International Advance Journal of Engineering, Science and Management (IAJESM)
Multidisciplinary, Indexed, Double Blind, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed-International Journal.
SJIF Impact Factor =7.938, July-December 2024, Submitted in August 2024, ISSN -2393-8048

Colonial Hangovers: Decolonial Discourse in Modern Indian English Theatre

Dr. Suman Kour, Guest Lecturers in English Department, Bidar University, Bidar, Karnataka, drsuman131313@gmail.com

Abstract

This research explores how modern Indian English theatre continues to grapple with the lingering influences of colonialism, referred to here as "colonial hangovers." Drawing from postcolonial theory and decolonial frameworks, the paper examines how Indian playwrights writing in English have resisted, subverted, and redefined colonial legacies. Through a close reading of plays by Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Girish Karnad, this study illustrates how themes such as cultural mimicry, identity crisis, language politics, and social alienation are addressed within a decolonial context. The paper asserts that Indian English theatre, while operating within a language once imposed by colonial rulers, reclaims space for indigenous expression and resists neocolonial hegemony.

Keywords: Colonial Hangover, Decolonial Discourse, Indian English Theatre, Postcolonial Resistance, and Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

Indian English theatre, born in the crucible of British colonialism, has long carried the imprints of its imperial origins. Emerging predominantly among the anglicized Indian elite in the 19th and early 20th centuries, theatre in English was initially marked by a strong inclination to imitate British dramaturgy in terms of form, language, and even subject matter. As noted by Aparna Dharwadker, “the early English plays in India mimicked Shakespearean models, often staged in colonial institutions and schools, affirming cultural superiority rather than contesting it” [1, p. 22]. This early phase of mimicry highlights the beginning of what many scholars term the "colonial hangover"—a lingering aesthetic and ideological dependency on Western paradigms that continued to shape theatrical expression in India well beyond 1947.

The term “colonial hangover” refers not just to residual colonial structures in the theatre industry but also to psychological, linguistic, and epistemological dependencies that influence how theatre is written, performed, and received in postcolonial India. Indian playwrights working in English often navigate a contested terrain—straddling between the colonial language and indigenous sensibilities. Rustom Bharucha observes that “English theatre in India occupies a schizoid position—caught between Western form and Indian content, global appeal and local reception” [2, p. 17]. This split is at the heart of colonial hangovers, manifesting through thematic choices, linguistic structures, and even staging techniques that betray a subconscious adherence to colonial values or aesthetics. However, post-independence Indian English theatre also became a site of resistance and reclamation. It started to develop as a counter-discursive space, challenging the dominance of colonial epistemology and aesthetics. Drawing from postcolonial theory [3,4] and more recently from decolonial frameworks [5,6], contemporary Indian playwrights are seen actively interrogating the legacy of empire. They do so by revisiting historical memory, confronting issues of language and class, and deconstructing inherited notions of cultural superiority. This shift is evident in the dramaturgy of Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, and Manjula Padmanabhan, whose plays reflect a conscious break from Eurocentric theatrical traditions and a turn towards hybridized, subversive, and pluralistic forms of storytelling.

Girish Karnad, for instance, often employs Indian myths and folktales to critique modernity and colonial mentality. In Hayavadana (1971), he uses traditional yakshagana and folk narrative styles within an English-language play, thereby "provincializing Europe," to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s phrase [7, p. 45], and asserting indigenous dramaturgy. Similarly, **Mahesh Dattani** addresses the intersections of gender, sexuality, and communal politics in urban India—issues deeply influenced by colonial morality and postcolonial state control. His play Final Solutions (1993) explores how communalism in India is a legacy of colonial divide-and-rule policies, internalized through generations [8, p. 246].



