinating. (*Memoirs* 19)

While this anecdote doesn't exactly point to his love for music, it does give us the context to his bend for poetry and drama, which he picked up at home. The regional theatre forms and the folk performance form of Nacha also had a significant influence on Tanvir, which was later integrated as a critical aspect of his theatre. The second major influence on his musical sensibilities was that of the IPTA, which was a radical left organisation since its inception in 1942. IPTA's repertory of music largely consisted of songs written as responses to contemporary social and political situations. It was, in Sumangala Damodaran's terms, "social text" [151] (12) that could be used to understand socio-political scenarios as well as to protest against oppressive regimes. One of the most prominent examples, to quote Damodaran, was,

> […] Sahir Ludhianvi's poignant lyrics in the song *'Jinhe naaz hai hind par wo kahan hain'* (Where are those who are proud of India?) […] to the scathing statement of want and misery in *'Cheen-o-arab hamara, Hindostan hamaara, rehene ko ghar nahin hai, sara jahan hamaara'* (China and Arabia belong to us, Hindustan belongs to us, we don't have a house to live in, but the world belongs to us" (215).

[150] Form of lyrical poetry in Urdu that contains couplets in defined meters. A group of such couplets that follow one pattern or meter is known as Ghazal.
[151] See Damodaran's *The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of Indian People's Theatre Association* (2017), 7.

Tanvir's time at IPTA had a profound influence on his ideological leanings as is reflected in his plays. His music, too, had an amalgamation of the Nacha's form and IPTA's methods. In a similar strain to IPTA, the role of music in Tanvir's plays was not just limited to the purpose of celebratory rituals or to reflect the vibrancy of the folk performance traditions, Tanvir used it as a dramatic device of commentary to subtly inform the audience about the turn of events. His songs were composed in collaboration with the folk artists. Malick provides an accurate account of their creation and integration into the story. He notes;

> Tanvir worked closely with some Chhattisgarhi folk poets to get these songs composed … They are set to delightful folk tunes and contribute immensely towards enhancing the play's pleasurability in performance. However, in a style reminiscent of Brecht, Tanvir also uses them to comment on an action and to elucidate and underline its larger moral and social significance. (*CC* 13)

The songs in Tanvir's dramatic corpus are not only for "enhancing the performance", as was the case with Parsi theatre[152]. Malick also points to their complexity as subtle commentaries on the narrative. When applied to the songs, Malick's assertions lead us to another significant function of the songs as a dramatic device. However, before attempting to peruse their functions in the play, it is paramount to define these songs and how they are termed ritualistic. Victor Turner describes rituals, particularly tribal rituals, in his article *Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality* (1979):

> … orchestrations of a wide range of performative genres, symphonies in more than music, comprising several performative genres. These may include dancing, gesturing, singing, chanting; the use of many musical instruments; mimetic displays; and the performance of drama during key episodes. (469)

[152] A precursor to modern Indian theatre that developed in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in parts of Gujarat and Bombay. It was known for its extravagant portrayal of stories from Arabian Nights and Indian mythologies. Songs and melodramatic spectacle were inseparable parts of the performance. It is also considered the precursor of Bollywood films.

Both Turner and Schechner agree upon one fundamental characteristic of a ritualistic performance, i.e., like any other performance, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Moreover, as observed in the Indian socio-religious context, a ritual always has a reformative function – to purify, to initiate, to liberate, to create an alliance, etc. Tanvir's songs perform similar functions. Nevertheless, a significant accoutrement is their ironic nature. Besides being rituals, they act as dramatic devices and commentaries on the narrative. They have much more profound symbolic connotations as ironies than rituals and performances. The song in the first scene of Act I, for instance, is a testament to this argument;

> Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam!
>
> Praise the truth, nothing better,
>
> Praise the guru, no one greater…
>
> Only a handful can
>
> Uphold the truth;
>
> And those few are gurus
>
> Who lead by example,
>
> They raise the world high,
>
> On the scales of truth.
>
> Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam! (*CC* 60)

While the lyrics praise the guru and the truth, as the story unfolds, it is the guru who charges money from people to initiate them as his disciples, and it is the thief Charandas who upholds the truth even at the cost of his life. A similar function of another song is observed in the first scene of Act II before Charandas robs the royal treasury;

> The baba roams the forest alone,
>
> The sadhu roams the forest alone,
>
> Offer the sadhu a tiger skin,
>
> Offer the clerk some dough,

Offer the peon a cup of tea,

Need we say any more?

With money it's done in a jiffy,

That we know for sure. (*CC* 99)

Performed pleasurably by the musicians and accompanied by the dancing actors, the song points to the corruption of power-bearing people and accentuates Tanvir's reformist agendas for society. Besides performing as dramatic devices and rituals, the songs also complement the folk story, which can be called the soul of Tanvir's plays.

As Damodaran's concept of "social texts" (12), Tanvir's songs also serve to provide the context into the near future in the play and subtly prepare the audience for the foreboding event of Charandas's death, as evident from the lyrics in Act II Scene 4:

Oh, Charandas, don't try to rob Death of his due,

Your name and fame will be taken from you […]

Truth is an addiction just like all the rest,

You might find your honesty put to the test,

Oh, Charandas, don't try to cheat Death of his due. (113).

This song, performed at the end of Scene 4, subtly creates the grim atmosphere of Charandas's death, which the audience is least expecting because his habit of speaking the truth till this point saves him from trouble and even takes him out of it. For instance, in his previous enterprise at the landlord's house, it is his truthfulness that makes the landlord's guard complacent and thus opens a window for Charandas to steal the grain. However, in this case, the song predicts to the reader/audience the event of Charandas' death. Its significance can also be gauged from the fact without this song, Charandas's death would have been far more abrupt and harsh on the readers and audience than they actually are with it. Similarly, the last song in the play establishes

Charandas as the guru and a saint, who is being worshipped by the people:

> An ordinary thief is now a famous man,
>
> And how did he do it?
>
> By telling the truth,
>
> […]
>
> Thieving was his destiny, he was both rich and poor,
>
> He lived a strange unusual life
>
> By telling the truth.
>
> Jokingly he made a vow never to tell a lie,
>
> Even though he had to die
>
> For telling the truth.
>
> Charandas the Thief he was, he was an honest thief,
>
> Charandas the honest thief,
>
> Who always told the truth. (*CC* 124)

The song also acts as a pacifier to the readers/audience, who are a little jolted by the abrupt death of Charandas.

The significance of music in Tanvir's plays lies in their transcending nature. Like other liminal aspects of Tanvir's dramaturgy, the songs also serve as liminal devices connecting two events or bridging the ordinary with the divine. It is also by virtue of these songs that we understand in advance what the Baba is like, and what is going to happen to Charandas in the next scene. Their role as "social texts" in the play, though not for the purpose of protest as was the case in IPTA's tradition, makes them equivalent to the Sutradahra (narrator) that subtly guides the audience from the opening act to the denouement.

3.3 Conclusion: Tanvir as the creator of a liminal space in post-independence Indian theatre.

Habib Tanvir, in the legion of reformist avant-garde Indian playwrights, is the torchbearer of reformist ideas, which are reflected in every aspect of his craft. Standing at the crossroads of the urban and folk performance forms, Tanvir ushered Indian theatre into a new dimension and proved that it was very possible to achieve harmony between the Westernized urban proscenium theatre and the out of favour folk theatre without degrading the value of either. Growing up in Chhattisgarh, he got familiarized with the folk form of Nacha at a young age and then received his education in Raipur, Nagpur, and Bombay. He further went on to study professional theatre at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, London, and the Bristol Old Vic Theatre and returned with a sense of realizing that he "[…] cannot possibly excel in imitating western dramaturgy and western methods," and that he "[…] must come back to our Sanskrit tradition and folk traditions" (*Charandas Chor* 26). This realization led him to find a new stream of Indian theatre that was cherished equally by the villagers of Okhla[153] as well as by audiences in Edinburgh, even though they did not understand a syllable of Chhattisgarhi.

This thesis explores the freshness that Habib Tanvir brought to the post-independence theatrical tradition of India. It studies his socio-literary contexts, especially in continuation with the realist schools of Mohan Rakesh, on the one hand, and his contemporaries such as B V Karanth, Ratan Thiyam, and K N Panikkar, on the other from the theatre of roots. The chapter studies Tanvir to retrace his position in the traditions of post-independence Indian theatre. Relying on three major perspectives on the discourse of Western realism versus Indian traditionalism, the chapter finds a paradoxical contrast in the perspectives of Erin B Mee and Aparna Dharwadker, who despite

[153] His first rough production of *Agra Bazar* was at the open auditorium of Jamia, where villagers from the nearby village of Okhla would frequently visit the rehearsals.

presenting profound arguments on the nature and function of the two traditions mentioned above, miss out on the liminal tendencies of Tanvir's theatre. Dharwadker defends Indian modernity, which, according to a consensus, started during the mid-nineteenth century and calls the theatre of roots anti-modern and its practitioners "cultural nationalists" (*The Critique* 61). Mee, on the contrary, defends the practitioners on the grounds that there was an "impulse" (*Theatre* 5) to decolonise the aesthetics of Indian theatre, which was distorted by the colonial realist theatre. Another prominent perspective regarding the theatre of roots comes from Suresh Awasthi, the progenitor of the movement who claims that there was an urgent need to rethink the direction of theatre because of the "violent dislocation" (48) of Indian theatre from its traditions. Tanvir emerged as a liminal figure in the roots movement by virtue of his innovations that led him to blend the rural and urban paradigms of theatre in equal in equal proportions. While he adhered to the foundational rule of the roots movement to reject the methods of the realist playwrights, he even departed from the methods of some of his contemporaries for whom folk only meant the implementation of regional stories in the framework of regional performance traditions but performed by urban actors.

The chapter then studies Tanvir's plays and reports that they can be read as testaments to his experimentation and his propelling the modern Indian theatre in a new direction. Tanvir's reformist ideas present themselves in all dimensions of his plays – the form, content, and meaning. First, he expands Mohan Rakesh's method and reaches out to the infinite richness and diversity of folk arts, bringing their exuberance to the urban stage. Second, his ensemble of folk actors, despite their limited (almost negligible) experiences with the proscenium stage, never stopped short of performing to their maximum once they had the freedom of movement and the freedom to deliver their dialogues in Chhattisgarhi – their mother tongue. Third, the ritualistic songs in his plays, especially that of *Charandas Chor*, not only contribute to the rich, entertaining atmosphere of the play but also serve

as dramatic devices that allow Tanvir to communicate to the audience and explain to them the events of the present and future. Fourth, and arguably the most significant, Tanvir's association with left-wing cultural organizations, such as the Indian People's Theatre Association and the Progressive Writers' Association, instilled in him, from the very beginning of his theatrical career, a soft corner for the plebian populace. All his plays, beginning from *Agra Bazar*, are testimonies of his profound observations of the exploitations of the masses by the social elites. *Agra Bazar* presents the conflict between the plebian idea of poetry and the socially elite version of it. The Paan (betel) seller, the fruit vendors, and the book-seller and the poet are placed in opposition thus representing the bifurcation between the different classes of society. *Gaon Ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad*, also presents three folk tales that question the stereotypical gaze on the Dewar Tribe, and also the greed behind the norm of bride fee. Similarly, through *Charandas Chor,* Tanvir questions the sacrosanctity of the elite classes by reversing the roles between a thief and a priest and by associating with thief the qualities of truth and honesty which are automatically associated with the social elites. Furthermore, in *Bahadur Kalarin* he uses the themes of oedipal complex and challenges Aristotle's laws of tragedy that only deems an individual of high birth to have such flaws. In all his plays he we observe him challenging the low gaze on less privileged sections of society. He brings the different classes on a n equal plane and in doing so establishes that a thief such as Charandas can also possess a character that can be compared with that of Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi.

Charandas Chor, has carved a distinct niche for Tanvir in the sense that he declares as the zenith of his creative journey. His later plays, such as Ponga Pandit and *Zehrili Hawa*, also being well received by the audience and critics alike. In *Charandas Chor,* we find Habib Tanvir creating a harmony between the urban and the folk elements of theatre that were hitherto unprecedented in the three decades of Indian independence. The play successfully establishes Tanvir as the creator of a new stream of Indian theatre. It can be argued that Tanvir had achieved

this moniker of an experimentalist with his first play, *Agra Bazar*. Nevertheless, it was with *Charandas Chor* that he achieved the distinctness of form and the harmonious amalgamation of the rural and urban paradigms of theatre.

Tanvir came of age when there were two dominant approaches in theatre – the urban proscenium style and the rural folk traditions. Caught at the intersections of the urban folk divide in the Indian theatrical conventions, Tanvir created a liminal space that defied the conventional norms of the extant tradition of theatre in India. The study relies on the concept of liminality defined by Victor Turner and Bjorn Thomassen for understanding the space that Tanvir creates for himself and his works between the two prevalent streams of Indian theatre. It is this tenet of his dramaturgy that this study has explored and endeavoured to comprehend the consequences of this new approach. Among all his plays, it is *Charandas Chor* manifests Tanvir's propagation of this new stream most lucidly. Tanvir himself claims that, barring the story, there was "no new ground broken" (*Charandas Chor* 20) after this play. To sum up, briefly, Tanvir's liminal space is a result of his distortion of the conventional norms, which are primarily associated with the urban theatre of Mohan Rakesh and others.

The first reformative "intervention," as Anjum Katyal calls it, was in the tradition of experimental drama. Tanvir, in his plays, changed the method in which the proscenium stage was utilized for theatrical performances. Beginning from the use of improvised small platforms (as in *Charandas Chor)* to the use of real-life tailors, vendors, and animals Tanvir's stage was a distinct representation of contemporary space-time. He emphasised not using sceneries and instead uses the actors' bodies to distort and manipulate the projection of space and time. Secondly, his plays employed a folk ensemble with a minimalist proscenium stage design, making it a rarely achieved equal and reciprocal proportion of the urban and the folk (*Nacha*) elements. The folk actors practically brought the folk form of *Nacha* with them and expanded the boundaries of the urban actor's manual. His actors, such as Lalu Ram and Bhulwa

Ram, were untrained in terms of the urban stage; however, they had grown up and lived with the Nacha throughout their lives. Hence, the protocols of the urban stage would render their performance ineffective. Tanvir realised this oversight as a director and allowed them the freedom to move as they moved while performing in the villages and to speak in their native dialect viz. Chhattisgarhi, allowing them to communicate to the audience in a way that had made them successful, thus resulting in all his plays coming alive. The third, was Tanvir's intervention in the use of songs in his plays. His association with the Indian People's Theatre Association had given him significant exposure to how the songs were used in plays. Also, the Nacha was performed by conjoining three-four musical skits that included ritualistic performances. The fourth, was his distortion of the method in which plays were being written and composed during the time. Tanvir's method of string together several improvised performances to compose a full play was a rare technique in the history of modern Indian theatre. He employed it since his first play and stuck to it till the end. In doing so, he distorted the conventional methods of writing the play text first and then creating scripts for performances. He also transgressed and bound together Richard Schechner's theoretical framework defining the flow in concentric circles that consists of 'Drama' as the innermost one and 'Performance' as the outermost circle. Schener's concept of 'scening' is also found to be challenged by Tanvir who instead of writing scenes first performs them and then freezes the sequence when he finds fit.

