Market Value of Intercultural Translations and Adaptations in Indian Theatre: A Sample Study.

Abstract:

The aim of this study is to understand if popular discourses on the “west” influence the commercial success of an intercultural theatre performance. This paper seeks to realize the effects of consumer culture on the practice and performance of Indian theatre of the urban, cosmopolitan kind. In the context of consumer culture, if a play is considered a product, my research attempts to understand the process of production and the factors ensuring its success. To study this theatrical conundrum I will use the framework of intercultural performance studies and post-colonial studies.

Theorists of intercultural theatre such as Philip Zarrilli, Patrice Pavis, Rustom Bharucha, Eugenio Barba and others have discussed issues pertaining to the politics of intercultural exchange. But the question of consumer culture has not been addressed at length in their works. Two plays- Nothing like Lear, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s King Lear, and Balura Gudikara, an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s The Master Builder in Kannada will serve as the primary data for analysis. Using dialectic method I will approach the visual performances through the theories mentioned. I will examine newspaper reviews, the audience turn-out for each performance, and the marketing strategies used by online ticket sellers like Indianstage etc. to promote these plays. I will also study the influence of
institutionalised theatre events like the Delhi Ibsen’s Festival that sanction the success of a play.

I aim to base my findings on interviews with directors and theatre audiences. This interview method will be used to identify the practice of intercultural theatre through theories of reception. My paper will venture into this yet unexplored contemporary theatre space to understand intercultural theatre through the market value of plays and the changing nature of the cosmopolitan, urban theatre-goer.

Keywords: Indian Theatre, Theatre Translation, Adaptation, Intercultural Theatre, Cosmopolitan Theatre, Consumer Culture.

Introduction

With the world-wide-web shrinking boundaries, the emergence of a new cultural space has been a reality for some time now. Indian theatre did not pledge its eternal reverence to the West anymore. Indianising a western product to suit specific cultural context is more important than preserving the original and its authenticity. The West was explored for its ideas and inspiration. The concept is similar to what Bharucha called “to seek the familiar in the unfamiliar, the unfamiliar in the familiar” (Bharucha 2001: 24). Media and globalization has created in the Indian psyche a mini-model of the West. West is familiar and very alien at the same time. Sirkku Aaltonen has noted, “Foreign play texts which represent either imperialistic or emotional reality familiar to us are admitted into the theatrical system more easily than those that are not compatible with our way of looking at the world” (Aaltonen 2000).

To assume the “west” as an implicit category has its contradictions. Hence, I use the term “west” in this paper with great caution and all its implications for a postcolonial context like ours. This paper will uncover the various complexities and meanings of the concept of a “western” text in the age of globalization. The research will focus on the governing factors of adaptation from the written page to a theatrical stage in the current global, multi-cultural, metropolitan scenario. Hence the research will briefly deal with the politics of translation and
adaptation, while being grounded in contemporary multicultural theatre exchange space. The nature of cosmopolitan societies in India is such that people are urged to negotiate between their regional culture, and a global identity as circulated by media. Intercultural theatre produces a sort of third space where Indian and global texts and performances intermingle to produce a new text that belongs to neither spaces but is part of both. This complex relationship between Indian theatre spaces and global texts has given rise to intercultural theatre in the contemporary Indian space. It is this theatrical product that is the object of discussion in this paper.

**Post-colonial context:**

Post-colonial translation theories were a ground-breaking phenomenon as it challenges European norms and rules of theatre translation. As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi have aptly coined the phrase “Empire translates back”, the colonies, through English gained access to various texts. It also meant that to stand against canonical theories, English was a key tool. Bassentt and Trivedi have explained that, “the widely shared post-colonial wisdom on the subject is that the Empire can translate back only into English, or into that lower or at least lower-case variety of it, English”. English texts seemed more profitable than writing in a native tongue. The lucrative market promoted a new species of Global English, writing in which assured monetary and cultural results. From a capitalistic view, profits for English texts and performances were far more lucrative.

With this powerful linguistic tool, the purposes of translation had drastically transformed. Theorists like Emily Apter coined the term “neo-colonial” to understand the new phase of relationship between east and west. Further, she describes the contemporary situation as “decolonizing intralinguistic bilingualism”\(^1\).