Girish Karnad **Mahesh Dattani** **Manjula Padmanabhan**

Manjula Padmanabhan, in her dystopian play Harvest (1997), imagines a near-future India dominated by Western technology and capitalist exploitation. The play critiques the neo-colonial commodification of bodies in the global market, portraying how colonized mentalities persist in postcolonial subjects. As she writes in her own introduction to the play, "It is not the West that enslaves the East. It is the East that sells itself, body and soul, to the West" [9, p. 8]. Here, the "colonial hangover" is not only cultural or linguistic—it is structural and economic. At the core of this research lies the recognition that modern Indian English theatre is not merely derivative—it is radically transformative. Through decolonial discourse, Indian playwrights are actively resisting colonial knowledge systems, reclaiming narrative sovereignty, and subverting the assumed supremacy of English itself. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, "language, as culture, is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" [10, p. 15]. In that sense, using English to stage decolonial resistance is a paradoxical yet powerful act of reappropriation.

This study, therefore, analyzes the theatrical texts and performance ideologies of Indian English playwrights who challenge colonial residues while working within the very medium imposed by colonial rule. It seeks to answer the central question: How does Indian English theatre reconcile its colonial inheritance with the imperative of cultural decolonization? Through a critical reading of selected texts and theoretical engagement with decolonial thought, the paper aims to illuminate the evolving role of theatre as a space of political, cultural, and linguistic negotiation in postcolonial India.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Postcolonial to Decolonial Thought

Postcolonial theory has served as a foundational lens through which the legacies of colonial rule have been critically examined in literature, art, and performance. Thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha laid the groundwork for interrogating the cultural, political, and linguistic residues of empire. In Orientalism, Said argues that "the Orient was almost a European invention," and that "it had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" [11, p. 1]. This construction, he contends, was not benign—it served to justify and reinforce Western imperial control by fixing the East in a subordinate, inferior identity. Said's work helped illuminate how colonial power operated not only through military and administrative control but also through knowledge and cultural representation. Spivak expanded this critique in her seminal essay Can the Subaltern Speak?, where she confronts the ways in which colonial discourse and elite intellectual structures have silenced the voices of the colonized, especially women. She writes, "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item" [12, p. 287], emphasizing that even well-intentioned postcolonial critique risks reinscribing the structures it seeks to dismantle. Meanwhile, Bhabha's The Location of Culture introduces key concepts like hybridity and mimicry, asserting that colonial subjects occupy an "interstitial space" where identity is continuously negotiated. He states, "It is the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" [13, p. 56].

While postcolonial theory reveals how deeply colonialism has shaped cultural and intellectual life, decolonial theory takes a more radical stance, arguing not only that colonial power persists, but that modernity itself is inseparable from coloniality. Walter D. Mignolo asserts that "modernity is a European narrative that needed the invention of the colonial world for its self-

affirmation" [14, p. 2]. His concept of the "colonial matrix of power" describes an interlocking system of control over knowledge, race, economy, and governance that originated in the 16th century and still structures global relations today. For Mignolo, true decolonization involves "epistemic disobedience"—a deliberate break from Western ways of knowing and the affirmation of marginalized, indigenous, and pluriversal epistemologies [14, p. 45].

Similarly, Aníbal Quijano, who introduced the concept of "coloniality of power," writes that "coloniality survived colonialism. It has been perpetuated and continues to define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production" [15, p. 533]. According to Quijano, the struggle against colonialism must extend beyond political sovereignty to encompass the de-linking from Eurocentric epistemologies that treat Western modernity as universal and superior. For Quijano and Mignolo, the "decolonial turn" demands a shift away from merely reforming colonial knowledge systems to replacing them with alternative ways of being and knowing.