The fifth, and arguably his most significant intervention was his non-idealistic, non-resolutive engagement with the contemporary social issues. *Charandas Chor* did not provide any resolution to the evils of society. At best, it made a heart-felt appeal to the audience by presenting the tragic death of Charandas the protagonist. This resonates with the stance that Mohan Rakesh took in his plays viz. to observe his immediate reality and report it to the audience, creating a friction in the minds between their perceptions of an intricate situation and the playwright's version of it. Similar to Kalidasa and Nand, Charandas Chor meets a

tragic end. The difference is that the other two are alive to decide on their lives further, but Tanvir chooses to transcend Charandas from a mere physical being into a symbol of truth and honesty. By doing so, he seconds Rakesh in establishing that the binaries of right and wrong only limit one's perception of their reality. The no-exit denouements in their plays portray an individual as they are irrespective of their circumstances. While Kalidasa and Nand are dynamic characters, and they rise and fall before coming back a full circle, Charandas is a static one, which imparts to his character what Henry Bergson calls, "mechanical rigidity" and "automatism," making walk the only path – the path of truth which eventually leads him to his death (or more precisely, his assassination).

Tanvir emerges as a reformist of multiple paradigms of Indian theatre. His reform begins with his method of composing his plays and culminates by striking at the heart of social ills. His dramaturgy can be read as what G N Devy defines as a literary movement. Tanvir's plays redefined the manner in which urban theatrical space was used and also substantiated Girish Karnad's assertion of the lack of significance in urban drama. He notes that urban bourgeoise drama was trivial because the people of this class lived with a double set of values;

> […] professing faith in Western values of equality, individualism, secularism, or free competition in public while sticking to caste and family loyalties at home. Whatever the sociological justification for this division, its effects on drama were disastrous. To have any value at all, drama must at some level engage honestly with the contradictions that lie at the heart of the society it talks to and about. (Karnad 336)

We examine this argument by studying closely Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*. We begin by comprehending the socio-cultural scenario of the newly independent nation and find that Tanvir developed a new approach that integrated the urban and the folk models of theatre. His play *Charandas Chor* is a potent reflection of his reformist ideas—the play, besides reforming the extant tradition, of theatre also transmits reformist questions for the audience. The play presents through

Bakhtin's idea of a carnivalesque reversal of the existing social order that every human being, irrespective of their position in society, is equally complex. It also challenges the association of qualities such as truth and honesty only with the cultural and social elites. Instead, it affiliates them to a thief who dies upholding his vows.

Chapter 4: Mahesh Dattani and Indian Drama in English: A Study of the Evolution of a Performative Theatrical Tradition

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have observed and studied two of the trendsetters in the post-independence traditions of theatre in India: Mohan Rakesh and Habib Tanvir. Rakesh did it in Hindi and left a legacy of realistic plays, and Tanvir found a unique and equal proportion to blend the two entirely different models of urban and folk theatre in Chhattisgarhi. Their respective dramatic corpus was the result of their experiments that led to the creation of new streams from their respective traditions of theatre. Rakesh did it during the first two decades after independence, and Tanvir's contribution ranged from the 1950s to the 1990s and early 2000s. Both these playwrights continue to be among the most performed playwrights in India. Theatre companies based in Delhi and Mumbai stage at least one production of *Asadh Ka Ek Din*, *Adhe Adhure*, and *Charandas Chor* every year. The reason for their relevance, as established in the previous chapters, is not only the contemporaneity of the themes and subjects in their plays but also their commitment to the theatricality and performativity of their dramas, which ushered the post-independence Indian theatre in novel directions. Both these playwrights worked in tandem with theatre companies and actors to develop their plays and thus were able to compose plays that were written for the stage.

In the present chapter, I shall study another trendsetter who has significantly influenced the evolution of one of the most thriving theatrical traditions in India today – Indian English theatre. It is essential to note that, traditionally, critics have used the term Indian English Drama to refer to the corpus of plays written in English by Indian playwrights. However, for the purpose of this study, I shall be using the

term theatre[154] to refer to the stream of English drama in India. This change in terminology is due to the dichotomy between the terms drama and theatre. While drama typically refers to a written text that can be published or turned into a script for performance, theatre is more closely associated with the terms script and performance. I shall explore these concepts in depth with reference to our next trendsetter, Mahesh Dattani, in the latter part of the chapter. Born in 1958, Dattani, the playwright-director from Bangalore, established his theatre company Playpen in 1988. Prior to that, he was a part of the Little Theatre Group, which helped him gain insights into acting and direction. He wrote his first play, *Where There is a Will,* in 1988 and his most recent, *The Big Fat City*, in 2012. Besides writing and directing[155] all his plays, he has also written and directed the film *Mango Souffle* (2002), which was an adaptation of his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998). These biographical details make it evident that Dattani is a multi-dimensional dramaturg who approaches drama from the paradigm of performance. This approach becomes significant when we study Dattani in the context of the evolution of Indian English theatre, which could hardly be termed theatre before Dattani. Professor Multani concurs with the assertion when she notes:

> There are many ways in which Dattani's contribution to modern Indian theatre can be assessed. At the very least we can discuss it at two levels, that of the stagecraft and thematically. If we look at the structure employed in most of the plays we can find some interesting generic tropes – this structure, in my opinion, is reflective of a large pattern of the development of modern urban India. The family is a very important theme and is at the core of many of Dattani's plays, whether covertly or overtly. The family may be ostensibly 'happy' or already obviously dysfunctional, but the 'stasis' is the opening of many plays. (*Centering* 20)

[154] As we observed the differences between the terms in the previous chapter through the definitions by Richard Schechner, we shall use the same distinction here to understand the liminality of Dattani's play-texts.
[155] Dattani established his theatre company Playpen in 1988.

Her analysis of the themes in Dattani's writings includes a fascinating take on his stagecraft, which she again orients to extend on her thematic analysis by drawing upon the conflicts "between the 'outer' and the 'inner' worlds of the characters he creates" (25). This study takes cues from her argument that Dattani finds a "middle path" with "unnoticeable ease" (22) and uses the framework of the realist proscenium stage only to break away from the "conventional parameters of 'realistic theatre'" (22). She notes:

> Dattani surprises us by upsetting this assumption in almost all his plays. The spaces in his stage are not only the literal 'realistic' living rooms of the urban middle-class families that inhabit his plays, but also the hidden and sometimes treacherous spaces of memory, of the past, and of desire. (23)

While referring to the 'outer' and 'inner' spaces on the same stage, she points to the liminal nature of Dattani's stage. The spatial and temporal liminality associated with Dattani's stage also creates a point of departure from the preceding generation of Indian English playwrights, thus accentuating his reformative agendas. It is for this reason that this study refers to Dattani as a trendsetter of equal stature to Rakesh and Tanvir, who broke away from the previous traditions of Indian English plays and led in a novel liminal direction that resulted in the evolution of Indian English drama as a thriving performative tradition.

The chapter further explores Dattani's position as a reformist playwright, where the word reformist, akin to the other two playwrights, has dual connotations. Similar to Rakesh and Tanvir, I study Dattani as a liminal reformist, as a playwright-director who is renowned for leading the transition from a dry, overtly literary dramatic tradition into a vibrant performative arena. While it is very difficult to pick one or two plays from Dattani's influential repertoire. To emphasize the contrast between the other traditions of Indian English theatre and Dattani's theatre, I shall rely on his few initial plays, such as *Where There is a Will*, *Dance Like*

a Man (1989), and *Final Solutions* (1993)[156] for understanding his methods of reform, however, for the analysis, I have chosen *Dance Like a Man*. The first part of the chapter retraces Dattani in the context of Indian English drama and how he pioneered the transition from closet plays to a performative tradition. I study his stagecraft with reference to Richard Schechner's concept of 'Drama', 'Script', 'Theatre', and 'Performance'[157] (8) to establish his approach to his tradition as inherently performance-oriented. Also, using Thomassen's definitions of liminal spaces, I contextualise his unique position with respect to the preceding generations of Indian playwrights in English. Then, through different generations of scholarship, I retrace the trajectory of Indian drama in English. Then, through the critical enquiries of the first generation and contemporary scholars, I argue that Dattani is one of the foremost playwrights pioneering the reformation of the tradition of Indian English drama from literary to performative. The section concludes with an examination of the sources of his performative dramaturgy and the influence it has left on the present theatrical scenario in India.

The second part of the chapter consists of a detailed study of Dattani's reformist agendas for the contemporary socio-cultural fabric. Dattani's choice of subject for his plays has been the Indian middle class, especially the upper-middle-class sections of urban society. His emergence as a playwright coincides with one of the most radical reforms in India's economic policies, i.e. the liberalization of 1991. He wrote most of his plays during the last two decades of the century, when Indian society underwent the advent of liberalisation. An immediate impact of the economic reforms could be observed in the steep growth of the middle-class population, a section of society that held liminal identities between the upper and the lower classes. As Sara Dickey notes:

[156] Another significant reason for this selection is the proximity of these plays to the preceding generations of Indian English playwrights.
[157] See Schechner's *Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance* (1973, pp. 7–8)

> […] those who see themselves as middle-class also talk about their class position as a markedly uneasy and unstable place. Their accounts emphasize the centrality of the middle class, which is at once a position of social visibility and worth, a stage on which to be judged by critical spectators, and a site that simultaneously avoids, buffers, and is caught between behavioral extremes. (121)

The judgment and performance of the middle class that Dickey notes are substantial parameters for understanding the functioning of this class in India, which gets trickier and trickier as factors such as ethnicity and caste come into play. However, in this thesis and in the present chapter, the study of the Indian middle class is undertaken with a different perspective and purpose than Dickey's[158]. I apply her anthropological lens of middle-classness only to put into perspective the complexity of the families presented in the plays. Dattani's plays often tell the stories of the upper middle classes and the "invisible"[159] social issues in those families, which, even in today's day and age, are either not made open for discussion or are met with denial. The chapter studies these latent issues, their sources, and whether they reverberate with Rakesh's and other urban Indian playwrights' observations of the middle class. Again, the applicability of liminality is what connects Dattani with the other two playwrights in this study. In Dattani's case as well, this study explores the liminal approach towards the composition of plays that orients to performance from the level of text, as well as in the representation of social issues presented in his plays stem from temporal liminal dimensions and characters that are found trapped in the voids between past and present. In the following sections, we explore in detail the integration of the concept of liminality in Dattani's socio-literary contexts, as a liminal reformist playwright who bridges the distance between text and performance.

[158] While there are visible similarities between Rakesh's representation of the middle class, especially in his play *Adhe Adhure* and that of Dattani's plays. One stark difference that needs to be mentioned is that Dattani's middle-class families are on the upper end of the middle-class spectrum and also represent the changes Indian urban societies have gone through after Rakesh.

[159] See Erin B. Mee's *Mahesh Dattani: Invisible Issues* (1997).

4.1.1 The Traditions of Indian English Drama: The First and Second Generations.

We have already discussed in the introduction to this thesis, under the topic of the trajectory of modern Indian theatre, the beginnings of Indian English drama from Krishna Mohan Banerjea's *The Persecuted* (1831) to Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei Ki Bole Shobhyata* (Is this Called Civilization, 1871). To briefly sum up this first generation of Indian drama in English, Shanta Gokhale, in her essay *The Dramatists*, in the collection *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* (2017), notes:

> Though Krishna Mohan Banerjea's *The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* (1831) was the first play in English written by an Indian, it was less a play and more a dramatised debate of the conflict between orthodox Hindu customs and the new ideas introduced by Western education. While anyone interested in English plays preferred to see those written by native English speakers, the majority of Indians preferred those performed in an Indian language. (378)

The first-generation Bengali playwrights who either wrote their plays in English or translated Bengali plays into English wrote primarily about the orthodox cultural norms. Their plays were works of social criticism that, in the words of Farley P. Richmond, "served as the instruments of social change" (319). These playwrights were committed to the eradication of social ills that had "plagued" (319) Indian society for centuries. Things changed around 1876 when the colonial government imposed the Dramatic Performances Act to curtail writings and performances that it deemed libellous and seditious. Most of the scholarships, including Richmond's *The Political Role of Theatre in India* and Gokhale's essay, point to *Nildarpan* (Indigo Mirror, 1860) by Dinabandhu Mitra as the starting juncture of the friction between Indian playwrights and colonial censorship. The performances of *Nildarpan,* starting from Dacca[160] in 1861, started to arouse public consciousness

[160] Old name for Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

against the cruelty and exploitation of the colonial government, so much so that they banned its subsequent performances and transferred the reverend who translated it into English. Richmond notes:

> […] it [Nildarpan] met with unqualified success among the Indian spectators and apparently aroused no adverse reaction from the expatriate community. That same year, the Reverend James Long translated the play into English. Approximately five hundred copies were printed and sent to the Bengal Office for approval. But only fourteen were permitted to circulate freely in India, and the remaining copies were either sent to England under official seal or withheld by the Bengal Office. The good Reverend was paid for his trouble by being sentenced to one month in prison on a charge of libel and fined a thousand rupees […] And through its actions the government admitted a fear that English, the very language nurtured among a segment of the Indian population as a means of sustaining indirect rule, could be effectively used to promote nationalistic sentiments among Indians throughout the country. That the Bengali version of the play was not suppressed was probably because the government knew that it would not be read outside the Bengali-speaking regions of the country. (3)

If we were to draw an analogy between the earliest traditions of other Indian traditions and English drama in India, we could do so by recalling the initial stages of Hindi drama which, after the first generation of Bhartendu Harishchandra and his contemporaries, fell into the pitfalls of literariness which playwrights such as Jaishankar Prasad believed as a prerequisite quality for dramatic texts. Similarly, after the first generation of Bengali playwrights, the genre of Indian English drama did not have much to offer to the tradition of Indian theatre for a considerable amount of time. Of course, one could consider Tagore's literary achievements at the turn of the twentieth century to bridge this void, but given the romantic and spiritual nature of his works, it would be both presumptuous and jarring to fit Tagore into the category of Indian English playwrights who wrote with a performative orientation.

Another analogy with Hindi drama can be drawn from the participation of the Parsi community in late nineteenth-century Bombay and its arenas of English theatre. Besides the touring European

companies that performed in Bombay, several Parsi companies had also ventured into producing successful European plays. M. K. Naik sketches an elaborate account of the circumstances and the hoi polloi prevailing in Bombay's theatrical circuit in his essay *The Achievement of Indian Drama in English* (1977) when he states:

> Several European touring companies visited and performed in Bombay during the latter half of the nineteenth century. These included the Fairclough Company, the Lewis Dramatic Company, Norville's Our Boys Company, the Loftus Troupe, the Willard Opera Company and the Dave Carson Troupe. The plays staged were mostly comedies, farces and operas (very rarely tragedies) — all imported from Britain. Of these, only Dave Carson, the self-styled 'only Anglo-Indian comedian in the world' (The Bombay Gazette, 25 April 1877), made any attempt to use Indian material for his farcical comedies. Among the popular items in his repertoire were a 'burlesque of the eccentricities sometimes witnessed in a mofussil magistrate's court', 'scenes in the Bombay Police Court', and 'The Bombay Palkheewala', his biggest song-list being the 'Bengalee Baboo'—a tune which bands continued to play till the end of the century at Hindu weddings and on Parsi New Year's Day.
>
> Many amateur dramatic groups and clubs also flourished, especially during the 1860s and 1870s, notably the Parsi Elphinstone Dramatic Society, the Kalidas Elphinstone Society, the Shakespeare Society of Elphinstone College, the Bombay Amateur Dramatic Club, the Thespian Club, the Orphean Dramatic Club, etc. A pointer to the great interest created by this dramatic activity among the students of the time is provided by a letter published in The Times of India on 7 May 1864, signed 'J.D.S.', it complained that young Parsis spent a 'major portion of their time in attending the club and preparing their parts of the performance instead of allotting their time towards the preparation of their school lessons'. (182)

Following the first-generation playwrights and theatre companies from Bengal and Bombay were the playwrights Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) and Tyagaraja Paramsiva Kailasam (1885–1946). Most of Sri Aurobindo's plays, including *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Rodogune*, and *Perseus the Deliverer*, were written during the first two decades of the twentieth century and dealt primarily with Greek mythology and

characters. They were written as dramatic texts in a Shakespearean verse style and did not conform to any performative tradition in India.