**Understanding Audience response to Intercultural Theatre:**

As a public event, a theatre study is only complete with audience response. An attempt was made to tackle the problem of individual difference in audiences and to what extent does the text (performance) regulate audience response. To analyse response and

reactions the most apt tool in the literary toolbox was psychoanalysis. Susan Bennett has remarked, “Freud’s interest in audience response is evident from his discussions of Hamlet and Oedipus Rex” (Bennett 1997). The reader of performance is not only seeing the play but is simultaneously seeing what s/he wants to. The question arises if a theory could be formed on such individual understandings of performance. Can there be an underlying structure that yields a general reader response?

A classification of theatre audiences is provided by Clifford Williams (as qtd in Bennett 1997). He has opined that the popular theatre audience’s qualification of admittance is the possession of entrance money. Immediately, a class classification emerges as determining theatre-going culture. The ability to afford to watch a play was only an elite activity. This has however changed to mean that by theory, anyone can be a theatre goer. Performance studies have often questioned academic authority on theatre participation. Edging towards being a mass-culture, performance theorists conceive “all audiences as potentially active participants who can authorize artistic experience.” While in favour of a “counterelitism,” has theatre really become a space available for all members of a population? Do they have to right to determine the cultural relevance of a performance? When new perspectives of theatre as a cultural industry took shape, there was a need to study and seek out audiences. The underlying assumption being that theatre was an entertainment industry that contributed economically. At the end and beginning of this industry was its audience. Traditional understanding of an audience-performance relationship was to be soon replaced by consumer-producer relationships.

Theories of reception failed to quantitatively point out how meaning was produced and perceived by audiences. Desperately, statistical and questionnaire methods were used as means of measure. Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire by Pavis was one such attempt. The shortcomings of this method is quite obvious, Pavis mentions, “I felt a similar sense of mistrust towards statistical studies based on the psychology of the reception of a work of art and towards sociological investigations into the social origins and the taste of the theatre going public”. Pavis recognised the need to “verbalize” audience reactions to the


following set of questions. The need for such methods of recording was to finally inch closer to “a dialogue between the production as it happens and the production that the spectator sees.”

Another fruitful technique is to observe theatre as a cultural industry by analysing the various machines involved in production and reception. The mechanism of this industry is based on exploiting certain emotional attachments or popular trends. These general thematic emotions make a text seem universal in a sense that it is very much part of everyone’s world. The struggle of a mother in Mother Courage, problems and treatments of elders in Im not Rappaport, the delicate father-daughter relation in Lear are all emotions that can be evoked in a majority of audiences. While fanatically revolting again universals in Peter Brook’s Mahabharatha, Bharucha admitted that Peer Gynt was, “always already Indian...but more specifically Kannadiga” (Bharucha 2001). Translator and/or directors cash on these emotions that somehow seem to surpass all intercultural differences.

Discussing intercultural theatre reception in the age of globalization has led to media forces in contemporary society that determine and influence on production and reception. Media plays a crucial role in setting trends, following which allows acceptance into specific social systems. Theatre going can be seen as one such trend among the urban middle-class and upper-middle class sections of society. The act of theatre-going can be classified as a sub-culture-- a part of mainstream social practices but also indicates a selective group of people belonging in it. From the William’s description of audiences, it is obvious that particular theatre-goers take pride in their ritual of theatre going. Who are these people? “The theatre-going audience is predominantly middle class, middle aged and affluent”\(^4\), says Simon Stewart while describing the cultural practices of theatre goers. Such a statement, however generalized, entails all the elements of monetary and cultural choices that Williams discussed. It also leads to an important concept- silver disposition. The term coined by Stewart, indicates conspicuous consumption such as dining out, dressing up and spending money and opting theatre as a leisure past time. Theatre-goers volunteer to be a part of a culture that involves opting for the well-established or the current trend. This trend may be part of a larger popular culture. But elements from the same are selected, through silver disposition, creating a sub-culture of theatre goers. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu’s

\(^4\) Stewart, Simon. “Culture and the Middle classes”, Ashgate Publising Ltd: 2010
*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* is enlightening. He notes that people choose the best theatres, the most expensive seats and often go out to eat in an expensive restaurant, all part of the practices involved in theatre-going. “Choosing a theatre is like choosing the right shop, marked with all the signs of quality and guaranteeing no unpleasant surprises or lapse of taste,” he explains. Thus, advertising these plays help audiences to pick the kind that they suit their taste. An ongoing cycle of demand and consumption of plays is created. Such practices are different from the habitual activities like television watching. Although the elitist canon associated with theatre-going has been deconstructed by the rise of popular culture, entry to cultural practices are still marked by boundaries like urbanity, monetary and time investment, rituals of social practices and the cool factor associated with watching a play as part of a night-out in the city. Whether or not audiences conform to these rituals marks their entry point into this sub-culture.