This ideological rupture is central to the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who critiques the internalized cultural subjugation resulting from the continued use of colonial languages. In Decolonising the Mind, he asserts, "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" [16, p. 13]. Ngũgĩ famously chose to stop writing in English and began publishing exclusively in Kikuyu and Swahili, arguing that writing in the colonizer's language perpetuates colonial domination. He warns, "To write in a language that is not your own is to bear the marks of cultural domination, to reinforce the hierarchy of languages that colonialism has imposed" [16, p. 26]. In this context, Indian English theatre occupies a unique and paradoxical position. It uses the language of the colonizer—English—as its medium, yet often to articulate narratives that are deeply rooted in indigenous realities and critique colonial and neo-colonial legacies. This tension transforms Indian English theatre into a site of decolonial negotiation, where playwrights grapple with the very language that symbolizes colonial control while using it to resist, rewrite, and reimagine cultural memory. The plays of Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, and Manjula Padmanabhan exemplify this tension. They embed Indian myths, oral traditions, subaltern experiences, and socio-political critiques within the English language, creating a hybrid aesthetic that subverts the authority of English while exploiting its reach. In doing so, these playwrights align with Mignolo's notion of "border thinking"—a mode of expression that arises from the colonial difference and seeks to displace hegemonic Western paradigms from within [14, p. 85].

Thus, by bridging postcolonial critique and decolonial epistemology, this study positions modern Indian English theatre as a liminal space—one where colonial hangovers are both visible and challenged, and where English is both a burden and a tool. It is a cultural theatre of resistance that calls not just for representation but for epistemic rupture, paving the way toward pluriversal futures that no longer orbit around Western norms.

3. Language as a Site of Struggle

Language serves as both a medium of expression and a marker of cultural identity, and in postcolonial societies like India, it also becomes a site of ideological struggle. Among the most visible and persistent colonial hangovers in Indian English theatre is the use of English itself—a language historically imposed during British imperial rule. While it continues to enjoy elite status, its presence on the Indian stage raises questions about authenticity, cultural allegiance, and audience reach. The playwright's choice to write and perform in English can be interpreted either as a continuation of colonial influence or as a strategic reappropriation of colonial tools for subversive ends.

This paradox is sharply critiqued by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in Decolonising the Mind, where he argues that "language carries culture, and culture carries… the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" [17, p. 16]. For Ngũgĩ, the continued use of colonial languages such as English or French in African literature and drama constitutes a form of cultural domination, one that alienates the writer from their own people and perpetuates psychological colonization. "The domination of a people's language by the

languages of the colonizing nations," he warns, "was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" [17, p. 16]. His call for linguistic decolonization—particularly the return to indigenous languages—has had a profound influence on postcolonial discourse. Yet, in the Indian context, the linguistic situation is more complex. With over 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of dialects, India's multilingualism challenges the binary between colonial and indigenous. Indian English theatre thus exists in a hybrid linguistic landscape, where English is not just a colonial remnant but a functional lingua franca, especially in urban and cosmopolitan settings. As such, many contemporary playwrights have chosen not to abandon English, but rather to transform it into a site of cultural negotiation. **Girish Karnad,** in plays such as Hayavadana (1971), navigates this terrain by embedding Indian philosophical themes and folk performance traditions like yakshagana within English dramatic structures. Though Karnad originally wrote Hayavadana in Kannada, its frequent performance and translation in English testify to his belief that Indian themes can survive and flourish even in a colonial tongue. In his essay "Author's Introduction" to Collected Plays: Volume One, Karnad writes, "The choice of English or Kannada was less important than the challenge of finding a theatrical language rooted in Indian experience" [18, p. xvii]. His ability to maintain the cultural authenticity of Indian myth and folklore—while using English as a vehicle—suggests an early form of linguistic decolonization through theatrical hybridity.

Mahesh Dattani, one of the most prominent Indian playwrights writing originally in English, takes this subversion a step further. In plays like Final Solutions (1993), Dance Like a Man (1995), and Bravely Fought the Queen (1991), Dattani blends Indian English with regional idioms, code-switching, and colloquial speech patterns, reflecting the everyday linguistic practices of urban Indians. His dialogues oscillate between English and native languages such as Gujarati or Kannada—sometimes even leaving untranslated words within English sentences. This technique not only captures the polyphonic nature of Indian identity but also challenges the notion of English as a monolithic, colonial language.