Arguably, one of the first playwrights to achieve a degree of balance between the literary and performative aspects of dramatic writing was T. P. Kailasam. He wrote in Kannada as well as in English, and his plays, such as *Fulfilment, The Purpose*, and *The Brahmin's Curse,* all written during the 1930s and 1940s, were interspersed with short and crisp stage directions. The following excerpt from his play *The Purpose* (1944), a dramatization of the scenes of the *Mahabharata*, presents his bent towards performance while writing the play:

> *Place:* THE ROYAL ATHLETIC GROUNDS: HASTINA
>
> DISCOVERED: **In the Background**: *Stalwart Youths at Mace and Sword exercise*
>
> **In The Mid-Ground**: *Arjuna practising with bow, his target swung by a tree-branch.*
>
> **In The Fore-Ground**: *Dronacharya with Nakula and Sahadeva; the former with a riding whip and the latter with a bow taller than his own self.*
>
> Sahadeva: *(With a wry face)* Gurujee! I cannot use this bow! It is too big for me! I cannot even lift it!
>
> Drona: *(Feigning astonishment)* Bow too big for you? But my little man, you seem to forget you are a Kshatriya! Why, no bow in the world is really too big for a Kshatriya -- not only to lift, but to bend, string, and shoot with!
>
> Sahadeva: *(With a more pinched face)* I AM remembering I am a Kshatriya, Gurujee! But *(Straining at the bow)* this is too big and I canNOT lift it!
>
> Drona: Yes. And and that is where you will spend your next eleven days. *(Looks at Nakula for a moment and looks away)* YOU will do the same too, Nakula!
>
> Nakula: *(Startled)* I, Gurujee! Why?
>
> Drona: *(Still looking away)* You thought perhaps that I was not watching you this morning whilst you were riding at day-break! But I was!...The MANE of a horse, Nakula!... *(Nakula bites the tip of his tongue guiltily)* is not meant for the rider to hold on to... unless he be a... *(meeting Nakula's eyes)* FRIGHTENED HORSEMAN!

Nakula: *(Scandalised)* "FRIGHTENED"! I was NOT frightened, Gurujee! It was not fright that made me...do...what...I...did […]

Drona: *(Feigning disgust and anger)* "Horse much too big"! And you are a Kshatriya! And to think I have just told your little brother that...I mean... (Kailasam 2–3)

The stage directions complementing the dialogues above are not as detailed as we see in Ibsen or in the generations of Indian realist playwrights, but they certainly make a case for Kailasam's orientation to theatre, unlike the succeeding generation of playwrights immediately after independence.

Nevertheless, not having a performative tradition to hark upon, Kailasam and his contemporaries were also restrained by the short-sighted vision of prioritising literary aesthetics over the constitutive theatrical elements of the play. Also, like the case with Hindi drama, religious and mythological themes were the leitmotifs in the plays of Kailasam and his contemporaries, such as Harindranath Chattopadhyay and Sri Aurobindo. Naik makes a sharp observation regarding what linguists term the foregrounding of style in language, in their plays:

> […] Kailasam and Sri Aurobindo invariably cast their full-length plays in the age-old Shakespearian mould, without at all pondering whether the form was still artistically viable in the modern context. A parallel that comes immediately to mind is that of the Romantic and Victorian poets who copied the Shakespearian verse play with similar results. It was only by discarding the Shakespearian framework that Eliot and Fry were able to give a new lease of life to stage-worthy verse drama. It is arguable that an original mind like Sri Aurobindo and an inventive one like Kailasam would perhaps have consciously tried to evolve a new dramatic form in keeping with the Indian ethos, instead of borrowing the readymade Shakespearian one, if only they could have written English plays for being actually staged and not for being simply read. (185)

Naik's criticism of these playwrights, especially Kailasam, might appear contradictory to what we observed in the fragment from the opening act of his play before. However, keeping in mind the context and the present Indian tradition of English theatre and also Ibsen's theatre of the mid to late nineteenth centuries, it is evident that Kailasam's drama aligned with Shakespeare in the European context and with classical Sanskrit

playwrights, such as Shudraka, in the Indian context. One does not need to look far beyond the stage directions of the English translation of *Mrichchhakatikam* (The Toy Clay Cart, 3rd Century CE) to establish similarities in the stage directions of the two plays at the textual level at least.

4.1.2 The Post-independence Generation of Playwrights Before Mahesh Dattani.

Just as Hindi drama broke away from the neo-Sanskritic tradition in the 1950s, the playwrights of Indian English drama too began to portray more contemporary social issues in their plays during the decades around the independence. After Kailasam, playwrights such as Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004), Asif Currimbhoy (1928–1994), Gieve Patel (1940–2023), Gurcharan Das (1943–) and Partap Sharma (1939–) wrote exclusively in English and portrayed the issues of the urban societies in India. Despite their efforts in producing renowned plays, contemporary scholars and critics of Indian drama in English, including the likes of Shanta Gokhale, Eunice de Souza, Angelie Multani, and M. K. Naik, have labelled their plays as dramatic texts. De Souza credits Ezekiel for presenting the Western (American) influences on Indian youth in his plays, such as *Nalini, Marriage Poem* and *The Sleepwalkers*[161] and for contemporizing the themes and subjects of Indian English drama. Currimbhoy's *The Doldrummers* (1960), *The Dumb Dancer* (1961), *Goa* (1964), and *The Hungry Ones* (1965) were again urban-centric plays, accentuating the playwright's intentions of social awakening. Gokhale commends Currimbhoy as a "[…] deeply compassionate playwright who gives his characters room to reveal themselves" (382). The technical aspects of drama are also on display in his corpus of twenty-nine plays through devices such as choruses, dramatic monologues, and interspersed songs. Fascinatingly, Currimbhoy was not renowned in India initially and only came to public notice after the political ban on his play *The Doldrummers*, which

[161] In the collection *Three Plays* (1969).

allegorised the Goan liberation as a sensitive event marking the loss for both sides. Gokhale notes:

> Currimbhoy was ignored in India till news of the reputation he enjoyed in the United States reached the country. The Asian theatre scholar Faubion Bowers had declared in New York's The Village Voice that Currimbhoy was emerging 'more and more clearly as a playwright of international stature. Goa was produced at the University of Michigan in 1965. In 1968 it was staged at the Martinique Theatre on Broadway and The Hungry Ones was performed at the Theatre Company, Boston, and at Café La Mama. The Doldrummers was given a tryout at the Actors' Studio. Mean-while, it had been banned in India. It was only in 1969, after writers like Khushwant Singh and Mulk Raj Anand wrote letters of protest to the Times of India, that the ban was lifted and the Little Theatre Group in Delhi staged it. (383)

Despite his best efforts, Currimbhoy could not initiate a tradition of plays that were written for the stage and with performance in mind. To achieve artistic mastery over the art of dramatic storytelling, he sometimes let go of the fundamental rule that words in a drama were meant to be performed on the stage. Naik reserves sharp comments for him, and the tone is one of disappointment when he notes:

> […] the case of Currimbhoy shows how the continued lack of the discipline of the living theatre corrupts even genuine dramatic talent and corrupts it absolutely. His recent play, *Om Mane Padme Hum* (1972) should be a veritable nightmare to any producer, howsoever resourceful; it might well defeat even a combined team of Stanislavsky, Gordon Craig and Jean-Louis Barrault. Within its limited range of two Acts, the play involves innumerable changes of scene within single scenes (there are as many as eighteen in Act I, scene i); there are a number of flash-backs and dream-sequences; and some scenes, as the playwright himself points out, 'need screen shots', for example, scenes of the torrid rivers being crossed' a few thousand Chinese troops entering', etc. (185–86)

Another writer and playwright, Gurcharan Das, attempted a historical rendition of mid-nineteenth-century colonial Punjab in his play *Larins Sahib* (1970). The ethos of the character of Henry Lawrence, the Officer of the East India Company, which made him sensitive to the conflicts between his duty and his sympathy for the people of Punjab,

also made him a static character in the play. The fact that the play won the Sultan Padamsee Prize in 1968 and was produced by Little Theatre Group in Bombay in 1969 provides evidence of its literary and dramatic merit. However, De Souza, in her essay, *Some Recent Indian Plays in English*,[162] questions the very purpose of Das's approach to history in his play when asks, "[w]hy is the playwright writing these plays? What is his interest in history?" (160). To elaborate on her questions, we can recall the use of historical and semi-historical figures by Hindi playwrights across generations. While Harishchandra and Prasad used historical narratives to depict the contemporary circumstances of the nation and to appeal to the nationalist sentiments of the masses, Rakesh used historical figures such as Kalidasa to present the complexities of the modern-day individual and the interpersonal conflicts that arose due to such complexities. Das, on the contrary, despite writing in the decades after independence, approaches historical narratives as a chronological document. His approach to historical stories appears anachronistic when we consider the context of other theatrical traditions in the country. De Souza proceeds:

> Modern European playwrights often go back to history and myth, particularly Greek history and myth, to establish modern man's relationship to history, to interpret contemporary problems, to work out ideas or theses through historical material. Shaw, Sartre, Camus, Giradoux, Brecht, Hocchuth, all have something to say through history. The relentless power politics of Shakespeare's plays, the conflict in them between power and personal desires, still have a profound meaning for us.
>
> The Indian playwrights attempting history plays in English have contented themselves with straight chronicle plays. There is no question anywhere of trying to establish the modern Indian's relation to history. *Larins Sahib* is at least a coherent sequence of events. But the characters are all one-dimensional, and the main character does not come alive at all. An Englishman interested in the East, Henry Lawrence, suddenly becomes obsessed to the point of madness with the Lion of the

[162] See Naik and Mokashi-Punekar's *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English* (1977), pp. 151–62.

> Punjab as Maharaja Ranjit Singh was called. But the change is sudden and unconvincing; it has no psychological depth. (160–61)

Drawing an inference from these assertions, we observe two prime reasons for the criticism of this generation of English playwrights in India: i. the non-existence of a thriving performative tradition in their choice of language, and ii. their indifference towards the performativity of the dramatic text. A similar approach was also observed in Jaishankar Prasad's plays, which relied more on literary aesthetics than the performative tenets of the genre of drama.

Gieve Patel (1940–2023), another poet and playwright from this generation, who Gokhale says was "inducted into theatre" (386) by one of the most celebrated theatre directors of the time, Ebrahim Alkazi[163] (1925–2020), was somewhat able to transcend the constraints of literary drama in his play *Princess* (1970). The play was produced on stage before it was published, another testament to its theatrical qualities. The play, set in a semi-urban Gujarati locale, presents the conflict between two families over a young male child who survives after the death of his mother. Like most urban plays of the time, the play relies on inner conflicts and psychological causes that insinuate these conflicts. It also presents a pressing social issue of obsession with male offspring across Indian societies which still finds some or the other ways of expression in some parts of the country. De Souza calls *Princess,* the first experiment with words in English language and credits Patel for demonstrating that English can be used as a medium to convey inherently Indian sensibilities and issues. She notes:

> Princes is also an excellent instance of experimentation in language. As Patel informed me in a discussion about the play, the language problem arose because part of one family leaves its ancestral home and goes to the city, and he did not want to write a bilingual play–half small-town dialect and Gujarati English, nor did he feel that using English with the occasional Gujarati phrase thrown in was at all a satisfactory solution.

[163] Renowned director and thespian. Alkazi also served as the director of the National School of Drama between (1962–67). He played a significant role in bringing Mohan Rakesh into the limelight with his production of Ashadh ka Ek Din at the open-air theatre in NSD in 1962.

> So he evolved a form of modified English which is not standard English, which has distinctively Indian rhythms but none of the 'cuteness' or self-conscious phony 'Indianness' of other experiments in this genre. (161)

Through this brief overview of the state of Indian English Drama during the first two decades after the independence, we are drawn to the conclusion that despite a historical heritage parallel to that of the other traditions of drama in regional languages, Indian drama in English could not bridge the void between text and performance until the 1970s. Besides a few exceptions, there was no substantial output in terms of plays that could be interpreted on the stage. While playwrights from other traditions had transcended the restraints of overtly relying on historical narratives and ornamental language, playwrights in English were still finding proportions to elevate their dramas into performance. During the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, when Rakesh was moving from reality to ultra-reality and experimenting with fragmented words and sentences in Hindi, and Habib Tanvir had found an equilibrium between the urban and the folk models of theatre in Chhattisgarhi to pioneer the "theatre of roots" (Awasthi 48) movement. The English playwrights, on the other hand, barring the experiments of Patel, were still searching for methods to present contemporary issues and connect to the audience in a language that a large chunk of the population considered a residue of colonialism. It's not the case that there were no efforts to incorporate myth and folk elements in the plays in English, but again, biases towards the literary capabilities of the texts confined the playwrights from achieving what Tanvir and his contemporaries had achieved. As Naik notes:

> Unfortunately, the dramatist in English has seldom thought of experimenting in this direction, and when he has occasionally tried to do so, he has only been guilty of using these traditional elements as little more than clever and exotic gimmicks which can be depended upon to impress a gullible foreign audience which has no familiarity with the genuine article. […] the playwright's passion for sheer technical virtuosity has led him to neglect the basic dramatic values to the detriment of a potentially rich artistic conception. The playwright in English has thus failed to enter into the spirit of these folk forms, while

> his counterpart in the Indian languages has succeeded and secured vital artistic leverage. (188)

Another significant reason for the challenging course of Indian English drama was the lack of any extant theatre tradition in the language. It is significant to note here that despite Hindi drama's relatively better position in terms of a corpus of plays that could be performed, it did not acquire the status of a fully thriving performative tradition as it did after Rakesh. Playwrights such as Upendranath Ashk wrote plays that were meant for the stage, and Ashk's involvement with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) meant he valued the significance of performativity as one of the core aspects of his plays. However, his radical ideas and vocal support for women's agency over their lives resulted in friction with the orthodox section of Indian society and, in turn, his marginalization in the canon of Hindi theatre. If not for Mohan Rakesh, the post-independence Hindi theatre could be imagined grappling with similar circumstances. Thus, one of the primary differences between the establishment of Hindi theatre and its counterpart in English is observed to be a playwright who was willing to substitute literary embellishments with dialogic speech in the play-text and to experiment with the form and content of the plays like Rakesh.

The choice of English as the language of communication on stage was another inescapable hindrance for Indian English playwrights who had to navigate the pitfalls of emulating the Western maestros, many of whom were native speakers and did not have to create a balance between the written and the spoken words to achieve the effect of conversation. Besides, the success of Indian novelists writing in English had already demonstrated that communicating Indianness and the atmosphere of the Indian socio-cultural milieu was possible in the coloniser's language. Both Naik and De Souza corroborate this assertion. Naik further notes:

> One major hurdle which the playwright in English is supposed to encounter is that of language. It is often said that we have so few actable

> English plays because a dialogue in English between Indians will not sound convincing except when the characters are drawn from an urban, sophisticated milieu, or are actually Anglo-Indians, whose mother tongue is (supposed to be) English […] 'English as the non-Convent-trained people speak it in this, non-English country has been made a thing to laugh at on the Indo-Anglian stage... This is a shared snobbery between the playwright, the producer, and the audience. ' (191)

Novels such as *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) by Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) and *Kanthapura* (1938) by Raja Rao had already established English as a parallel medium of conveying Indian ethos and pathos as any of the other regional languages. In such a scenario, the question of authenticity or artificiality of the language of communication on stage was not an issue that could hinder the audience's connection with the story and the playwright's agendas. As Naik proceeds:

> If Raja Rao can make a rustic Indian grandmother (in *Kanthapura*) talk in a kind of Indian English which recaptures the very feel of the soil-and that too not merely for superficially comic purposes– why should his counterpart in the theatre feel shy to emulate his example? When Shakespeare makes his Romans speak in Elizabethan English, we do not bat an eyelid; when Shaw's St Joan speaks in English, no one asks whether the French girl held a certificate of proficiency in that language; and when Brecht makes the good Woman of Setzuan express herself in German, we are not horrified. Nearer home, when a play about Krishna was written in any of the Indian languages (and there is hardly any Indian language without one) did either the playwright or the audience raise the question, whether the author of the *Gita*[164] could possibly have used any of these Indian vernaculars? It would indeed be patently absurd to demand that all characters in Indian drama in English must, in order to qualify, produce a certificate that (a) English is their mother tongue or (b) they normally use it in their everyday social intercourse. (191)

To sum up, the convergence of factors, including the dearth of a thriving tradition, the playwrights' indifference towards the performative aspects of their plays and their over-reliance on literary embellishments, and the

[164] An epic from Hindu mythology ascribed to the ancient sage Vyasa and believed to have been composed between 400 BCE and 200 CE.

conundrum to manoeuvre the English language to suit the needs of the Indian stage and stories, are some of the primary reasons that delayed the establishment of Indian English theatre as a tradition. It was only in the last two decades of the twentieth century that circumstances changed with the emergence of a new group of playwrights, including Mahesh Dattani, who was to create the transitional space for Indian English drama. In the following section, we study Dattani in the context of the aforementioned reasons for the stunted growth of Indian English drama as a performative genre. We explore the difference between Dattani's approach to theatre and his predecessors and argue for Dattani's liminal position between the previous generation of Indian English playwrights and the present scenario when his plays have been performed hundreds of times all across the world.