Eminent to the working of theatre industry, are indicators declaring what a “must-watch-play” is. During high modernism, the verdict of an aesthetic performance was issued by academics. In contemporary times, academic theory does not have authority on popular cultural choices but other cultural signifiers decide what is the new “in thing,” the canon. These indicators may be media, capital, educational institutions, specialized theatre spaces, statistical validations like blockbuster and bestseller, accreditations like Booker Prize, Tony awards, Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards etc, and through institutionalized academies, international theatre festivals and newspaper critics. Any theatre event that has been validated and approved by one or more of these indicators, is deemed fit for cultural consumption. Once validated, the same texts, theatre events and playwrights will be circulated as an assured source of capital. In such a case of “commercialized internationalism” excludes many choices as not popular. Jones observes the contemporary theatre market to comment: “One of the most commercialized internationalist theatrical phenomenon is perhaps the international festival circuit, where the local rarely plays a role, subsumed as it is into a dominant globalized and globalizing aesthetic”. Besides Shakespearian festivals, the annual Ibsen festival at Delhi is a fitting example. This

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5 Bourdieu, Pierre. “*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*”:1984

centralized event attracts international attention, reemphasising that Ibsen’s plays in translation, in India, are a sure sell.

The post-colonial context of this research adds another major indicator of cultural capital. When ads and promotional events indicated a play is to be an adaptation, like all goods foreign, attracts attention. Information on the plays are circulated by websites, ticket booking sites like Indiastage, theatre reviews in mainstream newspapers reinforce the foreign source of the play. In the next section of this paper, I attempt to analyse the chosen sample plays- *Nothing like Lear* and *Balura Gudikara*. I will focus on audience turn-out, marketing strategies used for promotion, and the various platforms that add to the cultural value of these plays. In addition to these parameters, I have also quoted relevant parts of interviews with the directors, actors, and audiences in some cases. These excerpts will help understanding the thought processes involved in the production and consumption of these two theatre performances.

Data Sample 1: *Nothing like Lear*

**Adaptation from**

*King Lear* by William Shakespeare

*Nothing like Lear* is a Company theatre production directed by Rajat Kapoor. The play is a one-man show with the actors Athul Kumar and Vinay Patak taking alternate turns to play the part of the clown. The adaptation is a post-modern, post-structural rendition of Shakespeare. I will be analysing the performance held on 2 December 2012 at Rangashankara, Bangalore. Belonging to the contemporary theatre genre, this play sheds light on the nature of a cross-section of Indian theatre at present.

I met the director to ask him more about the adaptation process, the reason for his choice of Shakespeare. On being asked why he chose Shakespeare, Rajat replied, “The reason why we keep going back to Shakespeare is because there is a familiarity there, something that holds relevance for our lives today. Shakespeare’s themes are interwoven with some personal experiences to produce a new kind of performance. “So I can say that *Nothing like Lear* is a bit of Shakespeare and a bit of us,” Rajat Kapoor remarks.
Printed on the ticket for Nothing Like Lear, the audiences are aware that they play they have chosen to watch is an adaptation. Whether such a disclosure is intended by the translator cannot be ensure in all cases, however a fancy towards acclaimed playwrights and plays could increase the demand for intercultural translations. The recurring use of specific texts and playwrights accentuates their brand value. In reminiscence, the Indian school curriculum is rich with popular playwrights. Many know Shakespeare as dearly as native texts, and many more know him better than Kalidasa. With such an early familiarization with foreign plays and playwrights, attraction to them is inculcated and reinforced by the Indian education system as well. A more daunting question is really how foreign are these plays to the Indian context?

On the flipside, Shakespearean translations can be understood as “mimicry” - a concept part of postcolonial theory popularised by Homi K Bhabha. Mimicry can be defined as, “When colonial discourse encourages the colonial subject to “mimic” the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonizer that can be quite threatening”. This “blurred copy,” is similar to the coloniser but is dissimilar all the same.

This particular adaptation has drifted far away from the original while fundamentally still being the same. The play brings Shakespeare closer to the Indian audience, rather than transporting them to Lear’s times. The director claimed that is he knows the play is a success when a girl came up to him after the performance and said, “I’m going to call my father now.” Accordiing to Kapoor, the immediacy of the performance is the key to its success. Once again, a familiarity within the text appeals to the directors as formula for a profitable production.