As Dattani himself asserts in the preface to Collected Plays, "My characters speak in English but they dream in their mother tongues" [19, p. x]. This poetic declaration encapsulates the postcolonial condition of linguistic hybridity, where English becomes a layered site of performance—carrying within it both colonial residues and decolonial impulses. Rather than abandoning English, Dattani decolonizes it from within, using the stage to reinscribe Indian consciousness, dilemmas, and worldviews through what is ostensibly a foreign tongue. This performative indigenization of English is not without its tensions. Critics often raise concerns about accessibility and audience segmentation, especially in a country where a large percentage of the population is not fluent in English. However, Indian English theatre's emergence as a counter-public sphere—engaging middle-class urban audiences in dialogue about caste, gender, sexuality, and communalism—demonstrates its political and cultural relevance, even within a limited linguistic domain. Ultimately, language in Indian English theatre is not simply a tool of expression but a terrain of contestation, where the battle between colonial inheritance and cultural sovereignty plays out in full view. The works of Karnad and Dattani illustrate that English, though historically imposed, can be reclaimed and recharged with Indian voices, making it a powerful instrument for decolonial storytelling.

4. Textual Analysis and Play Comparisons

Modern Indian English theatre provides a unique platform for dramatizing the cultural contradictions of postcolonial identity. The selected plays—Girish Karnad's Hayavadana (1971), Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions (1993), and Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest (1997)—each exemplify how language, form, and theme can be mobilized to critique colonial legacies while reimagining indigenous subjectivities. These plays, while distinct in genre and style, converge in their use of decolonial strategies: Hayavadana reclaims myth to challenge Western notions of selfhood, Final Solutions exposes internalized colonial communalism, and Harvest critiques neo-colonial capitalism.

4.1. Hayavadana – Myth as a Decolonial Strategy

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana draws from Thomas Mann's retelling of an Indian tale in The Transposed Heads and further back to the Kathāsaritsāgara, an 11th-century Sanskrit text. Karnad critiques colonial ideals of Cartesian dualism and Western individuation, contrasting them with Indian metaphysical notions of wholeness. The play's protagonist, Devadatta, represents intellect, while Kapila symbolizes physical strength—an artificial binary that collapses when their heads and bodies are switched. The absurdity that follows critiques colonial rationalism and celebrates the Indian philosophical idea of the body and mind as unified, not dichotomous.

The sub-plot of Hayavadana, a horse-headed man seeking completeness, metaphorically mirrors postcolonial India's search for identity amidst fractured colonial legacies. As Karnad writes, "The incompleteness of Hayavadana is not physical but existential" [20, p. 78]. By using Yakshagana folk performance techniques, Karnad deconstructs Western dramatic realism and instead roots the play in indigenous performative traditions. His dramaturgy resists colonial aesthetics and affirms vernacular cosmology, enacting a form of cultural decolonization through form and content.

4.2. Final Solutions – Unmasking Colonial Communalism

Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions delves into communal tension between Hindus and Muslims, focusing on a middle-class Gujarati family during a riot. At the heart of the play is the recognition that sectarian violence in modern India is not an organic outcome of religion but a colonial residue, inherited from British policies of "divide and rule." The chorus in the play, known as The Mob, repeatedly changes masks, symbolizing the manufactured nature of religious identity and mass hatred. The play's use of code-switching between English, Gujarati, and Hindustani reinforces the hybrid and conflicted identities of postcolonial Indians. As Aruna, the mother, expresses: "We never hated them. Not until we were taught to" (21, p. 239). This line alludes directly to the colonial conditioning of fear and hatred, still alive in modern society.

Dattani's decision to write in English but retain regional speech patterns further demonstrates how language itself can be decolonized through localization. The play stages a psychological unmasking of inherited prejudice, critiquing how colonial power continues to manifest internally, through social fragmentation and moral confusion.