4.1.3 The Women Playwrights, Directors, and the Emergence of Mahesh Dattani: The Change-makers of the 1980s and 90s.

With the turn of the decade of the 1980s emerged a group of women playwrights and directors that changed the critics' perception of Indian English drama. Women directors[165] such as Kirti Jain, Maya Rao, Anamika Haksar, and Amal Allana, brought out impressive productions inspired by the agendas of IPTA. Also, playwrights such as Manjula Padmanabhan (1953–), Uma Parameswaran (1938–), Poile Sengupta (1948–), and Dina Mehta (1961–) presented the stories of women from a perspective that was not achievable by their male peers. Their plays, such as *Lights Out* (1984), *Harvest* (1997) by Padmanabhan, and *Sons Must Die* (1997) by Parmeswaran, presented to the audience immediate social issues from a feminine perspective. Vasudha Dalmia presents the context of their emergence in her book *Poetics, Plays, and Performances* (2005). She notes:

> …the space created by the radical feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s was coming, at least partially, to be occupied by the firebrand rhetoric of Right Wing Hindu women ideologues, who assimilated the emancipatory idiom under the old heads of 'wife' and 'mother,' allowing

[165] See Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays and Performances*, pp. 315-316.

> for some agency that could, however, only move within the well-defined parameters of Hindutva. (313)

These playwrights' works were counter to the "firebrand rhetoric" and exposed the ambiguity involved with the expected gender roles and the advertised "emancipatory idioms" (313). Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning* serves as a prime example of a playwright's commitment to society and social reform. The play, as its subject, chooses the theme of dowry deaths, which, unfortunately, are still a reality in some parts of the country. The protagonist, Malini, represents the new open-minded woman who challenges the orthodox social norms that burden women to uphold the family's dignity and honour while giving a free pass to men. Mehta dedicates the play to "[a]ll the angry young women [w]ho can be whatever they choose to be" (5). The play also challenges the taboo topic of male sexual health cocooned with sacrosanctity. Malini questions the premises of her sister Laxmi's death as a suicide because she was childless even after five years of marriage.

> Malini: […] I would have known nothing but for Tarla –
>
> Anil: Who has a sweet tooth for gossip. As the only neighbour on the scene of the tragedy her testimony was vital, but she did not have much to say at the inquest today.
>
> Malini: Perhaps she was scared to! She knew how they picked on Laxmi because in the five years there had been no children – as if Vinod couldn't be at fault there […] (Mehta 16–17)

Malini's suspicions are later confirmed in the play when Vinod's younger brother reveals that he has been getting various kinds of treatments to cure his impotency. Laxmi's submission to her husband's demands to participate in asinine ordeals and rituals to cure her barrenness proves Judith Butler's assertion accurate when she says that;

> "[…] gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts […] and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (519).

Thus, Laxmi's performative acts of submissiveness and Vinod's macho/hyper-masculinity[166] create a chain of events pushing Laxmi to commit suicide.

A similar gaze towards patriarchal oppression is taken by Padmanabhan in her *Lights Out*, which presents in an elite upper-middle-class Mumbai setting, the indifference of this class towards women's issues. By weaving together several issues, such as sexual violence against women, the inaction of people who witness such violence, and the different reactions of men and women to such grotesque crimes, Padmanabhan questions the silence of Indian upper-middle-class over gender bias and subjugation in the urban socio-cultural milieu. The different reactions of the protagonist, Leela, and her husband, Bhasker, to a heinous crime on the terrace of a nearby building present evidence of how denial functions as a goto method of dealing with crimes against women. As Padmanabhan writes:

> LEELA: (*Struggling in his half embrace*) But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and I can't push them out! (*Stops Struggling*) If only they didn't make such a racket, I wouldn't mind so much! (*pause during which Bhasker rocks her gently*) Why do they have to do it here? Why can't they go somewhere else?
>
> BHASKER: Leela, the thing to do is not let them disturb you like this. Pretend they're not there …
>
> LEELA: But how? I can't help hearing them! They're so – so loud! And rude! How can I make myself deaf just for them! (10)

Padmanabhan makes a declaration through slides in the end that states, "[t]his play is based on an eyewitness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982 […] The characters are fictional. The incident is a fact" (63). The play ends with the continuation of the crime while Bhasker and his friend, Mohan, remain indifferent to it, and the women, Leela and Mohan's wife, Naina, remain perturbed. None of the

[166] See Sanjay Srivastava's *Masculinity Studies and Feminism: Othering the Self* (2015).

characters decides to act and lodge a complaint regarding the crime, which in turn portrays the real-life scenario of indifference and denial towards such issues.

Besides the pressing social themes, these plays also presented Padmanabhan and Mehta's commitment to the stage and were accompanied by such stage directions that marked the beginning of a transitional phase in the history of Indian English dramaturgy. The opening stage directions of *Lights Out* provide credible evidence for this argument:

> *The Curtain rises to reveal the drawing-dining area of a sixth-floor apartment in a building in Bombay. The décor is unremarkably upper middle class. The focal point of the space is a large window to the rear, its curtains drawn back. Through it, the audience can see the sky and the rooftop of the neighbouring building, as yet unpainted. During the first scene, the sky wanes from dusk into night.*
>
> *A sofa and two armchairs are in the foreground, partially obscuring the dining table which occupies the area between the drawing room and the window. An area divides the two spaces. The kitchen and main entrance to the flat are at stage left. At stage right is the entrance to the master bedroom.*
>
> *Only the foreground is lit up as FRIEDA dusts items on the room-divider-cum-bar. The sound of the front door being opened is heard. FRIEDA straightens up and moves towards the kitchen as BHASKER enters. He makes straight for the sofa and prepares to settle down with his newspaper.* (Padmanabhan 4)

These stage directions, when read in the context of Indian English drama, appear innovative and respectful of the modern traditions of Indian drama. They appear more in line with the realist generation of playwrights, such as Mohan Rakesh in Hindi and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi. Similarly, Mehta, states in her opening directions for *Brides*, that the two-act play requires multiple acting areas;

> "Altogether five separate acting areas are needed, designed sparingly and with a degree of flexibility, and independent of each other as far as the lighting is concerned. Act one requires only one change of scene, Act

> Two requires four. Both the Acts have the major acting area in common, where four of the total of eight scenes are enacted." (8)

In their plays, Mehta and Padmanabhan successfully achieve the balance between the play text and performance, found missing in the previous generations of playwrights. Besides the social function of their plays, they also focused on their stageability and thus started a new stream of Indian English drama that Dattani developed and perfected in his plays.

4.2. The Liminal Reformer: Retracing Mahesh Dattani In His Theatrical Context.

The over-arching view of the trajectory of Indian drama in English in the previous sections makes it evident that it was only during the 1980s and 1990s, that the playwrights began to consider seriously the stage-worthiness of their plays. Stage directions describing realist scenes were incorporated, and after a gap of two decades after Gieve Patel's *Princess* was produced, the Indian English playwrights managed to initiate a performative tradition. Mahesh Dattani's emergence with the production of his first play, *Where There is a Will,* in 1988, reified the paradigmatic shift in Indian English drama. His dramaturgy appears as a careful amalgamation of the best of all theatrical traditions in India. He picked up the threads created by Padmanabhan and Mehta and advanced them with his plays that were, in Schechnerian terms, scripts written for theatre. Not only did Dattani depart from the preceding generations of playwrights, but his dramaturgy, particularly, his stagecraft, was also different from his contemporaries. While Padmanabhan and Mehta used realistic sets in their plays, Dattani, on the contrary, experimented with his stage design and constructed spaces that included a portrayal of multiple timelines on a single stage. In between these spaces, he also created a space where all those timelines met and where most of the action was performed. In the following sections, we shall examine Dattani's distinct methods of stagecraft and why Aparna Dharwadker calls it "inventive dramaturgy" (27). Through his plays, we shall study why Dattani, despite extending the tradition initiated by Padmanabhan and Mehta, is renowned as the pioneer of reformist drama in English.

4.2.1 The Liminal Subjects: The Urban-middle-class and its Relationship With Conflicts in Dattani's Plays.

We have observed in the overall trajectory of modern Indian theatre that it was an inherently urban theatre whose prime subject was the urban middle class. We have also established in the first chapter the liminality associated with the middle class around independence through the plays of Mohan Rakesh and using markers defined by Sara Dickey in her *Living Class in Urban India* (2016). In the present chapter, as well, we shall observe the urban middle class around Indian liberalization through Dickey's lens. Interestingly, Dickey also began conducting her study of the Indian middle class around 1985, and during her subsequent visits between 1987 and 1989, followed by other visits in 1991–1992, and then in 2011, she observed the middle-class change/evolve considerably in India.

All of Dattani's plays, including *Where There is a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Final Solutions, and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai,* are stories of the families of the urban middle-class, which Dickey defines as a "[…] position of social visibility and worth, a stage on which to be judged by critical spectators, and a site that simultaneously avoids, buffers, and is caught between behavioral extremes" (121). Dattani's reasons for choosing to write about the middle class are both lucid and genuine. He stated in his interview with Erin B. Mee:

> I think one has to be true to one's own for any art (drama or literature). I think one has to be true to one's own environment. Even if I attempted writing a play about the angst of rural Indian society, it wouldn't ring true, it would be an outsider's view-I could only hope to environment. Even if I attempted writing a play about the angst of rural Indian society, it wouldn't ring true, it would be an outsider's view-I could only hope to evoke sympathy, but never to really be a part of that unless I spend a lot of time evoke sympathy, but never to really be a part of that unless I spend a lot of time there. I think there are enough issues and challenges in urban Indian society (the there. I think there are enough issues and challenges in urban Indian society (the milieu I am a part of) and these automatically form the content of my work. (19)

Dattani's upbringing in the city of Bangalore, combined with his experiences of theatre with the Little Theatre Group, constitute his urban socio-cultural context – the reason for his affinity to the urban middle-class. His characters are all from the upper-middle-class bracket of society, in which, according to Dickey, "[…] identities are performed, continually by individuals" (6). As observed in the previous section with the plays of Padmanabhan and Mehta, the performance of this identity has an identical relationship with the latent issues pervading this section of society. It is not by chance that both Rakesh and Dattani turn their gaze to the complex and often deteriorating familial bonds of the middle-class society in India, from which stem the internal, interpersonal, and social conflicts in their plays. As Dickey notes, this is the most critically judged section of society – a section that appears a misfit at both the upper and lower echelons of society and hence adheres to liminal identities[167] –, and performs above or below their social position before outsiders/spectators depending on the class of the spectator. A precise example would be Savitri from *Adhe Adhure*, who, on the occasion of her boss Singhania's visit, makes it a priority to offer tea and snacks despite him boasting his class identity and belittling her family. Similarly, Dickey's friend in Madurai, Lakshmi, performed above her position to present herself as a good host. Dickey reminisces that "Lakshmi did not remember the Britannia biscuits as I did, I had recognized the material cost of their hospitality in those days, yet still I hadn't realized that her family had too little to eat […] and despite their hunger, Lakshmi's family was working hard to perform as not-poor people" (6). However, in the context of Dattani's plays, we explore more the conflicts and social issues hidden behind the performance of class identities and how they create liminal phases for the characters.

To explore further the relationship between the middle class and the social issues presented in Dattani's plays, we need to study the

[167] In terms of their "distan[ce] from wealth on the one hand and from mere survival or subsistence from the other ("wealth" and "subsistence", being, however, relative terms) […]" (Dickey 127).

structure of the families in his plays in which one person, often the elderly (father), has complete control over the finances of the house. In *Where There is a Will*, he presents the family of a businessman, Hasmukh Mehta, who, at the beginning of the play, belongs to the upper stratum of the middle-class society. He then writes a will that forbids the family to inherit his wealth after his death and instead, transfers it to his mistress. In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani presents another similar family with a rich father, Amritlal Parekh and his son, Jairaj, who is married to Ratna and is dependent on his father. In *Final Solutions* too, Ramnik Gandhi's family business is built by burning their neighbour's shop in the name of communal violence. The conflict in these plays is multi-modal and often stems from what Aparna Dharwadker has called "the edifice of home" (268), in which the playwright "forges distinctive connections between the private world of the family as an emotional and psychological entity and the public world of social and political action" (270). To sum up, the overarching pattern of familial structure in Dattani's plays comprises a first-generation man who controls all the finances and disposes or tries to dispose of anyone who does not comply. In *Final Solutions,* though, we see in Ramnik Gandhi, not an autocrat but a pseudo-liberal and self-proclaimed progressive who himself is the perpetrator of violence and then, in a fit of guilt, tries to atone for his and his father's deeds by offering jobs to the two Muslim men.

We also do not need to establish these families as middle-class as they justify Dickey's parameters of economic, social, and educational positions to qualify as middle-class. What becomes fascinating is their performance as a family once their class status is challenged. Hasmukh's family, initially appalled at his decision to let her mistress inherit his fortune, comes to terms with the realization that Hasmukh wants to control their lives even in death. Immediately following is the act of denial of both Hasmukh's will and the fact that he had a mistress outside his marriage. Dattani writes:

> AJIT: I don't blame mummy at all, aunty. This was a shock . . . Yes. Yes. I'm telling you. Father has formed a trust. A charitable trust.

The Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust. (Pause. Takes a deep breath.) All his property, finances, shares—he has donated to the trust.

SONAL (punctuating Ajit's conversation with sobs): Including the house we are living in.

AJIT: We will all get a regular allowance from this trust, Mummy too.

[…]

AJIT: And that's not all, aunty. Do you know who the trustee is? Of course you don't! Well I'll tell you. And if you use cologne water to treat shock, you had better keep a lot of it handy.

SONAL: Don't tell her, Aju. It will kill her!

AJIT: Why not? We survived. Aunty, listen . . .

SONAL: No, Aju! Minal, are you listening? It is unimportant who the trustee is. You don't want to know, do you? . . . What? You don't want to know? (Sighs.) All right Aju, tell her.

