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BA English Honours | Semester III | Calicut University

Drama: Exploring the Literary and Performative Elements

Course Code: ENG3CJ201 • Module 2 Notes

MODULE II: WORLD THEATRE

1. The Global Theatrical Horizon: Transcending Eurocentric Canons

World Theatre encompasses the extraordinary plurality of dramatic traditions across continents, civilizations, and historical epochs. Far from being a monolithic aesthetic lineage originating exclusively in ancient Athens or Renaissance London, theatre is an innate human universal. Across Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, dramatic performance has emerged through ritual dance, ancestral mask performance, oral storytelling, street satire, and philosophical dialogue. Studying World Theatre requires dismantling eurocentric hierarchies, examining how diverse cultures utilize theatrical space to confront colonial violence, domestic trauma, spiritual reconciliation, and social revolution.

2. Global Stylistic Paradigms: Realism, Surrealism, and Expressionism

Modern global dramaturgy is defined by the dialectical interaction between three major aesthetic paradigms:

- **Realism (Naturalism):** Pioneered by Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov, realism strives for psychological verisimilitude. The stage represents an authentic slice of everyday life (*tranche de vie*), complete with colloquial conversational dialogue, authentic domestic interiors, and forensic social critique of bourgeois hypocrisy.
- **Surrealism:** Influenced by André Breton and psychoanalytic dream theory, surrealist drama liberates the unconscious mind from rational logic, staging bizarre dreamscapes, non-sequiturs, and startling symbolic juxtapositions.
- **Expressionism:** Prioritizes emotional and spiritual truth over external photographic reality, utilizing exaggerated physical gestures, distorted perspectives, and archetypal characters (e.g., The Father, The Worker) to express cosmic angst.

3. European Renaissance Drama: William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Act V)

Composed circa 1611, *The Tempest* stands as William Shakespeare's final solo masterpiece and an enduring allegory of colonial dominion, political usurpation, magical power, and human reconciliation. Act V represents the emotional, metaphysical, and philosophical climax of the entire romance.

TEXTUAL EXCERPT **Prospero's Renunciation of Magic (Act V, Scene 1)**

> *"This rough magic / I here abjure; and, when I have required*
> *Some heavenly music—which even now I do—*
> *To work mine end upon their senses that*
> *This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,*
> *Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,*
> *And deeper than did ever plummet sound*
> *I'll drown my book."*

In Act V, Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, reaches the zenith of his occult power: his enemies—King Alonso, the treacherous brother Antonio, and Sebastian—are completely paralyzed within his enchanted circle on the Mediterranean island. Prospero possesses the power to execute absolute bloody vengeance.

However, prompted by the spirit Ariel—who observes that if Prospero beheld their suffering, his "affections would become tender"—Prospero undergoes a profound ethical awakening. He declares: "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance."

Prospero voluntarily renounces his godlike supernatural art. The breaking of his wooden staff and the drowning of his occult book symbolize the surrender of totalitarian control. Crucially, post-colonial critics (such as Aimé Césaire and Edward Said) interpret Act V through the lens of colonial governance: Prospero frees Ariel, but his relationship with the indigenous islander Caliban remains fraught with colonial dispossession. In the final epilogue, Prospero steps forward as an ordinary mortal, asking the audience to release him from his island prison with their applause, bridging the illusion of theatre with the mortal reality of human forgiveness.

4. Decolonial African Community Drama: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want*

First produced in 1977 in the rural village of Kamiriithu, Kenya, *I Will Marry When I Want* (originally composed and staged in the Gikuyu language as *Ngaahika Ndeenda*) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngũgĩ wa Mirii is one of the most radical, influential anti-colonial theatrical projects in world history. Written not for elite university audiences in English, but created collaboratively with impoverished Kenyan peasants and factory workers, the play exposes the brutal realities of neo-colonial economic exploitation in post-independence Kenya.

The protagonist, Kĩgũũnda, is an impoverished laborer who fought bravely in the anti-colonial Mau Mau rebellion against the British, only to find that post-colonial independence (*Uhuru*) transferred power not to the masses, but to a corrupt indigenous capitalist bourgeoisie in league with multinational corporations and foreign Christian missions. Kĩgũũnda's wealthy employer, Kĩoi, coerces Kĩgũũnda into taking an extortionate bank loan to finance an expensive Christian wedding, ultimately defrauding Kĩgũũnda and seizing his sole possession: a tiny one-and-a-half-acre plot of ancestral land.

The play synthesizes traditional Gikuyu songs, communal dance, circumcision rituals, and agricultural rhythms with revolutionary Marxist political critique. By staging the play in the local mother tongue in an open-air village amphitheater built by the villagers themselves, Ngũgĩ demonstrated how theatre could directly educate, mobilize, and liberate the oppressed. The political impact was so explosive that the authoritarian Kenyan regime banned the play, destroyed the Kamiriithu cultural center with armed bulldozers, and imprisoned Ngũgĩ without trial in a maximum-security prison—proving that theatre remains one of the most feared and potent weapons of democratic dissent.