4.3. Harvest – The Body as a Neo-Colonial Commodity

In Harvest, Manjula Padmanabhan presents a futuristic dystopia where Indian citizens sell their organs to Western buyers through a company named InterPlanta Services. The play critiques the ongoing exploitation of the Global South, framed through the lens of biomedical colonialism and global capitalism. The characters become literal bodies for consumption, echoing colonial extraction but in a medicalized, technological register. Om, the central character, signs up to "donate" his organs for a price, sacrificing dignity and autonomy for economic survival. The Western buyer, Ginni, appears on screen in a sanitized, sterile white space, contrasting the crowded, disordered world of the Indian characters. This spatial metaphor extends to colonial power relations, with the West still watching, owning, and commodifying the East. As Padmanabhan notes in her preface, "The play explores the way first-world capitalism transforms third-world bodies into profit-yielding assets" (22, p. 8). Padmanabhan's use of English as a sterile, transactional medium reflects how language itself becomes implicated in global capitalist violence. Her stylistic choices—detachment, surveillance, commodification—expose a postcolonial condition now shaped by techno-colonialism, where the body replaces the land as the colonized resource.

4.4. Comparative Reflections

Across these three plays, we observe different modes of decolonial articulation:

- Karnad challenges colonial epistemologies through form and metaphysics, rejecting Western individualism and realism via indigenous myths.
- Dattani unpacks colonial sociopolitical residues—particularly communal division—through

psychological and linguistic hybridity.

- Padmanabhan exposes global neocolonialism, depicting how capitalism perpetuates imperial hierarchies even after political independence.

What unites these playwrights is their refusal to allow English to operate as a neutral medium. Instead, they reshape it through Indian registers, idioms, and worldviews, performing a cultural and linguistic re-territorialization on stage. Their works not only deconstruct colonial hangovers but also reimagine postcolonial futures—ones where plural voices, fragmented identities, and indigenous aesthetics co-exist within, rather than despite, the inherited structure of English theatre.

5. Mimicry and Hybridity: Colonial Shadows in Performance

The concept of mimicry, as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha, provides a crucial lens through which to understand the colonial and postcolonial tensions within Indian English theatre. In his influential work The Location of Culture, Bhabha defines mimicry as "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (23, p. 85). He elaborates that the colonized subject who mimics the colonizer is rendered "almost the same, but not quite," thus unsettling the authority of colonial discourse through a partial resemblance that inherently contains difference (23, p. 86). This incomplete replication creates a site of both compliance and subversion. In early Indian English theatre, this mimicry was stylistic and structural. Colonial-era playwrights and theatre practitioners modeled their scripts, character types, and stage conventions on British dramatic forms, particularly the Shakespearean five-act structure and neoclassical unities. Such mimicry functioned as a performance of cultural assimilation, affirming colonial notions of aesthetic and moral superiority. Aparna Dharwadker notes that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, "English drama in India was dominated by school productions and amateur clubs that saw imitation of Western models as a form of prestige" (1, p. 41). However, contemporary Indian English playwrights disrupt this mimicry by hybridizing form and content. Rather than fully rejecting Western dramaturgy, they appropriate its structures while infusing them with local idioms, mythological themes, and indigenous performative traditions, thus converting mimicry into strategic hybridity. This process not only destabilizes colonial authority but also reclaims agency within the colonizer's medium. Take for instance **Girish Karnad,** whose play Hayavadana demonstrates hybridity through both form and theme. The narrative is drawn from Kathāsaritsāgara and fused with Thomas Mann's Western retelling, but the execution uses traditional Indian storytelling techniques such as yakshagana and narrative interludes by a sutradhar (narrator). As Karnad himself explains, "I had to invent a theatrical language which was both Western and traditional, Indian and modern" (20, p. xvii). His use of chorus, live music, stylized gestures, and mythic structure undercuts naturalistic Western realism. Thus, even when Hayavadana is performed in English, it refuses to function as a Western play; it becomes, in Bhabha's terms, a hybrid cultural artifact, unsettling the "fixity" of colonial identity and aesthetics (23, p. 112).

While **Karnad** hybridizes structure and myth, Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest hybridizes language and political critique to dramatize India's entanglement in global neocolonialism. The play, set in a dystopian future, features Indian citizens selling their body parts to wealthy Western buyers through a corporatized medical system. Written in English and intended for a transnational audience, Harvest appears, on the surface, to mimic Western speculative fiction. But a closer reading reveals its subversion of Western technocratic narratives and critique of global capitalism that continues the logic of imperialism in economic and biomedical terms.