AJIT: Well, listen. The . . . Hello? Are you there? Hello. Can you hear me? (Louder.) Now can you hear me? (Screaming.) Is this loud enough? . . . Good. The trustee for the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust is Kiran Jhaveri . . . Who is he? Kiran Jhaveri is not a who-is he, she's a who-is-she . . . Yes. Yes. She's a marketing executive turned company director—and my late father's mistress. (Pause.) Yes. And . . . (*Collected Plays*[168] 557–558)

Similarly, in *Dance Like a Man*, the conflict between Amritlal[169] and Jairaj, due to the latter's choice of Bharatnatyam as a profession, pushes Jairaj to leave his father's house and take shelter with his wife in her uncle's house. What follows is her uncle's stupefying demand from Ratna for sexual favours. Usually, scholars such as Indranee Ghosh have termed Ratna's uncle's behaviour as stemming from a "feudal morality" (273) about gender roles and prejudices against women performers, who are objectified and harassed even today. However, what is often neglected is the couple's class status outside Amritlal's house. Without

[168] Hence forth referred to as *C P.*
[169] Amritlal is Jairaj's father.

Amritlal's finances, they plummet to the lower class of the seventy-year-old Chenni Amma, who, even in such an old age, is considered a prostitute by Amritlal. Jairaj states it accurately when he says:

> JAIRAJ: You brought it up. What did you say? I stopped being a man for you because we couldn't survive on our own . . .
>
> […]
>
> RATNA: Don't say it!
>
> JAIRAJ: Look the other way while your uncle . . .
>
> RATNA: Please!
>
> JAIRAJ: While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter? Would you have preferred that? Do you think your uncle made such interesting proposals to all his nieces? No! That would be a great sin. But you were different. You were meant for entertainment. Of what kind was a minor detail. So what was wrong with going back to my father? At least my father didn't make . . . (*C P* 475–76)

Their return to Amritlal's house, on the one hand, saves their dignity and, on the other, returns them to the respected middle-class structure of society.

An analogy to Dattani's representation of the middle class can be drawn from Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure*, in which class differences and their influences on the family are very accurately presented. Mahendranath's absence whenever his wife's boss visits, Savitri's disliking of her husband's friend Juneja, and the son's feeling of inferiority before Singhania, all these issues can be traced back to class differences among the middle-class characters. Similarly, in Dattani's plays too, the class structure and the inherent liminality play a significant role in the power dynamics within the family. As mentioned above, the finances of these families are controlled primarily by the patriarchal father/head. Both Hasmukh Mehta and Amritlal substantiate this pattern. What follows is a tussle for control over the lives of other characters, which in turn results in severe interpersonal conflicts. Almost all of his

plays concur with this assertion and reflect, in general, the latent allegiance of the so-called urban society to orthodoxy and conservatism.

The tripartite relationship between the middle-class family, liminality, and the consequent social issues, having been established, in the next section, I explore Dattani's stagecraft – arguably, the most significant reason for labelling him as the liminal reformer of Indian English drama.

4.2.2 Liminality and the Stage: Dattani as the Emancipator of Indian English Drama.

Aparna Dharwadker's assertion that Dattani was "perhaps the first to challenge effectively the assumption that Indian drama written in English represents a disjunction between language and sensibility […]" (83), leads us to an immediate question, viz. that once, the equations between language and the Indian sensibilities were taken care of, what led to Dattani being renowned as the "emancipator" of Indian drama in English? Dharwadker again provides the answer by pointing us to Dattani's "inventive dramaturgy", which "projects several domestic spaces simultaneously, or several spaces among which home is central" (277). This section traces the source of Dattani's "inventive dramaturgy" that emerges from his innovative and experimental stage directions. Arguably, the most significant study on his stagecraft comes from Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri's chapter titled *Reading the Stage: The Self-Reflexivity of the Texts*[170]. Nevertheless, Chaudhuri, while discussing the ontological paradigms of Dattani's text, its performativity, and its significance in accurately projecting social issues, stops short of examining Dattani's stage construction as the source of his innovation. In this section, I extend her arguments about the interconnectedness of text and performance[171] in Dattani's plays and argue that his innovative stage directions add a liminal dimension to his texts, which further helps in emphasising the social issues.

[170] See Chapter 5 in Chaudhuri's *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*, pp. 98–111.
[171] In Schechner's terms.

Dattani's directions create separate spaces to denote different timelines simultaneously. Among these spaces, Dattani deliberately allocates a space which belongs to neither of the timelines and acts as the central space for most of the action, often resulting in a tug-of-war between the contrasting perspectives of the characters that culminate with Dattani's signature 'no resolution' denouement. Recalling Thomassen's definition of liminality as "any 'betwixt and between' situation or object, any in-between place or moment […]" that exists "between two structured world views or institutional arrangements" (7) when applied to Dattani's stage directions, yield a liminal space that can be spatial, temporal, and situational and results in interpersonal conflicts. The conflicts of characters Amritlal, Jairaj, and Ratna in Dance Like a Man (1988) stem from this liminal space that echoes both their past experiences and present conundrums.

The pattern that emerges from such representations in Dattani's plays is his creation of an inimitable space through extravagant stage construction. John McRae writes in his introduction to *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) that "Mahesh Dattani is always adventurous in his ways of using the theatrical space at his disposal: multiple levels, breaking the bounds of the proscenium, wondrously inventive use of lighting to give height, breadth, and depth […]." (*Collected Plays*, 60). The "crescent-shaped ramp" and the "room with a roll top desk" represent the decades of the 1940s and the 1980s in *Final Solutions,* the "non-realistic set" functioning to immediately suspend the characters in a "shoonya [nothingness] "to confront their inner thoughts" (64) in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), and the space between the modern living rooms, kitchen, and the " at least forty years old" (448) furniture in *Dance Like a Man*; are all a salient characteristic of his stagecraft that play a pivotal role in highlighting the conflicts presented. Another subtextual pattern that can be observed is that all these extravagant spaces are liminal. They create a "peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters […] in which authority in any form is questioned […]" (Thomassen 1). His stage involves multiple sections

and levels. Both in *Final Solutions* and *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai,* his stage is divided into separate areas and levels that perform diverse functions, ranging from suspending characters in a "shoonya" (nothingness) to confronting their inner thoughts as in *Muggy Night* and to reflect the perspectives and positions of the characters within the story as in *Final Solutions.* Dattani, in his stage description for *Muggy Night,* notes;

> *The stage is divided into three acting areas. The first is a small flat, beautifully done in 'ethnic chic' fashion […]. The windows overlook the Mumbai skyline and act literally as a window to the city with its glittering lights […].*
>
> *The second area, a completely non-realistic set comprising three levels, is black and expansive. Characters in this area are immediately suspended in a 'shoonya' where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts.*
>
> *Below this is Kamlesh's bedroom. The bedroom is realistic, but hidden behind a gauze wall, giving it some mystery and secrecy.* (*C P* 64)

While appearing complex and profound in the description, the reconstruction of such a division of stage becomes challenging for other directors. Besides the realistic living room and the bedroom, Dattani also describes a "non-realistic" set used to force the characters to "confront their inner thoughts" (64). It is spaces such as these that define transition within the characters in the story in Dattani's plays.

Similar contrasts can be observed in his stage directions in the text of *Final Solutions* (1993) and its stage production in translation by Delhi-based director Arvind Gaur. Dattani's stage construction in *Final Solutions* involves multiple levels and an allocation of different spaces of the same stage to different periods, akin to that in *Dance Like a Man.* Dattani notes in the stage directions;

> *The stage is dominated by a horse-shoe or crescent-shaped ramp, with the end sloping to the stage level. Most of the actions of the Mob/Chorus take place on the ramp […].*

> *Within the confines of the ramp is a structure suggesting the house of the Gandhis with just wooden blocks for furniture. However, upstage, perhaps on an elevation, is a detailed kitchen and a puja room.*
>
> *On another level is a room with a roll-top desk and an oil lamp converted to an electric one, suggesting that the period is the late 1940s. This belongs to the young Daksha, who is in fact the grandmother, also sometimes seen as a girl of fifteen. There are several instances when Hardika, the grandmother, and Daksha, the young bride, are on this level at the same time, although they are the same person. Hardika should be positioned and lit in such a way that the entire action of the play is seen through her eyes.* (*C P* 193)

Dattani, through his stage directions, presents a vivid distinction between the past and the present perspectives on stage by dividing the stage into multiple levels. The stage directions also establish the different periods of time on a single stage, from the 1940s to "after forty years." However, the same distinction in Asmita Theatre's production under Gaur's direction is achieved by emphasizing furniture and different costume designs for Daksha and Hardika. Gaur takes a more minimalist approach to stage design than Dubey for *Dance Like a Man*. Nevertheless, both these veteran directors succeed in creating an effect similar to Dattani's grand stage directions.

Dattani's stage directions complement the dialogues and provide the readers with necessary details about the story that the audience is unaware of. His play text transcends the domain of text into a liminal space between 'Drama' and 'Performance'. Richard Schechner calls this space the 'Script' (7) that informs the readers of the details that are not usually available to the audience.

Thus, in Dattani's plays, liminality manifests as a multi-modal "spatial" (*Thomassen* 91) dimension. The space of the living room where most of the action takes place is liminal, holding remnants of both the past and the present. Liminality also appears as a "temporal" (89) concept in the play as the characters (Ratna and Jairaj) are seen trapped between their present and their traumatic memories of the past. A perusal of the issues thus far yields that the conflicts presented in the play are

all in relation to space and time. The conflict between Amritlal and Jairaj is represented through their respective orthodox and modern perspectives on *Bharatnatyam* as a profession, as well as through the physical space in the house that includes a modern living room and an old-fashioned dance practice hall. In most of his plays, Dattani deliberately crafts the living room as a liminal space. In *Final Solutions,* he uses it to present the conflict between two generations and between extremist and liberal views on religion and society. In *Where There Is a Will,* the liminal space is presented between life and death and through the breaking of the fourth wall by the ghost of the central character, Hasmukh Mehta, who intermittently transitions from a character to a narrator. Similarly, in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai,* Dattani creates a separate level to place the characters into nothingness – a liminal void. In the following sections, we study the existence of liminal spaces and the ensuing conflicts in Dattani's play through his stage directions.

Dattani and his contemporaries (as mentioned before) ushered the tradition of Indian English Drama in a novel era by keeping at the core the idea of what Richard Schechner has called 'Performance.' An overarching observation of the traditions mentioned above informs that approaching social reform through conflicts generated from liminality (both spatial and temporal) is a rare method applied by very few playwrights, such as Rakesh, Tanvir, and Dattani. In the following section, we study Dattani's application of multi-dimensional spaces and the implied liminality to appeal for social reform.

4.2.3 The Invisible Issues: Mahesh Dattani as a Social Reformer in *Dance Like a Man*

Dattani's plays present a rendition of urban middle-class families caught in the conflict between two different times or eras. In this section I study the conflicts arising from these voids, often resulting in broader debates on tradition versus modernity. The pattern observed is about the characters being consistently trapped in a space and time that often stands in conflict with their past and present. This space-time is marked

vividly by Dattani's stage directions and manifests liminal characteristics. Liminality in *Dance Like a Man* is interspersed both as a spatial and a temporal concept. As a spatial concept, as we shall see in the following sections, liminality evolves as an intrinsic feature of the spaces where most of the action takes place, both in the play text and in stage productions by other directors. As a temporal concept, it circumscribes the lives of the characters, especially Amritlal, Ratna, and Jairaj, whose perspectives insinuate inter-generational conflict.

The spatial dimension of liminality is established through Dattani's use of the stage and stage directions to describe the mise-en-scene and to reveal the intricately layered plot. Notably, most of the action happens in the living room of Jairaj's/Amritlal Parekh's house, which has been deliberately constructed as a space between the old dance hall and the modern kitchen and living area. This space is liminal, as, on either side of it, are markers of the two generations – the old furniture and the modern living area. The play begins with Ibsenesque stage directions of the mise-en-scene and establishes itself, in Schechner's terms, as 'Drama' amplified in the play text through the process of "internal scening" (13). Dattani describes the setting in the first act of the play. He notes:

> *A dimly-lit room in an old-fashioned house in the heart of the city. Up centre is the entrance to the room—a huge arched doorway. There is a rather modern-looking rear panel behind the entrance with a telephone and a modern painting on it. The rear panel can be slid to reveal a garden. Upstage left, a dance practice hall. Upstage right, a staircase going to the bedrooms. Downstage right, exits into the kitchen. All the furniture in the room is at least forty years old.* (*C P* 448)

The stage direction for Ratna and Jairaj's house shows that Dattani's stage construction is complex, involving multiple levels. Also, the emphasis here lies on the old "furniture" (*C P* 448) in a modern living room. A distinct space is created through this direction, which holds potent markers of the past and the present, setting up for the conflicts. The stage directions also immediately establish that the family (presently headed by Ratna and Jairaj) has not completely moved away

from the vestiges of the customs set by Amritlal. A temporal dimension of liminality is also established through this stage direction that hints at Jairaj and his family's continual conflict with the authoritarian norms of his father. This temporal liminality is observed recurrently when Jairaj reminisces about Amritlal's autocratic figure. He emphasises this transition by deliberately attempting to renovate the house.

> VISWAS: Yes. That's why you have kept this portion unaltered, Almost like a shrine in memory of him.
>
> JAIRAJ: Rubbish. This was my world. I have kept it the same because it's mine. This is where I spent my childhood. I removed his memories. The gardens. […] When he died, I had everything removed. Pulled it all out from the roots […]
>
> VISWAS: And the shawl? Why have you kept his shawl? *(No reply.)* (*C P* 471)

Nilanjana Sen corroborates when she emphasises that "Amritlal remains a constant presence even after his death […] The play is haunted by the reverberated echo of the past—both as memory and the shaping mechanism of present […]" (279). The constant presence of Amritlal sets into motion a liminal "paradoxical state" in which Jairaj attempts the "destruction of [his father's] identity" and his influence (*Thomassen* 92) but instead ends up reinforcing it the more he tries to destroy. In the "spatial" (91) sense, Dattani's stage, especially that of the old dance hall in contrast to the modern drawing room, symbolizes a conflict between other characters and Amrit Lal's tyrannical presence throughout the play. Amritlal's domineering influence (both physically on stage and as an abstract memory) and Jairaj's consistent failure to negate the reverberations of his father's influence often insinuate what Gregory Bateson in his *Naven* (1936) calls "complementary schismogenesis" (176), which generates conflict by mandating one character to become more and more "assertive" and the other more and more "submissive" (177), thus resulting in an unfathomable divide. More than anything, the play presents a never-ending conflict between the two generations with binary opposite perspectives of gender roles and progressivism.

Amritlal's assertiveness is complemented by Jairaj's unwilling submission throughout the play. Beginning from their first argument regarding practising dance in the first act to Jairaj's impulsive decision to leave the house and then return to ask for shelter from Amritlal are all acts emerging from the conflict between the father's autocratic assertion and his son's unwilling submission.

In another stage production of the play by Lillete Dubey's[172] Prime Time Theatre[173], the same schismogenic effect was created by the hanging photograph of Amritlal and his belongings, such as the shawl. Interestingly, the space allocated as the dance hall in Dubey's production also represented this rift between generations. Amritlal's photo frame was always positioned above the space where Jairaj and Ratna performed. Amritlal's presence and absence are both markers of his suppressive ideology and the intergenerational conflict with Jairaj and Ratna that Dubey achieved through his photo frame and his on-stage presence. Dubey also recreated Dattani's symbolic allusions through what Siddharth Biswas has defined as "icons" that are representative "of what they signify" (9), such as the statue of the dancing Nataraja (the God of dance and drama in Indian mythology). Amritlal's (Anantha Mahadevan) photo frame above the cupboard where the statue of Nataraja is kept again signified the effect of Amritlal's suppression of the art of Bharatnatyam in his house. Similarly, the Shawl, in the context of Indian culture, represents authority. In the text, Jairaj reveals that Amritlal wore the Shawl even in summer, which signifies his unwillingness to let go of his control over his and his son's lives. This results in his conflict with his son as he tries to coercively enforce the norms from his past into his son's present. Dubey employed a similar technique to present this intergenerational conflict, and in most scenes, Amritlal (Mahadevan kept wearing the Shawl). Akin to Dattani's play-

[172] Lillete Dubey is a veteran actor, director, and thespian known for her works in Indian theatre. She is also renowned for her work in films such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Baghban* (2003), and *Zubeida* (2001).