5. Breaking Taboos in Contemporary Indian Drama: Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

Mahesh Dattani, the first playwright in English to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, has redefined contemporary Indian theatre by fearlessly staging marginalized subjects—gender discrimination, queer identity, communalism, and domestic violence—that polite middle-class Indian society systematically sweeps under the rug. Commissioned by RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest), an NGO working with survivors, Dattani's play *Thirty Days in September* (2001) confronts one of the most deeply suppressed taboos in modern society: Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) within the sanctity of the family home.

The drama focuses on the fractured, dysfunctional relationship between Mala, a volatile young woman struggling with intimate relationships and emotional volatility, and her mother, Shanta. Through a gripping, non-linear dramaturgy that weaves between present-day confrontations and painful memory flashbacks, the horrifying truth emerges: throughout Mala's childhood, she was systematically sexually abused by her uncle

(Shanta's brother). When Mala desperately appealed to her mother for protection as a child, Shanta remained silent, willfully blinding herself to the abuse to preserve the family's social reputation and patriarchal honor.

Dattani constructs the play with extraordinary psychological depth, forensic realism, and emotional sensitivity. He does not treat Mala as a pathetic victim; rather, the drama charts her harrowing journey toward confronting the repressed trauma of her past and breaking the conspiracy of familial silence. The play indicts the hypocritical Indian family structure, where the preservation of patriarchal "honor" is ruthlessly prioritized over the physical safety and psychological soul of an innocent child. Dattani's theatre functions as an active therapeutic and social intervention, demonstrating that true healing can only begin when painful truths are brought out of the shadows and spoken on stage.

Advanced Theatrical Hermeneutics, Dramatic Theory & Performative Semiotics

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1. Core Theatrical Paradigms and Hermeneutic Debates

Critical inquiry into World Theatre Traditions, Decolonial Dramaturgy, and Social Taboos reveals fundamental dialectical tensions across dramatic history:

- **Dramatic Text versus Performance Text (The Page-Stage Divide):** Classical literary criticism treated the playwright's written script (the dramatic text) as the supreme, authoritative repository of aesthetic meaning. In contrast, performance theorists like Richard Schechner and Hans-Thies Lehmann demonstrate that the *performance text*—encompassing scenography, lighting cues, vocal cadence, physical gestures, blocking, and audience spatial relationship—constitutes an autonomous semiotic system that frequently subverts, deconstructs, or exceeds the written dialogue.
- **Cathartic Absorption versus Epic Alienation:** The Aristotelian dramatic tradition prioritized dramatic illusion, emotional mimesis, and tragic *catharsis* (the purgation of pity and fear), encouraging audiences to accept fatalistic suffering passively. Bertolt Brecht radically overturned this with *Epic Theatre*, deploying the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or defamiliarization effect) to dismantle emotional complacency, reminding audiences that social conditions are man-made historical constructs that can be changed through collective political action.
- **Feminist and Decolonial Dramaturgy:** Traditional dramatic canons historically codified patriarchal and eurocentric perspectives, marginalizing female agency and subaltern oral performance traditions. Feminist dramatists (e.g., Caryl Churchill, Manjula Padmanabhan, Lynn Nottage) dismantle the voyeuristic male gaze and expose domestic gender violence, while decolonial African and Indian playwrights (e.g., Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mahesh Dattani) reclaim indigenous languages, folk rituals, and subaltern voices from colonial suppression.

2. Comparative Matrix: Classical, Modernist, and Post-Dramatic Theatre

A structured comparative assessment delineates dramatic architecture across theatrical epochs in Drama: Exploring the Literary and Performative Elements:

Theatrical Dimension	Classical Aristotelian Drama	Modernist / Epic Theatre	Contemporary Post-Dramatic Theatre
Dramatic Structure	Linear 5-act pyramid; strict unity of time, place, and action.	Episodic montage; narrative interruptions, songs, and didactic projection placards.	Non-linear, fragmented, deconstructed; paratactic collage of sound, body, and space.
Spectator Relationship	Passive emotional empathy leading to spiritual catharsis.	Critical, analytical observer provoked into socio-political consciousness.	Active co-creator, sensory participant, immersive witness in shared space.
Theatrical Medium	Proscenium arch stage with fourth-wall illusion.	Exposed theatrical apparatus, bare lighting rigs, visible stagehands.	Multimodal hybridity: digital projections, VR, performance art installations, found spaces.
Role of Language	Supreme vehicle of poetic thought, characterization, and plot.	Dialectical argument, social critique, and defamiliarized gestures (*Gestus*).	De-hierarchized; language functions as acoustic sound, texture, or visual graphic alongside bodies.

3. Glossary of Essential Dramatic and Theatrical Terms

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Mise-en-Scène	French Theatrical Theory	The totality of visual and spatial staging—sets, costumes, lighting, blocking, and props—arranged within the performance space.
Post-Dramatic Theatre	Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999)	A theatrical paradigm that dismantles the primacy of the dramatic text, emphasizing sensory presence, physical performativity, and non-representational aesthetics.
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Liminality	Victor Turner / Schechner	The transitional, threshold state during ritual or theatrical performance where ordinary social rules are suspended and new identities can be forged.

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