Padmanabhan's protagonist, Om, embodies the postcolonial subject seduced by the promise of Western capital. The stage is split between Om's cramped Mumbai apartment and the pristine, distanced interface with Ginni, a Western recipient who communicates via video screen. This spatial arrangement visually represents the technological and spatial hierarchies between the Global North and South. In the play's introduction, Padmanabhan writes, "The play is about the intersection of power, technology, and the body—how poor nations sell their bodies while rich nations control the machines" (22, p. 8). Her decision to write in English

while centering Indian characters allows her to expose how linguistic imperialism operates alongside economic dependency, making the play a powerful hybrid critique of both colonial memory and contemporary neocolonialism. The dialogue in Harvest further exemplifies hybridity. While Ginni speaks in slick, rehearsed, corporate English, the Indian characters' English is marked by idiomatic simplicity, occasional code-switching, and culturally grounded metaphors. The effect is not comedic or submissive—as in colonial mimicry—but critical and disjunctive. The contrast in linguistic registers highlights global inequality and the commodification of culture and bodies in a neocolonial marketplace. In both **Hayavadana and Harvest**, then, English becomes a liminal language—a space of negotiation rather than subjugation. Their use of hybrid forms reflects what Bhabha describes as the "Third Space," where "cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" (23, p. 55). This Third Space is not merely a fusion of East and West but a productive zone of rearticulation, where postcolonial subjects challenge hegemonic meaning and assert plural identities. Ultimately, the use of mimicry and hybridity in Indian English theatre does not merely illustrate the residue of colonialism; it performs its undoing. Through creative adaptations of form, language, and space, playwrights like Karnad and Padmanabhan expose the hollowness of colonial authority, reassert indigenous voices, and transform English-language theatre in India into a decolonial instrument of cultural resistance.

6. Identity and Social Fragmentation

The lingering shadows of colonialism in India are most poignantly visible not only in the nation's institutions but in its fragmented social consciousness. British colonial rule exacerbated divisions across religion, caste, gender, and class through mechanisms of governance that relied on segmentation and control. In post-independence India, these colonial structures have been internalized, particularly among the English-educated urban elite, manifesting in fractured identities and cultural dissonance. Indian English theatre—especially the works of Mahesh Dattani—offers a powerful dramaturgical space where these fissures are not only exposed but examined through deeply personal narratives.

In Bravely Fought the Queen, Dattani portrays a family torn between modern appearance and oppressive traditions. The female characters, Dolly and Alka, represent women who conform externally but suffer emotionally and psychologically due to patriarchal norms inherited from both Hindu orthodoxy and colonial morality. Alka bitterly observes:

"We wear our pain so well. Like expensive clothes. We mustn't soil them" (Dattani, Collected Plays: Volume One, 2000, p. 230) (24).

This metaphor equates emotional repression with colonial civility, where public respectability masks private despair. The performative elegance of their English-speaking, middle-class lifestyle conceals violence and silence—legacies of both Victorian morality and indigenous patriarchy, reinforcing each other in postcolonial society. **Dance Like a Man** similarly explores identity through the lens of gender and generational conflict. Jairaj, a male Bharatanatyam dancer, is suffocated by his father's rigid ideas of masculinity, which are rooted not in Indian culture but in colonial ideals. Jairaj's father, Amritlal, disapproves of dance as "effeminate," echoing the colonial administration's disdain for traditional Indian art forms. Jairaj's lament captures this internalized colonization:

"He wanted to make me a man. The only way he knew. A British public-school type of man." (Dattani, Collected Plays: Volume One, 2000, p. 438) (25).

Here, masculinity becomes a colonial script, and Jairaj's struggle is emblematic of an entire postcolonial generation caught between ancestral legacies and Western-imposed ideals. The English stage, in this context, becomes a mirror to the postcolonial Indian psyche—fragmented by desires for validation in both global and local registers.