[173] Performed at the Experimental Theatre at the National Centre for Performing Arts in Mumbai on January 29, 2023.

text, in Dubey's production as well, most of the action was performed in the liminal space between the living room and the dance hall.

Another significant illustration of liminality in the play is presented through Dattani's directions for the actors on stage. His directions necessitate that the characters of older Jairaj and Amritlal be performed by one actor and that of younger Jairaj and Viswas be performed by another. Thus, the character of Jairaj becomes a liminal vessel embodying the sensibilities and experiences of both the past and the present, as evident from the following stage direction:

> *Jairaj wears the shawl. He is immediately fixed in a spotlight. The music builds up until suddenly jathis or dance syllables being recited can be heard. The living room now changes into a lovely rose garden. Spotlight picks up a young man with his back to the audience, dancing. He wears dancing bells and a band around his waist. A young woman is sitting in front of him. The characters have all changed. Jairaj becomes the father, Amritlal Parekh. Viswas becomes Jairaj. Lata is now Ratna. Their ages remain the same as those of the previous characters they played. It is now the 1940s.* (*C P 479*)

The transitions presented through these stage directions signify the actor's transition from Amritlal to Jairaj and vice versa. These transitions throughout the play, even though highlighted vividly by the stage directions, appear in Thomassen's terms "[…] without clearly defined boundaries of space and time" (99). For an actor, it implies that they need to perform two fatherly characters (older Amritlal and older Jairaj), both vastly different from one another. Thus, even the actor's body becomes a liminal vessel traversing between two different time periods, which Mahadevan in Dubey's version performed with great depth. The liminal spaces created through the stage direction are a recurring feature in Dattani's plays. As mentioned earlier, *Final Solutions* includes a "crescent-shaped ramp" (*C P* 193) overarching the other spaces, including the living room and the bedrooms of Ramnik Gandhi and his family. Primarily used for the sequences performed by the mob, the ramp acts as a liminal space where the mob has no specific

religious identities and is only a fanatic mob. Dattani notes in his stage directions:

> […] There are five Hindu masks and five Muslim masks. The Mob/Chorus become the Chorus when they 'wear' either the Hindu or the Muslim masks. But when referred to individually, they remain Chorus 1, Chorus 2, etc. The players of the Mob/Chorus do not belong to any religion and ideally should wear black. (*C P 193*)

Dattani's technique of concealing the identities of the mob is employed by another director, Arvind Gaur, in his stage production of the play[174]. Gaur directs his mob to wear white shirts and black trousers throughout the play, which emphasizes their liminal identities and frantic behaviour in contrast to the more thoughtful and witty choruses. Significant to note here is the traversing identity of the mob in Dattani's text between that of the two choruses, which signifies the liminal state between what Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Joshua Edelman call "stable states" (33). Again, the actors playing the mob, similar to Ananath Mahadevan from Dubey's *Dance Like a Man*, are required to adhere to liminal identities and to switch between one and the other.

Arguably, the most significant manifestation of liminality as a temporal dimension in *Dance Like a Man* is observed in the transitions in the lives of the characters. From the individual to the familial and the social level, the play is replete with "moments" and "periods" (Thomassen 89) that mark the transition through interpersonal and intergenerational conflicts between the characters. The clash of the orthodox and progressive views of Amritlal and Jairaj results in such moments and episodes that change the course of their lives. Young Jairaj's heated argument with his father regarding pursuing Bharatnatyam as a profession, followed by his rebellious yet impulsive decision to leave his father's house with his wife, Ratna, in the first act, marks the transition into his "intense and extra-ordinary experience that rejects the dichotomies" (Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman 35) between the orthodox structured worlds of his father and Ratna's uncle who both

[174] See, Asmita Theatre, (2020), https://youtu.be/YydlveN65pc

believe that dance is "craft of a prostitute to show off her wares" (*C P* 470). Jairaj's departure from his home commences the "tripartite structure of the liminal" (Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman 36) experiences of Jairaj and Ratna. The only significant difference between Arnold Van Gennep's tripartite laws, which include the "rites of separation, rites of transition, and the rites of incorporation" (11) and the young couple's ordeal in the play is that their passage of incorporation does not elevate their status as observed in the neophytic rituals in whose context Gennep defined them. Theirs "is a strange combination of homelessness" (Thomassen 4) and momentary freedom that is usurped by another orthodox view of the art form. Dattani notes in the stage direction:

> *It is the 1940s. The younger Jairaj and Ratna are standing patiently while Amritlal censures them. There is a paper on the coffee table. It is two days after Jairaj and Ratna had left home. Evidently they have come back, defeated.* (*C P* 493)

To comprehend the context of this direction, we need to tackle, arguably, the most profound question that Dattani raises through the play, viz., what it means to be a *Man*? Is it the biological sex or, as Judith Butler calls it, "an identity constituted in time […] through stylized repetition of acts" (519)? One of the "acts of gender" (522) that societies across recorded history have deemed necessary for being a man is one's adherence to their words even in the face of extreme adversity. Ratna and Jairaj's argument in the first act emphasizes this conundrum accurately. Dattani notes:

> RATNA: You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours.
>
> JAIRAJ: Ratna! Don't . . .
>
> RATNA: You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house . . .
>
> JAIRAJ: For forty years you've been holding that against . . . (*C P* 466)

What makes the earlier question more problematic is the consequence of what the scenario would have been had Jairaj chosen to perform

masculinity by adhering to his whimsical oath. As evident from his response;

> JAIRAJ: Is that what you wanted me to do?
>
> RATNA: Don't say it!
>
> JAIRAJ: Look the other way while your uncle . . .
>
> […]
>
> JAIRAJ: While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter? Would you have preferred that? Do you think your uncle made such interesting proposals to all his nieces? No! That would be a great sin. But you were different. You were meant for entertainment. Of what kind was a minor detail. So what was wrong with going back to my father? At least my father didn't make […] (*C P* 476)

Jairaj's response to Ratna's allegations again shifts our attention to the liminality associated with gender identities. Amritlal questions Jairaj's dance teacher's identity as a man because "normal men don't wear [their] hair so long" and because he has also "noticed the way he [the dance teacher] walks" (484). Although Jairaj responds by stating that "[a]ll sadhus [saints and ascetics] have long hair" (484), that is not enough to convince Amritlal. According to him, anyone deviating from the straight-jacketed masculine behavior is not a man. Contrastingly, the other orthodox character, Ratna's uncle, deems the dancers as objects "meant for entertainment" (476), again negating their identities as women or men and treating them as prostitutes and eunuchs.

This conflict between the orthodox and the modern outlooks fuels the complementary schismogenesis between Amritlal and Jairaj. The former, in an attempt to subdue his son's ambition to become a dancer at all costs, crosses all boundaries and even pressures Ratna to help him make Jairaj a man. Jairaj, despite his hatred for his father's prejudices, keeps surrendering to his schemes unwillingly. Irrespective of agreeing to the couple's pursuing dance after they return, Amritlal has

no intention of letting Jairaj dance. As evident from his conversation with Ratna:

> RATNA: And Jairaj? You do want to prevent him from dancing, don't you? In spite of what you said.
>
> AMRITLAL: A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic.
>
> RATNA: Maybe we aren't 'progressive' enough.
>
> AMRITLAL: That isn't being progressive, that is . . . sick. (*C P* 495)

The effects of this schismogenesis between the father and the son create an unbridgeable void between them. Its influence extends to the third generation of Lata and Viswas, which drives home the point that Ratna and Jairaj have been unable to neutralize Amritlal's influence on their lives completely. Their lives still traverse the liminal space between the time when they returned to Amrtilal's house and the present in which they want to exert similar control over their daughter Lata's career as a dancer. The rites of transition, in their case, are only over when Dattani ends the play with the death of Ratna and Jairaj, and for them, "*[a]ll sense of time is abandoned"* (*CP* 518) while Lata and her husband Viswas are now the owners of their flat.

4.3 Conclusion: Dattani as a Liminal Reformist

The emergence of Mahesh Dattani during the late 1980s and the early 1990s led his tradition in a direction that had not been perceived to be associated with the genre of Indian plays in English. Despite the performance of plays in English going as far back as the mid to late nineteenth centuries in India in urban centres, such as Bombay and Calcutta, there was no considerable development till the late twentieth century of a performative tradition of Indian drama in English. The chapter studies Mahesh Dattani for his experiments with the form and content in English drama that pioneered the transition of his tradition into its present shape and form.

Unlike the other two playwrights in this study, Habib Tanvir and Mohan Rakesh, who were in close proximity to each other's traditions,

Dattani belongs to a different time period when India was preparing for the onset of globalisation. Nevertheless, even during the late 1980s and the 1990s, the English language was considered a colonial remnant. There existed a considerable chunk of criticism of Indian English playwrights, both from the critics for not being able to convey the sensibilities of the English-speaking population in English and also from the people who thought why did they need a colonial medium to convey the feelings of Indians. In this tug-of-war between the two dominant expressions of criticism, what suffered most was the tradition of Indian English drama, which despite being one of the earliest forms of literary drama, since the arrival of theatrical modernity[175] was considered a "lost cause" (De Souza 156) and was the most recent to evolve as a performative tradition.

Retracing these contexts, this chapter studies Dattani and his role in the evolution of Indian English as a performative tradition. In a similar framework to the other two playwrights, it explores Dattani's reformism from the dual perspectives of tradition and society. It argues for his liminal position between the multiple approaches to Indian English drama exemplified by playwrights such as T. P Kailasam, Nissim Ezekiel, and Gieve Patel. It also brings into context the absence of any tradition for these playwrights to rely upon and advance further the genre. What makes Dattani liminal with respect to these playwrights is his stagecraft, which is oriented to performance from the outset. The examination of the earlier generation of Indian English playwrights and their works informs that plays, such as T. P Kailasam's *The Purpose* (1944), Currimbhoy's *The Doldrummers* (1960), and Gieve Patel's *The Princess* (1970) were some of the plays that displayed some affinity towards performance. Barring these few examples, there are not many Indian plays in English that could be kept in the same category.

The study reports that Dattani's reformism of his tradition stems from his "betwixt and between" (Thomassen 7) position as a playwright-

[175] See Ananda Lal's *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings* (2019), 31.

director. His association with Little Theatre Group first, and then with his Play Pen, and also with other stalwart directors, such as Alyque Padamsee and Lilette Dubey, provided him the advantage to develop his theatre with a performative orientation. Arguably, the most striking point of his departure from his preceding generations was his stage directions, which created a liminal space for Dattani, where he further experimented with the form and the content of his plays. Thus, Indian English drama emerged as a thriving performative tradition.

The second part of the study, focusing on his reformist agendas for contemporary urban society, tests the application of liminality to his plays, such as *Dance Like a Man*. It reports that Dattani's utilisation of the spatial and temporal dimensions of liminality helps him create spaces such as "the crescent-shaped ramp" (*C P* 193), the elevated space to suspend the characters in a "*shoonya*" (64), as well as multiple timelines on a single stage. Besides the liminal spaces, Dattani also employs liminality in the choice of his subject – the middle class, which Sara Dickey defines as a class "caught between behavioural extremes" (112). Dattani's reformist questions target the urban middle class and their latent allegiance to conservatism and orthodoxy. Further, the study examines the utilisation of liminality and its dimensions in the play *Dance Like a Man. It reports* that Dattani integrates into all the significant elements of the play. It serves as a prime example of how Dattani represents social issues through interpersonal conflicts, often stemming from a space between opposite ideologies and beliefs. The play also challenges the established domains of identity and profession and, in turn, questions the self-proclaimed liberals and progressives by creating "unsettling" (Thomassen 1) situations "through the text and the plot, a hybridized state that emerges by both domination or subversion of tradition" (Mehta 101).

Mahesh Dattani's plays, including *Where There is Will, Dance Like a* Man, and Final *Solutions,* establish such points of departure from the preceding traditions of Indian English drama that challenge the label of dramatic literature. Arguably, his most significant contribution to the

domain of Indian English drama is not the issues he presents through his plays but his method of presenting them. His play texts, like that of Tanvir's impromptu performances, challenge at least the first two circles of Schechner's concepts of 'Drama' and 'Script' (7–8). To comprehend the relevance of his dramaturgy, we need not do much. Even a cursory glance at the event calendars of all the major theatre houses and companies in India, such as the NCPA[176] and Prithvi theatre, will reveal that Dattani is one of the most performed Indian playwrights and, arguably, the most performed playwright in English. His relevance also lies in the fact that he has created a blueprint, a model to look up to, for the future generation of playwrights who will not need to grope in the dark to compose plays for the stage. He is still active as a playwright and continues to serve as the bridge between the present and the past traditions of Indian English drama.

[176] National Center for Performing Arts in Mumbai.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Trendsetting Reformers of Modern Indian Drama

Indian theatre, in its present state, has transcended boundaries. It is now well-recognised across the globe, with several universities offering courses on the vast gamut of performance forms practised in different regions. Owing to the efforts of scholars such as Vasudha Dalmia, Aparna Dharwadker, and Diana Dimitrova, and playwrights such as the ones in this study, the diverse genre of Indian theatre has been able to contribute significantly to the field of theatre and performance studies. Since Sir William Jones's translation of *Abhigyanshakuntalam* as *Sacontala* or *The Fatal Ring* in 1789 as the formal introduction to Indian theatre, the tradition has proved to be a pandora's box offering innumerable forms of theatre and performance arts for scholars to study and examine.

Several studies on modern Indian theatre have reported the reformist agendas of various playwrights in various languages. Several scholars have also dedicated their works to studying playwrights, such as Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and their contemporaries individually. These studies define the paradigms of modern Indian theatre, which comprises various streams, such as the nationalist, historical-allegorical, psychological-realist, and cultural-traditionalist, which interact and respond to each other. A few questions arise: What were the points of departure that marked the differences between one stream and another? Were there any clear demarcations? Did a playwright who rejected a stream of methods from a stream of drama offer something different from the extant tradition? While the extant scholarship defines in great detail the characteristics of the various traditions, it falls short of acknowledging such playwrights and their works that went out of their traditions to initiate a new stream and, in turn, reform their traditions. Another significant aspect of post-independence Indian theatre missing from the studies is its response to social situations. While there are loud, polemical debates on the reaction

of the post-independence traditions to the influence of colonial culture on Indian theatre and its subjects, there is a noticeable silence on how the playwrights after independence contributed to the discourse on social reform.

Interestingly, a large proportion of the extant scholarship studies the taxonomies of Indian theatre (especially the Pre-independence traditions) from the perspective of anti-colonialism (Mee, Bhatia, Lal) or as part of a culture–tradition–modernity nexus (Dalmia, Dimitrova, Dharwadker). A void remains in terms of studies approaching the post-independence tradition of theatre not as a remnant of colonial influence or as a counter to this influence, but as a tradition of a series of experiments, deliberate departures, and discontinuities within the traditions. Dalmia and Dharwadker's works fill this void significantly. Dalmia deals with the Brechtian influence on Indian theatre. She studies the "streams" and generations of modern Indian theatre more for their implementation of Brechtian techniques than their post-colonial agendas. Dharwadker examines the tenets of modernism in Indian theatre. Then, she defines the inherent characteristics of modern Indian theatre and its thematic range, including historical and political symbolism, realism, and the melodramatic flamboyance of traditions such as the Parsi theatre. Similarly, Dimitrova's works focus primarily on the tradition of Hindi theatre during the pre and post-independence periods, and her illuminating analysis of the various schools of modern Hindi drama and their agendas, starting from Bhartendu Harishchandra, makes a substantial document in studying a complex tradition of theatre that evolved parallel to the freedom struggle. Amidst these focused and overarching studies on modern Indian theatre, there remains a gap to be filled by studies that explore the boundaries of these tightly knit traditions and the playwrights who bridge their fuzzy boundaries. This thesis takes up the challenge of achieving the same.