The tickets sold for the performances mentions that Nothing like Lear is based on a Shakespearian play. Even if the audience doesn’t recognize Lear, he will recognize Shakespeare. Therefore, the theatre audiences reading about the upcoming play could be attracted to familiar trends. The “silver disposition” of the modern day urban audience as discussed earlier, is applicable here. An online reviewer posting in The Hindu: Citizen Review writes, “we watched, expecting lines from the original to hit us any minute, and they

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7 Hamara movie, “Rajat Kapoor on his play 'Nothing like Lear'”, Youtube clip, Apr 1, 2013
did when we least expected it.” An example of audience turn-out will better explain why foreign is a popular brand. The first of its kind theatre space in Bangalore, Rangashankara, Bangalore, is a platform for theatre performances from around the world. The theatre space seats 320 people at a time. Hyavadana by Karnad performed by Benaka Theatre Company headed by T. S Nagabharana, a well-known TV personality, theatre artist, director and producer; and Nothing Like Lear directed and adapted by Rajat Kapoor, well known film and theatre director; these plays were performed in Rangashankara on the 2nd and 11th December 2012, respectively. For the former, 50-52 individuals lavishly occupied the empty theatre. On the other hand, tickets of the latter play was sold out two days before the actual performance and a staggering number of audiences who were squeezing and adjusting to find a seat in the overwhelmingly full theatre auditorium. The example reveals a twofold conclusion-- it comments on the demographic nature of Bangalore’s population and reemphasises the lucrative nature of plays in adaptation.

Bangalore city is a display of the globalised economy and the concept of a global citizen. The class of audiences marked with silver-disposition are thus a mixture of audiences from various Indian states and otherwise. Although they may live in the metropolitan city, they are oft not familiar with the native tongue. From the above example, it is safe to conclude that theatre-goers in Bangalore are a mixed linguistic and cultural demographic. They appreciate a night-out in the city after a busy week. Tickets at Rangashakara are normally priced at 100 for Kannada plays and 200 or more for English plays. English plays thus stand out as the logical choice to reach and please such a diverse demographic. “Among urban theatregoers none of these other languages (Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam and Gujarati) has the currency and accessibility (some would say the cachet) of English”, says Dharwadker.

9 These statistics are from first hand observations
Online ticketing franchises like Indiastage track the trends and preferences of audiences on a regular basis. They are aware that English plays are more popular and profitable. Eventually, as an outcome of such poor turn-outs, Indiastage now sells tickets to only selected vernacular plays. Did Indiastage lower the demand by regulating sales or did the demand influence their marketing strategy? The industries that profit from intercultural exchange regulate the availability of performances. By decreasing the number of plays they are selling tickets for, they are both creating market for certain products (plays) and affirming their aesthetic value. There may no more be a state-regulation on theatre, but as Bharucha reminded, there is most definitely an economic regulation. To imagine the worse, such regulations may entirely discourage production of less popular vernacular plays. Profits and demand are the major forces governing cultural production. There is only an illusion that the audiences can access any play or product. But in reality, they can access only what they are being provided with. Whether the limitations may come in terms of language access or accessing the product itself, the post-industrial audience, as Adorno, T. & Horkheimer have described, is reduced to statistics on research organization charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green, and blue areas.”

Data Sample 2: Balura Gudikara

Translation and Adaptation from

The Master Builder by Henrik Ibsen

The play was translated into Kannada by B. Suresh and directed by B. Jayashree. Performed by the Spandana Theatre Company, the play was performed as part of the Annual Delhi Ibsen Festival 2010.

Initiated in 2008, the primary objective of the Delhi Ibsen Festival (DIF) was “to establish a platform for promoting long term institutional artistic and academic cooperation and dialogue in the areas of literature, performing arts as well as social- and political

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The director of the festival Nissar Allana said in an interview with The Hindu, Allana that the Delhi Ibsen Festival’s target group as “post ‘post-colonial’ generation”. He explains that theatre practitioners that emerged after the ‘90s seek to reconnect with the global theatre tradition, but are often faced with “modern challenges of space and the domination of television”. It is to such an audience that contemporary Indian theatre has to cater to. In other words, the audiences of these plays are both part of a mass-culture as well as possess silver-disposition.

The play Balura Gudikara is an adaptation of The Master Builder in the Veeragase folk theatre form particular to Northern Karnataka. Translation and adaptation in theatre is a deeper dramaturgical process than text-to-text translation.