Dattani's characters often experience identity crises stemming from what Frantz Fanon termed "epidermalization of inferiority," the internal belief that Western values are superior (30). This is vividly dramatized in Alka's constant effort to impress her English-speaking in-laws, even as her own life deteriorates. Her statement,

"I was told to behave. Speak less. Be graceful. Be English,"
reflects the codified colonial gender expectations still alive in Indian households (Dattani, 2000, p. 228) (26).
Moreover, the fragmentation extends beyond gender to religion and class. In Final Solutions (1993), Dattani explores Hindu-Muslim communalism as a deeply rooted colonial residue. The characters' inability to see beyond their religious identities echoes the divisive politics of British India's divide-and-rule strategy. The play reveals how this imposed binary still dominates the Indian imagination. As Hardika, the grandmother, reflects:
"We were told they were different. That's what our teachers said. That's what our leaders believed."
(Dattani, Final Solutions, 2000, p. 246) (27).
These lines expose how colonial pedagogy continues to inform postcolonial prejudices—religious, gendered, and otherwise. The English stage, in Dattani's hands, thus becomes a decolonial battleground, where internalized beliefs are confronted through dialogue and performance. Ultimately, Dattani's plays advocate for decolonial healing through self-reflexivity and collective reckoning. Rather than abandoning English altogether, Dattani appropriates it to voice indigenous concerns, creating a hybrid language of resistance. As he writes in his preface:
"My characters speak in English because they think in English. That itself is the tragedy." (Dattani, Collected Plays, 2000, p. xxi)
This admission recognizes English not as a neutral tool but as a colonial inheritance fraught with contradictions—one that Indian playwrights must critically inhabit and reshape. Through psychological realism and layered characterization, Dattani invites audiences to witness the damage colonial ideologies continue to inflict on the individual and collective Indian self—and, through theatre, to begin the process of decolonial restoration.

7. Towards a Decolonial Aesthetic in Indian English Theatre

In navigating the linguistic and cultural residues of colonial rule, Indian English theatre has developed what can now be described as a decolonial aesthetic—a creative and ideological response that challenges the Eurocentric models imposed during and after colonization. This aesthetic does not reject English as a medium outright, but rather reclaims it as a vessel for subversion, localization, and cultural recovery. As Walter Mignolo states in The Darker Side of Western Modernity, decolonial aesthetics are "those artistic practices that move away from the hegemony of modern/colonial aesthetics, refusing to reproduce its logic and values" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 10) (28). Indian dramatists have embraced this philosophy by re-centering indigenous forms of storytelling and epistemology within the frameworks of English-language theatre. Girish Karnad, for instance, resists Western dramatic models by integrating Indian oral traditions, myths, and folk performance structures such as yakshagana and bhagavata into his plays. In Hayavadana (1971), Karnad layers traditional narrative devices with existential themes, blending Sanskritic mythology and folk rituals into English dramaturgy, thereby disrupting linear Western dramatic conventions. As Karnad himself affirms in his introduction to Three Plays, "Myth and history in India have never been purely textual—they have always existed in performance" (Karnad, 1994, p. xi) (29).
Manjula Padmanabhan, by contrast, engages a futuristic frame to expose the persistence of neo-colonial structures and the global South's vulnerability to techno-capitalist exploitation. Her play Harvest (1997) critiques Western commodification of the Third World body, using English not as a tool of cultural surrender but as a means of resistance. In her preface, Padmanabhan notes, "The imagined West is not the villain—it is the Indian underclass's willing submission that haunts me" (Padmanabhan, 2003, p. 8) (30). This insight transforms Harvest into a critique of both colonial nostalgia and internalized neocolonialism, reinforcing the play's decolonial impulse.
Similarly, Mahesh Dattani's theatrical oeuvre interrogates postcolonial nationalism, gender oppression, and secular hypocrisy—legacies partly shaped by colonial moral codes and legal

structures. In Final Solutions (1993), Dattani examines communal violence as an outcome of India's unresolved colonial past, blending multiple voices and timelines to reflect the fractured nature of modern Indian identity. He writes, "I write about the invisible issues, the hidden agenda. I write about the marginalized… about the spaces we fear to occupy" (Dattani, 2000, p. 4) (31). Through such layered dramaturgy, Dattani reclaims English theatre in India as a space of epistemic disobedience, where marginalized identities can articulate their truths.