This thesis resulted from the hypothesis that the exact markers of these transitions in the paradigmatic structure of modern Indian theatre could be defined. If yes, what were these makers, and who were

the playwrights who instigated the change? How did the playwrights lead the transitions in their respective theatrical traditions, and how did their agendas for society resonate with contemporary social issues? Could these playwrights and their methods be termed liminal in the sense that they stood out from both their preceding generations and contemporaries?

To answer these questions, this thesis unifies the methodology of the three selected playwrights through the common strain of liminality. Fascinatingly, the three playwrights are individuals who emerged at a time when India as a nation was experiencing vast social and political changes. Rakesh and Tanvir emerged in the decades immediately following the event of Independence, and Dattani in the decade of Indian liberalisation. These transitional phases in the Indian socio-cultural milieu have significantly influenced their surroundings and are reflected in their plays. The thesis studies the playwrights as part of these liminal/transitional spaces, as defined by Arnold Van Gennep and consolidated by Arpad Szakolczai and Bjorn Thomassen. The concept of liminality is found permeating both their social and literary contexts. It emerges as a key framework for understanding their works written during the decades of vast socio-political turmoil. It helps us understand the space they have carved with their experimentations and their distinct position with respect to their respective traditions. The plays Rakesh's *Asadh Ka Ek Din*, *Lahron Ke Rajhans*, and *Adhe Adhure*; Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor*, and Mahesh Dattani's *Where There is a Will*, *Final Solutions*, and *Dance Like a Man* constitute the primary texts for this study. The secondary data is extrapolated from diverse sources, including the preface and introduction to these plays, the notes and assertions of the playwrights documented in the form of essays, correspondences, and interviews, and the critical analyses by scholars mentioned above.

The primary findings of this study are observed in the novel streams of theatre initiated by these playwrights. The thesis contests the idea that they were reformists in a unilateral sense and establishes their

experimentations with the form and content of their plays as credible evidence of the reformism of their respective traditions and society. The repositioning of their plays as reflections of contemporary society and genre-extending experiments creates a fresh perspective for studying these playwrights by problematising their works as emerging from their "immediate reality" (*Interview* 16). The thesis retraces the playwrights in the diverse streams of modern Indian theatre to examine their context as a key influence on their dramaturgical experiments.

The thesis further examines their departure from the methods of the preceding as well as their contemporaries, which in turn blurs the boundaries within these traditions. It relies on the limited yet immensely profound scholarship available on the post-independence traditions of modern Indian theatre in English. Its only point of departure from the extant scholarly corpus is that it neither generalises nor focuses only on one individual to make a case for the entire tradition of post-independence Indian theatre. It takes a very calculated approach to problematise the paradigmatic structure of the term reform and then invoke it in the dual context of the intricate trajectory of modern Indian theatre and contemporary society. The paradigmatic structure of Indian reformist theatre in the pre-independence period[177] can be understood in terms of its function, the subject of representation, and the approach to dramaturgy. The primary function in the early decades of modern Indian theatre was inherently socio-political and took significant inspiration from the works of social reformers,[178] including the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj. The subject of the plays during the mid and late-nineteenth century ranged from staunch criticism of the conservative norms to the oppressive regime of the colonial government. The first transition in the function of these plays could be traced back to the implementation of the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, which

[177] Referring to the early and mid-nineteenth century when modern Indian theatre is believed to have begun to shape under the influence of Western techniques. See Ananda Lal's introduction to his *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings* (2019),
[178] For further explanations on the nuances of reform and its types in that period, see Amiya P. Sen's edited volume *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India* (2003).

compelled the playwrights to switch to allegorical representations of contemporary socio-political scenarios. The introduction to the thesis explicates this trajectory of modern Indian theatre and the various connotations of the term reform beginning from the mid-nineteenth-century Bengali theatre. Relying on some of the earliest critical scholarship offering a historiographical survey of the agendas of theatre in Bengal, it retraces the function and significance of reformist playwriting at the first intersection of Bengali dramatists with European theatrical modernity. It studies the themes and agendas in plays such as Krishna Mohan Banerjea's *The Persecuted Or Dramatic Scenes, Illustrative of the Present State of the Hindoo* [Hindu] *Society and* Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei Ki Bale Shobhyata* (Is This Called Civilisation?) and reports that playwrights during this era used drama as a tool of social criticism to comment on the suppressive orthodox social norms governing a large chunk of the population. It was during this period that the Indian populace had its first encounter with the European techniques of stagecraft, such as the proscenium stage, sceneries, and backdrops. This encounter was reflected in the following streams of Indian theatre, which chose to awaken the nationalist sentiment of the masses as its agenda. Starting from Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan* (The Indigo Mirror, 1871), which dramatised the plight of the indigo farmers and whose stage productions led to the colonial government's framing of the Dramatic Performances Act, marking another paradigmatic shift in the trajectory of reformist drama. Arguably, the most recognised proponent of this stream was the celebrated Hindi playwright, commonly referred to as the father of modern Hindi literature – Bhartendu Harishchandra. His plays, such as *Bharat Durdasha* (1875), *Nildevi* (1881), and *Andher Nagari* (1882), symbolically addressed the state of affairs during the colonial regime. This tendency to allegorically address the plight of the nation through drama continued till the late 1930s with playwrights such as Jaishankar Prasad and Harekrishna Premi. Both these playwrights in their plays, such as *Skandagupta* (1928), *Dhruvswamini* (1933) by Prasad, and *Swarna Vihan* (1930) and *Shiva Sadhana* (1937) by Premi, harnessed the (semi-) mythological and

historical legends from Indian antiquity to appeal to the nationalist consciousness of people.

Parallel to these traditions was the repertoire of Parsi theatre companies that operated with agendas of entertainment and commercial enterprise. Companies such as Elphinstone Theatre Company and Balivala Victoria Theatrical Company were prominent names that toured different parts of the country as well as abroad[179]. Multilingualism, spectacle, music, dance, and melodrama were the key characteristics of Parsi theatre, and its productions did not pay much attention to other significant dramatic elements such as plot and characterisation. It was their indifference towards the literary sensibilities and towards establishing a dramatic tradition that drew the ire of Hindi dramatists such as Bhartendu Harishchandra, who wrote *Bandar Sabha* (1880), which was a parody of the famous Parsi play *Indar Sabha* (1853) by Agha Hasan Amanat. Harishchandra ridiculed the extravagance of Parsi theatre with his parody and departed from this contemporary tradition to establish a living, thriving performative tradition of theatre in Hindi. He established four theatre companies in Varanasi, Prayagraj (then Allahabad), and Kanpur to achieve this aim, but his efforts were short-lived as the following generations led by Jaishankar Prasad again broke away and chose to revitalise Indian antiquity through their plays.

This brief trajectory of modern reformist drama in India, starting from the mid-nineteenth-century Bengal, converged to a point during the decades around independence, where realism was the key operator to present all kinds of problems. Besides Mohan Rakesh, the Marathi playwrights Mahesh Elkunchwar and Vijay Tendulkar were prominent names in Indian theatre who chose realism as their go-to method for social reform. Subsequent experimentations in Indian theatre showed a decline in interest in realism and the associated austerity of dramatic productions. Institutions such as the National School of Drama and

[179] Companies such as the Balivala Victoria Theatrical Company travelled to England around 1883.

Sangeet Natak Akademi began advocating for a fresh approach to dramaturgy, citing realism as a result of colonial influence on Indian dramatists.

During the decades around independence (starting from the late 1930s to the late 1960s), Another significant shift in the paradigmatic structure emerged with the first-generation realist playwrights, who wrote in the wake of "Ibsenite realism" (Dharwadker 272). Playwrights such as Lakshmi Narayan Mishra, Upendranath Ashk, and Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Srivastava pioneered this shift in the reformist paradigms by rejecting the function and purpose of drama as propagated by Harishchandra and Prasad. They sketched realistic characters like Anjo Didi (from *Anjo Didi*) and Stree (from *Straik*) to present contemporary social issues permeating the lives of women. Their reformism was based on creating an alternate reality by enfranchising their women characters who operated of their own free will. Their model of reformist drama created tailor-made solutions for their readers and audiences, which required to be emulated to achieve social reform. The realist school of Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar, despite its trenchant appeals for social reform, was slowly marginalised in the canon of modern Indian theatre owing to its radical reformist agendas, which opposed the orthodox social norms.

The realist school achieved sophistication in the works of Rakesh and Tendulkar, for whom drama was meant to be rooted in one's "surrounding reality" (*Self-Portrait* 12). Especially for Rakesh, the primary function of drama was to "recapture" and present reality and not to "fabricate" anything around it. His plays reflected the confluence of all the preceding generations, only to depart from them in terms of dramaturgical experimentations. Bhartendu's symbolism, Prasad's (semi-) historical stories, and Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar's realism were all present in Rakesh's plays to varying degrees. Fascinatingly, his experiments resulting from the combination of all these methods also created his point of departure from these preceding traditions. He turned Harishchandra's symbolism into a more focused study of characters as

complex individuals. Instead of using them as allegories for the plight of the oppressed nation, he presented the frustrations of contemporary individuals resulting from the state of the nation and society. Prasad's historical narratives were transformed into demi-historical stories to the degree that only the names of the characters resembled their historical counterparts. Rakesh's stories, settings, and locale were anachronistic to the historical references and projected a sense of temporal liminality (see Thomassen 89), situated in a time that never appeared too far from the audience's temporality and, at the same time, projected the distant past through its settings. Similarly, Rakesh experimented with Ashk and Bhuvaneshwar's realist methods only to refine his presentations of reality into what he called "immediate reality" (*Interview* 23). He also departed from their reformist agendas, which included characters completely doing away with suppressive orthodox norms in the manner the playwrights presented.

Rakesh's departure was not unidirectional; he not only broke away from the methods of his preceding generations but also those of his contemporaries, such as Tendulkar. His realism vis-à-vis Tendulkar was much more experimental and required an in-depth application of liminality to understand the schematics of his first two plays. Rakesh's concept of immediate reality problematised the schematics of reform as, unlike his senior contemporaries, he never provided solutions to the predicaments of his characters and, in doing so, encouraged the readers and audiences to find their own solutions.

Throughout these trajectories and the playwrights mentioned above, reform remains the keyword here as it can mean both changes from one set of values to another or transition from something archaic to new. Arguably, the most significant paradigmatic change in modern Indian theatre was observed with the playwrights who rejected the "realist vogue" (Dalmia 119) to search for a new form of Indian theatre that accommodated both the urban and the rural methods of theatre. Habib Tanvir in Chhattisgarhi pioneered this transition in their approach to dramaturgy as well as in the function and purpose of theatre. This

transition was termed the "theatre of roots" by Suresh Awasthi. His plays, such as *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor,* redefined all the constituent elements of the foundational paradigms of modern Indian theatre, including the method of composition, the standardisation of language, and the function of plays. Tanvir's playwriting never included the act of writing a dramatic text. Instead, he extracted a rudimentary story from the gamut of folklore and stitched together several short impromptu performances by his rural ensemble of Nacha actors and musicians to flesh out an entire plot. His plays were developed in the manner of folk performances through a community exercise that included feedback from all the constituent members of his troupe. Also, Hindi, as the accepted standard language of theatre during his era, was rejected by Tanvir, who first experimented with his rural ensemble to deliver the dialogues in Hindi but later reverted to their native tongue, Chhattisgarhi, which allowed them the freedom to express their emotions without being curtailed by the burden of language.

Another change in the reformist paradigms by Tanvir was seen in the function of his plays. Indian drama before Tanvir had significantly diverse agendas of social reform, including socio-political during the pre-independence traditions to psycho-social in the post-independence realist traditions. Tanvir broke away from such agendas in his plays and emphasised issues permeating the lives of the plebian populace. For instance, *Agra Bazar* dealt, through the poetry of Nazir, with the issue of elitist indifference towards the plebian concepts of life and art. Similarly, despite the universality of the themes of truth, justice, and greed, in *Charandas Chor*, the play certainly problematised and represented the social hierarchies from a carnivalesque[180] perspective. There was a definitive similarity in his agendas with the realist playwrights in that he also refrained from advocating any solutions to the issues presented in his plays.

[180] See Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World,* 10.

Amidst all these transitions in the different streams of modern Indian theatre, the stream of Indian English drama evolved later than the others. Despite the presence of stalwarts such as Nissim Ezekiel, T, P. Kailasam, and Gieve Patel, there were only occasional efforts that could qualify as serious attempts to change the extant paradigms of Indian drama in English. With the emergence of playwrights such as Manjula Padmanabhan, Uma Parameswaran, Dina Mehta, and Mahesh Dattani, Indian drama in English was liberated from the clutches of overt literariness and evolved into a thriving performative tradition as we know it today. Dattani, whose plays constitute a significant part of the repertoire of several theatre companies such as Prime Time[181], can be credited for single-handedly reviving the stream of Indian English drama. His contributions appear more lucid when studied in the context of the preceding generations of English playwrights. His liminal position is highlighted by his points of departure, which were created specifically by his approach to dramaturgy. Written more in accordance with the realist playwrights, his plays transcend and bind together the Schechnerian concepts of 'Drama', 'Script', 'Theatre' and 'Performance'. On the other hand, Dattani also departs from the methods of realist playwrights by integrating into his dramaturgy the use of liminal spaces such as the "crescent-shaped ramp"[182], the elevated space to suspend the characters in "shoonya"[183] [nothingness] and the separate space for an actor to play a ghost and yet not be able to communicate either to the other actors or the audience. He even creates physical liminal spaces to accommodate all the significant plot-altering events in the play and places them "betwixt and between" spaces that project different time periods. Arguably, the most significant implementation of liminality is found in his problematisation of identities. His characters do not conform to the straight-jacketed identities of gender, and neither do they conform to the expected gender roles. All these aspects of Dattani's plays make him an agent of transition in the tradition of Indian

[181] Led by the veteran actress, director, and thespian Lilette Dubey.
[182] In *Final Solutions*, see C P, p. 193.
[183] In *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* (*C P* 64).

English drama who has helped shape the theatrical canvas in India in its present form.

The thesis explores the ambiguousness of the term reform in the context of these playwrights and argues that they were liminal reformers who initiated a new stream of theatre by departing from their respective traditions. The most recurring limitation that I faced while carrying out this study was the exclusion of in-depth studies on playwrights from other regional traditions of modern Indian theatre. While playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar have been cursorily discussed in the context of Mohan Rakesh's experiments, a detailed study of his plays, inclusive of his critical writings in Marathi, would have helped open further nodes of investigation into the paradigmatic structures of Marathi theatre. Thankfully, studies such as those by Sharmishtha Saha exist that deal extensively with the two traditions[184] of theatre in the colonial era that this thesis misses out on, owing to the inability to study the contextual information in the original language. Besides Tendulkar, in-depth studies of Bengali playwrights such as Utpal Dutt[185], Badal Sircar[186], and other regional playwrights such as Ratan Thiyam and B. V. Karanth would also help immensely in retracing the nature of experimentations in post-independence Indian theatre.