The pretext of the folk based theme for Delhi Ibsen Festival (DIF) 2010 could be construed as the factor influencing appropriation of Ibsen in a folk-based theatre performance. The DIF is providing a platform or a demand for plays that are based on Ibsen’s text but creates a nostalgic association with the regional folk identities. Hence, there is a demand in both the local as well as the global cultural market for a product like B Jayshree’s play. The DIF is conducted annually under the patronage of the Norwegian Embassy. Indian renditions of Ibsen have a market far from any geographical or cultural boundaries.

Having said this, has cosmopolitan theatre practice been reduced to such a market driven attitude? Or is there room for ideological critique? Preceding the discussions above, I felt that there is also an ideological influence in choosing western texts. Cosmopolitan modernity demands to appropriate the west in our own terms so it enables a better way to deal with cultural differences. This however does not mean minimising differences, but understanding western texts and trends through specific differences. What would Ibsen write if he wrote in Kannada? How would his character speak if they belonged to a specific Indian milieu? In intercultural theatre, we need to inch one step forward. How would a Kannada reader understand Ibsen? As is the case in Balura Gudikara, Ibsen was appropriated as he would be understood by Kannada readers. For instance, the adaptation associates the

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12 www.norwayemb.org.in/NR/rdonlyres/.../101550/ibsen2.doc

destruction of ego with mythology. By alluding to the story of Shiva and the Verrabhabras, B Jayashree has attempted to make sense of Ibsen’s play through specific roots.

The first staging of the play was on 5.12.2010 in the Delhi Ibsen Festival. Director Nissar Allana said that, “The Delhi Ibsen Festival 2010 is unique in every way, because it encompasses an aspect of Ibsen's work and theme, rarely discussed; Ritual, Tradition & Folklore. In the Indian context, this is especially important, because it helps us define our own point of contact with Ibsen. We have to see him, not as a stranger in our midst, but bring him into our own environment and into our minds, in a manner that he becomes familiar and endearing.” All plays of the festival where directed to match the folk theme of the year. In practitioner’s terms, Allana has explained the post-modern approach to appropriating the west from one’s own locus. As noted in the prior discussions translation in theatre is a means of “seeking for the familiar in the unfamiliar”.

In the adaptation of Ibsen’s Master builder as Balura Gudikara, the play cannot be considered as western solely based on their content. However, it cannot be considered as part of the veeraghase folk tradition of Karnataka as well. Such plays are of a new, hybrid variety that belongs to a third space that negotiates between two cultures. This third space is imaginary and need not be confined to one geographical location. It is an ideological space created as a result of the interaction between ideas, cultures, languages and theatre systems.

**Conclusion**

Theatre of the post-modern times is seen as a commodity culture driven by media and images. Understanding the nature and process of intercultural theatre during this time has been the main objective of this research. Cosmopolitan Indian theatre today has an economic and cultural bond with the west as shown its effects on theatre production and reception as well.

Owing to the cultural investment in Indian arts and products, it is necessary to treat intercultural theatre as a product, governed by the rules of market value, demand and supply. Production is increased and modified on the terms of demand. If so, contemporary Indian theatre is responding to the demand for western appropriations. In Indian movies as well as music, western forms and themes are being adapted to bring the Indian audiences closer to
the west, simultaneously bring the west closer to specific Indian audiences. Ibsen is made relevant to a specific Indian audience and Verraghase is made relevant in the global context.

In the specific example of B Jayashee’s adaptation of Ibsen, we have to observe the place of Indian theatre in the contemporary global scenario. The platform for which the play was first directed was the Delhi Ibsen Festival. Funded by the Norwegian Embassy, the Festival is open for global audiences as well. Indian plays represent the ways in which Ibsen is continued to be appropriated. The language or cultural difference is not a barrier in the global market rather; it celebrates the reincarnation of Ibsen through specific Indian theatre and cultural practices. Hence, there is an increasing demand for a unique representation of texts and this newness attracts investments for various sources.

The market value of intercultural theatre depends on its newness and the ability to create an amalgamation of western elements with specific Indian frameworks. If we treat intercultural theatre exchange as a cultural industry, its process is based on what sells best?

To answer the question what is the nature and process of intercultural exchange in theatre, cultural or market-oriented trends influencing this exchange have been examined in this research. Upon understanding the politics of intercultural theatre exchange, the power relations between the two cultures in contact will become clear. The changing relationship between India and the west has been the main reason for the change in the nature of intercultural theatre. Hence, in conclusion, the factors that have led to an urban, cosmopolitan kind of theatre practice are political, cultural and most of all, market-oriented.

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