These interventions mark Indian English theatre as a borderland, to use Gloria Anzaldúa's term, a space of cultural friction and hybrid rearticulation. In Borderlands/La Frontera, Anzaldúa writes, "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary... where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3)(32). Indian English theatre inhabits such a borderland—not geographically, but culturally and linguistically—where Indian dramatists perform the labor of decolonization within the structures of a language inherited through conquest. Their work embodies a resistance to homogenization, a commitment to plurality, and a refusal to be trapped within the binaries of colonizer/colonized or tradition/modernity. Thus, a decolonial aesthetic in Indian English theatre becomes not merely a thematic concern but a performative practice, one that disrupts colonial continuities while opening up new possibilities for creative and cultural sovereignty.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, modern Indian English theatre stands as a dynamic and transformative space where the complexities of postcolonial identity, cultural memory, and linguistic inheritance are actively negotiated and redefined. Despite being rooted in a language imposed during colonial rule, Indian English theatre has evolved into a powerful medium for decolonial expression. Playwrights like Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, and Manjula Padmanabhan have harnessed the English language not as a symbol of subjugation but as a tool for subversion, embedding within it indigenous narratives, folk traditions, subaltern experiences, and critiques of both colonial and neocolonial power structures. Through their dramaturgical choices, they dismantle colonial aesthetics, challenge internalized hierarchies, and assert hybrid, pluralistic modes of storytelling that speak directly to the Indian socio-political landscape. This theatre not only exposes the lingering shadows of colonialism—what may be termed as "colonial hangovers"—but also performs acts of epistemic disobedience by resisting Western frameworks of knowledge and representation. It reclaims the stage as a borderland of voices, identities, and histories, offering a rich and nuanced form of cultural resistance. Ultimately, Indian English theatre does not merely reconcile with its colonial past—it transforms it into a catalyst for reclaiming narrative sovereignty and imagining decolonial futures.

References

1. Dharwadker, A. (2005). *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947*. University of Iowa Press.
2. Bharucha, R. (1993). *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. Routledge.
3. Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage.
4. Spivak, G. C. (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Nelson, C., & Grossberg, L. (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). Macmillan.
5. Mignolo, W. D. (2011). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke University Press.
6. Quijano, A. (2000). "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(3), 533–580.
7. Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press.
8. Dattani, M. (2000). *Collected Plays*. Penguin Books.
9. Padmanabhan, M. (2003). *Harvest*. Aurora Metro Press.
10. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African*

Literature. Heinemann.
11. Said, Edward W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
12. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L. (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). Macmillan.
13. Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
14. Mignolo, Walter D. (2011). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.
15. Quijano, Aníbal. (2000). "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(3), 533–580.
16. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey / Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.
17. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey / Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.
18. Karnad, Girish. (2005). *Collected Plays: Volume One*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
19. Dattani, Mahesh. (2000). *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
20. Karnad, Girish. (2005). *Collected Plays: Volume One*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
21. Dattani, Mahesh. (2000). *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
22. Padmanabhan, Manjula. (2003). *Harvest*. London: Aurora Metro Press.
23. Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
24. Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays: Volume One*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000.
25. Dattani, Mahesh. *Dance Like a Man*, in *Collected Plays: Volume One*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 438
26. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008.
27. Dattani, Mahesh. *Final Solutions*, in *Collected Plays: Volume One*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 246.
28. Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke University Press, 2011.
29. Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*. Oxford University Press, 1994
30. Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. Aurora Metro Press, 2003.
31. Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays: Volume I*. Penguin Books India, 2000.
32. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.