Another area that this study misses out on is the vast body of Indian plays in translation. Scholars such as Vasudha Dalmia corroborate that during the 1960s and 70s, there was rarely a play in any of the regional Indian languages that was not translated into Hindi and later into English[187]. Every major play was translated and performed in Hindi owing to the metropolitan location of contemporary theatre companies. Girish Karnad wrote his plays in Kannada and translated

[184] The Bengali and Marathi traditions of Theatre.
[185] Utpal Dutt (1929–93) was a renowned Bengali playwright, actor and director known for his plays such as *Angar* (*Embers* 1959) and *Kallol* (1965).
[186] Another renowned Bengali playwright known for his plays such as *Ebong Indrajit* (*And Indrajit* 1963).
[187] A large chunk of plays in English came from translations.

them himself into English. Similarly, Tendulkar's plays, such as *Silence!,* were translated into both Hindi and English and had a diverse audience. Badal Sircar's *Ebong Indrajit* was also translated into several languages, including Hindi and English. Understanding the flow and intricate body politique of Indian plays in translation would enrich any study examining the liminal elements in modern traditions of theatre. Translations exist as the liminal modes of communication between the source language and the target audience, which adds further dimensions to the liminality of the plays. However, the magnitude of a project attempting to study the corpus of translated plays for their liminal attributes and impacts on their respective traditions is unfathomable to me presently. That is an idea best saved for the future.

Despite missing out on these fascinating threads of modern Indian theatre, this study achieves its purpose of refreshing the gaze with which we look at the stalwarts of contemporary Indian theatre. Relying on the monumental works by some of the most renowned theatre scholars, this thesis humbly reappraises the works of the three playwrights and argues that they should also be studied for their liminal stature and as the agents of change in the foundational paradigms of modern Indian theatre. These playwrights, despite being positioned across different decades after independence, emerge as three key conduits to comprehend the trajectory of post-independence Indian theatre. Rakesh, in hindsight, serves as the bridge between historical romanticism and "Ibsenite-realism" in two of his three plays. He also emerges as a liminal social reformer who neither believes in spoon-feeding the audience with tailor-made solutions to very complex interpersonal conflicts. Tanvir appears as the liminal agent between the hardcore "cultural nationalists" and the staunch leftists. His plays function as liminal zones for reshuffling the status quo between different sections of society for social reform. Similarly, Dattani allocates himself a liminal space between the dry closet-drama era of Indian English drama and the twenty-first-century Indian theatre that has transcended the boundaries of the nation.

To conclude, I can safely argue that what makes this study limited, viz., the broad sweeping application of liminality, also supports its open framework for further investigations of post-independence Indian theatre. Liminality as a theoretical concept shifts our attention to the discontinuities and fissures rather than the seamless and the organised. I can only guess the result if I were able to extend it to study the numerous folk forms and their marginalised status between the urban and the rural paradigms of theatre. If one could attempt to gaze beyond their vibrance, they would be able to see the inherent liminality in the forms themselves and their preservers, who, in order to keep their tradition alive, go through the continuous cycles of marginalisation.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources (Books).

Dattani, Mahesh, *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 2016.

- *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. 59–136. ([1998] 2016).
- *Final Solutions*. 189–264. ([1993] 2016).
- *Dance Like a Man*. 444–520. ([1989] 2016).
- *Where There is a Will*. 520–595. ([1988] 2016).

Dattani, Mahesh. *Final Solutions*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books. 2005.

"Mahesh Dattani Play Final Solutions directed by Arvind Gaur, presented by Asmita Theatre." YouTube, uploaded by Asmita Theatre, 2020, https://youtu.be/YydlveN65pc

Rakesh, Mohan. *Lahron Ke Rajhans*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2017.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Adhe Adhure*. New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan. 2017.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Asadh ka Ek Din*. New Delhi: Rajpal and Sons. 1997.

Tanvir, Habib. *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*. Kolkata: Seagull. 2018.

- *Agra Bazar*. 1–110. ([1954) 2018).
- *Charandas Chor*. 111–198. ([1975] 2018).

Tanvir, Habib. *Charandas Chor*. Trans. by Anjum Katyal. Kolkata: Seagull. 2016.

Tanvir, Habib. *Agra Bazar*. Delhi: Vani Prakashan: 2018.

Secondary Sources (Books)

Barba, Eugenio. *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House*. Trans. by Judy Barba, New York: Routledge. 2010.

Bateson, Gregory. *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View*. Stanford University Press, 1936.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World* trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington, Indiana University Press: 1984.

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, New York: The Mac Millan Company. 1913.

Bhatia, Nandi. *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press. 2009.

Biswas, Siddartha. *Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2017. E-book.

Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press. 2005.

- *The 'Invisible' Issues: Sexuality, Alternate Sexualities and Gender*. 47–74.
- *Reading the Stage: The Self-Reflexivity of the Texts.* 98–111.

Chakraborty, Kaustav, ed. *Indian Drama in English*. New Delhi: PHI Learning, 2011.

- Datta, Ketaki. *Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions: A Reconsideration*. 242–254. 2011.
- Banerjee, Samipendra. *History Through Modernity: An Analysis of Final Solutions*. 255–262. 2011.
- Ghosh, Indranee. *Form and Content in Dattani's Dance Like a Man*. 270–275. 2011.
- Sen, Nilanjana. *Dance Like a Man: Revisiting the Title*. 276–289. 2011.

Damodaran, Sumangala. *The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of Indian People's Theatre Association.* New Delhi: Tulika Books. 2017.

Dalmia, Vasudha. *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Indian Theatre.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Datta, Ketaki. *Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions: A Reconsideration* in Kaustav Chakraborty's Indian Drama in English, New Delhi: PHI Learning, 2014, e-book.

Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. *The Critique of Western Modernity in Post-Independence India* in *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader* by Nandi Bhatia (Pp. 42-56). New Delhi, Oxford University Press. 2009.

Dharwadker, Aparna. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947.* University of Iowa Press. 2005.

- *Orientalism, Cultural Nationalism, and the Erasure of the Present.* 127–164.
- *Realism and the Edifice of Home.* 268–309.
- *Alternative Stages: Antirealism, Gender, and Contemporary "Folk" Theatre.* 310–351.

Dickey Sara. *Living Class in Urban India*. Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Dimitrova, Diana. *The "Indian" Character of Modern Hindi Drama: Neo-Sanskritic, Pro-Western Naturalistic, or Nativistic Dramas?* in Theology and Literature: Rethinking Reader Responsibility, eds. Gaye Williams Ortiz and Clara A. B. Joseph. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Devy, G N. *Introduction to The Outcaste* by Sharankumar Limbale trans. from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Dewey, John. *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. New York: The Modern Library, 1922.

Dimitrova, Diana. *Gender, Religion, and Modern Hindi Drama*. London, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008, Microsoft Pdf reader e-book.

Dimitrova, Diana. *Hinduism and Hindi Theatre*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Dharwadker, Aparna. *One Day in the Season of Rain*. London, Penguin Books, 2015.

Donner, Henrike. *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life.* London: Routledge. 2011.

Ghosh, Manomohan. *The Natyasastra*. Calcutta (Kolkata): Asiatic Society of Bengal. 1951.

Jacobssan, Staffan, and Ghayur Alam. *Liberalisation and Industrial Development in the Third World: A Comparison of the Indian and the South Korean Engineering Industries*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.1994.

Kailasam, T. P. *The Purpose: A Playlet of Eklavya*. Bangalore: B.S Rama Rao. 1944.

Karnad, Girish. *This Life at Play: Memoirs*. Translated by Srinath Perur, Fourth Estate, 2021

Lal, Ananda. *Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings*. Jadavpur University Press. 2019.

Malick, Javed. *Diverse Pursuits: Essays on Drama and Theatre*. London, Routledge: 2021.

Mee, Erin B. *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Indian Stage*. London: Seagull Books. 2008.

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. New Delhi: Permanent Black. 2017.

Mehta, Dina. *Brides Are Not For Burning*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1993.

Menon, Jisha. *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Multani, Angelie. *Centering the Margins: Essays on the Plays of Mahesh Dattani*. New Delhi, Pencraft International. 2023.

Multani, Angelie, editor. *Final Solutions: Text and Criticism*. New Delhi, Pencraft International. 2023.

Multani, Angelie, editor. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi, Pencraft International. 2011.

- Multani, Angelie. *Introduction*. 11–34. 2011.
- Mehta, Gouri Nilakantan. *Dismembering Traditions within Postcolonial Contexts: A Retrospective look into Dance Like a Man*. 99–108. 2011.

Myles, Anita. *Contemporary Indian English Drama -An Overview*. Hardcover, New Delhi, Sarup Book Publishers Pvt Ltd. 2010.

Naik, M. K. and S. Mokashi-Punekar, editors, *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*. Madras (Chennai): Oxford University Press, 1977.

- De Souza, Eunice. *Some Recent Plays in English*. 156–64.
- Naik, M. K. *The Achievement of Indian Drama in English*. 180–194.

Nigam, R.L. 'Mohan Rakesh: A Study' in *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors* edited by Paul Jacob. New Delhi, Sangeet Natak Akademi Publication, 1989, Pp. 65-70, Microsoft Pdf reader e-book.

Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Lights Out*. Worldview Publications, [2000] 2020.

Pinkney, Tony. *Introduction* to *The Politics of Modernism* by Raymond Williams. London: Verso. 1989. Pp. 1–29.

Roadarmel, Gordon C. *Modern Hindi Short Stories*. University of California Press. 1974.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Another Life: Thirteen Stories and a Play*. E-book, Noida, Harper Collins Publishers. 2018.

Rakesh, Mohan, K. P. Singh, and Asghar Wajahat. *Interview with Mohan Rakesh.* Journal of South Asian Literature, volume 9, no. 2/3, 1973, Pp. 15-45, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40871689 accessed March 10, 2021.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Looking Around as a Playwright*. New Delhi, Sangeet Natak Akademi Publication, 1966. https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.16497 Accessed December 24, 2021.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Natya Vimarsh*, edited by Jaidev Taneja. New Delhi, Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2012.

Rakesh, Mohan. *Naye Badal*. Banaras (Varanasi). Bhartiya Gyanpeeth Kashi, 1957.

Rout, Satyabrata. *Theatre of Roots: Mapping the Indian Theatre*. Routledge, 2015.

Russell, Luke. *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*. London, Oxford University Press: 2014.

Sen, Amiya P. *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2003.

Styan, J. L. *The Dark Comedy: The Development of the Modern Comic Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008.

Tanvir, Habib. *Memoirs*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 2013.

Tendulkar, Vijay. *Silence! The Court is in Session in Collected Plays in Translation*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2003.

Thomassen, Bjorn. *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through The In-Between.* Surrey, Ashgate Publishing Limited. 2014.

Yajnik, R. K. *The Indian Theatre*. London: Unwin Brothers Ltd. 1933.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, University of Chicago Press: 1960.

Secondary Sources (Articles)

Awasthi, Suresh, and Richard Schechner. "'*Theatre of Roots': Encounter with Tradition*." *TDR (1988-)*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1989, pp. 48–69. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1145965 . Accessed 16 Oct. 2024.

Banerjee. Samipendra. *History Through Modernity: An Analysis of Final Solutions* in *Indian Drama in English,* edited by Kaustav Chakraborty. PHI Learning. 2011. Pp. 255–262.

Banerjee, Utpal K., and Mahesh Dattani. "Utpal K. Banerjee in Conversation with Mahesh Dattani." *Indian Literature*, vol. 48, no. 5 (223), 2004, pp. 161–67. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346512. Accessed 10 Feb. 2023.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, 40.4, 1988: pp. 519–31. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893, Accessed 7 April 2022.

Coser, Lewis A. "Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change." *The British Journal of Sociology*, volume 8, no. 3, 1957, Pp. 197-207. https://doi.org/10.2307/586859.

Cossio, Cecilia. "Contradictions of the Feminine in the Writings of Mohan Rakesh" in *Literature, Language and the Media in India*, edited by Mariola Offredi. New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 1993.

Coser, Lewis A. "Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change." *The British Journal of Sociology* 8, no. 3. 1957. Pp. 197-207. https://doi.org/10.2307/586859. Accessed March 01, 2022.

Dattani, Mahesh, and Kuhu Chanana. "Interview with Mahesh Dattani." *Indian Literature*, vol. 55, no. 6 (266), 2011, pp.126-29. Accessed 3 July 2022.

Datta, Ketaki. *Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions: A Reconsideration* in *Indian Drama in English,* edited by Kaustav Chakraborty. PHI Learning. 2011, pp. 242–254.

Eliot, T.S. Tradition and the Individual Talent. *The Sacred Wood*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1920, pp. 42-53.

Ghosh, Indranee. *Form and Content in Dattani's Dance Like a Man*, in *Indian Drama in English,* edited by Kaustav Chakraborty. PHI Learning. 2011, pp. 270–75.

Godbole, G. H. "The Role of Humour in Classical Sanskrit Plays", *Indian Literature,* vol. 21 no. 3, 1978: pp. 101-13. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23334395. Accessed 18 April 2024.

Gokhale, Shanta. *The Dramatists* in *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. New Delhi: Permanent Black. 2017, pp. 378–393.

Hansen, Kathryn. "Parsi Theater, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay." *Annual of Urdu Studies* vol. 16 (2001), http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/18267 Accessed, 13 October 2024.

Hansen, Kathryn. "Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre." *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1983, pp. 77–89. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1178367. Accessed 4 July 2023.

Karnad, Girish. Theatre in India. *Daedalus,* vol. 118, no. 4, 1989, pp. 330–52. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20025275. Accessed 15 Sept. 2023.

Juneja, Renu. “Women in the Plays of Mohan Rakesh.” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1984, pp. 181–192. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40872657. Accessed March 13, 2021.

Mee, Erin B. “Mahesh Dattani: Invisible Issues,” *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 19, issue 1, 1997, pp. 19–26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3245741. Accessed 13 Feb. 2022

McQuinn, Kristen. “Not at Home: Liminal Space and Personal Identity in The Hobbit and Coraline.*” Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, no. 60, 2020, pp. 14–18. JSTOR,

Naik, M.K., *The Achievement of Indian Drama in English* in *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*, edited by M. K Naik and Shankar-Mokashi Punekar, Madras (Chennai): Oxford University Press, 180–194. 1977.

Pomorska, Krystyna. *Forward to Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1984. pp. i–xii.

Rakesh, Mohan, and Deborah Torch. “Mohan Rakesh: A Self-Portrait.” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 9, no. 2/3, Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1973, pp. 3–14, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40871688.

Rakesh, Mohan, K. P. Singh, and Asghar Wajahat. “Interview with Mohan Rakesh.” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, volume 9, no. 2/3, 1973, Pp. 15-45, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40871689 accessed March 10, 2021.

Rakesh Mohan. *Looking Around as a Playwright*. Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi Publication. 1966.

Richmond, Farley P. “The Political Role of Theatre in India.” *Educational Theatre Journal* 25, no. 3 (1973): 318–34. https://doi.org/10.2307/3205692. Accessed Jan 10, 2022.

Schechner, Richard. “Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance.” *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol.17, no. 3 1973: pp. 5–36. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/1144841. Accessed 15 May 2023.

Singh, Madhu. “Altered Realities, New Experiences: Bhisam Sahni, Nirmal Verma, and the “Nayi Kahani” Movement.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 53, no. 2 2016: 313-333 https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.53.2.0312. Accessed January 24, 2022.

Schechner, Richard. “Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance.” *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 17, issue 3, 1973: pp. 5–36. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/1144841. Accessed 15 May 2023.

Skjoldager-Nielsen, Kim, and Joshua Edelman. “Liminality.” *Ecumenica*, issue 7.1-2, 2014: pp. 33-40. 10.5325/ecumenica.7.1-2.0033. Accessed 20 September 2024.

Srivastava, Sanjay. “Masculinity Studies and Feminism: Othering the Self.” *Economics and Political Weekly*, 50(20), 2015. Pp. 33-36.

Tanvir, Habib. “Theatre Is in the Villages.” *Social Scientist*, vol. 2, no. 10, 1974, pp. 32–41. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3516486. Accessed 19 Oct. 2024.

Tanvir, Habib. ‘The World, and Theatre According to Habib Tanvir’ The Telegraph Magazine, 17 April 1983.

Turner, Victor. “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1979, pp. 465–99. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233219. Accessed 15 July. 2023.