

An introduction to
post-colonial theatre

Brian Crow with Chris Banfield



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For Margaret and Bill Crow
and for Vayu Naidu

Preface

A characteristic feature of the development of Western art forms during the twentieth century has been the frequent and highly fruitful exploitation by artistic practitioners of all kinds of materials drawn from non-Western cultures. This is as true of the theatre as it is of music, painting and sculpture. For example, a profound influence on Artaud's formulation of the Theatre of Cruelty was, famously, his discovery of Balinese dance-drama at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931. Brecht seems to have discovered what epic acting could be only after he watched the Chinese actors of Mei Lan-fang's company in Moscow in 1935. More recently, two of the most influential figures in contemporary theatre, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, have drawn much of their inspiration from their encounters with the theatre of non-Western cultures – Grotowski mainly from Indian classical dance-drama, Brook from a variety of Oriental and African sources.

Creatively stimulating though these non-Western influences on European and American theatre have evidently been, one can ask legitimate questions about the extent to which Western practitioners have considered, understood or even much cared about the nature and significance of their borrowings in relation to their original cultural contexts. In this respect, as Rustom Bharucha and others have shown, the stylistic exploitation of, say, Indian forms of theatre has been largely opportunistic and culturally unequal, determined by the perceived needs of Western practitioners and audiences rather than by a genuine effort to confront Indian realities as they are refracted through its rich theatrical culture. This is not to say that the last few years have not witnessed an encouraging growth of appreciation, in an increasingly multicultural context, of non-Western performance

complementing the rise of 'world music' and of non-European fine arts. But it is to suggest that audiences and readers in the West have still much to discover about both the traditional and contemporary drama and theatre of what we have come to know as the Third World.

This book seeks to make a contribution to that process by introducing the work of some of the leading dramatists of that world. An initial word of explanation is required here, however; for though playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad all come from and write about what we normally think of as Third World societies (Nigeria, the West Indies and India, respectively), this is not true of some of the other practitioners we consider: Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona from South Africa, Jack Davis from Australia or August Wilson from the USA. Each of these countries, of course, has a colonial history, which profoundly affected its subsequent social, political and cultural development. Even the USA, which is more usually thought of as itself the major neocolonial power of the twentieth century, has a literature and drama that emerged from the distinctive experiences and tensions of colonization. As the authors of a recent influential book on post-colonial literary theory observe, America's 'relationship with the metropolitan centre as it evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for post-colonial literatures everywhere'.¹ Nevertheless these are countries whose white populations and cultures, at least, are very much of the 'First' World, as are their 'mainstream' theatre and other arts. How, then, can dramatists from them be regarded as other than First World writers, or meaningfully grouped with dramatists from, for example, Nigeria or India?

The crucial point here is that as former colonies of white settlement these countries have indigenous or imported slave populations whose historically oppressed and relatively impoverished lives may appropriately be described as the Third World within the First. The condition common to all the dramatists considered here is in fact that of cultural subjection or subordination. (Fugard is

¹ Bill Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

exceptional in that, though he belongs by race to the dominators, in his artistic practice and his dissenting politics he has consistently taken the side of the oppressed.) Central to their experience of life – and thus to their art – is the knowledge that their people and culture have not been permitted a 'natural' historical development, but have been disrupted and dominated by others.

This is, of course, only one of several possible ways of offering an introduction to post-colonial drama and theatre. But inasmuch as the condition of cultural domination and oppression has been one of the most widespread and defining of modern experiences, and is a central component of post-colonialism, it seems a legitimate and fruitful one. But it should be stressed that, given the range of cultures from which our chosen dramatists come, it is not surprising that there is great diversity – as well as some common factors – in the historical processes of political and economic subjugation and in their cultural implications. The introductory chapter therefore explores some of these issues in more detail, to create a context for the particular responses to felt cultural oppression in the work of the dramatists discussed.

Though we have tried to place our playwrights in their cultural and artistic contexts, this is neither a comprehensive survey of drama and theatre in the Third or 'oppressed' World, nor even of the particular cultures to which they belong. A select bibliography offers guidance to where discussions not attempted here may be found – though much, it should be said, remains to be done. If what follows helps engender interest in and enthusiasm for the writers discussed, and stimulates thinking about drama's relation to the experiences of oppression and subjugation, it will have served its purpose.

The chapters on Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad were written by Chris Banfield; the rest of the book was written by Brian Crow.

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Introduction

At its peak in the 1930s the British Empire covered almost a quarter of the world's land surface and embraced nearly a quarter of its population. It spanned every continent except Europe. If the United States had been long lost – and had already replaced Britain as the world's most powerful economic and political force – it still retained Canada and its Caribbean territories, Iraq and Egypt as its main colonies in the Middle East, large possessions in West, East and Southern Africa, a string of Asian colonies the jewel of which was India, and Australia and New Zealand. The nature and status of these constituents of empire were extremely varied. Canada, South Africa and Australasia, like the United States before them, had been settled by whites who had either decimated the indigenous peoples in their push for territorial expansion and their desire to reproduce European society, or ruthlessly exploited and controlled them: these white 'dominions' had already been granted 'responsible' government under the Crown. Britain's main Arab colonies were acquired as part of the colonial redivision after the First World War, and were soon to be granted their political if not entirely their economic independence (Iraq in 1932, Egypt in 1936). The tropical colonies of the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, except for the very special case of India, were ruled by governors and colonial officials without any prospect of the natives participating in government, at least within the foreseeable future. India was different for several reasons, not least the sheer size of the country and its population and the fact that it was already a highly developed military empire before the British arrived. The overwhelming pressures of Indian nationalism, combined with the Second World War, were to ensure the granting of independence in 1947.

The non-European peoples contained within this vast empire had little or nothing in common except their subjection. But even the forms of subjection varied widely, reflecting the variety of motives behind particular acts of colonization and the nature of the indigenous cultures colonized. If, in Australia, the invasion of white settlers often entailed the genocide of the Aboriginal population, or, as in South Africa, the ruthless economic exploitation and social control of the native peoples (culminating in the Nationalist government's official policy of apartheid from 1948), in India or Nigeria the everyday lives of most peasants remained more or less untouched by colonial subjection. And it was a different story again for those descendants of the vast number of Africans who were enslaved and shipped off to the Caribbean, or – outside the British Empire – to Brazil and the plantations of the southern United States. Nominally free men and women in the world's largest democratic republic, black Americans had to confront widespread racial discrimination, severe economic disadvantage, and the traumatic social and cultural disruptions of forced migration (a double migration in the case of those who sought a better life in the North).

Subordinated people experienced their domination differently even within the same society. The pain of humiliated subjugation might have been of more or less equal intensity for, say, the educated young black American schoolteacher or small-scale businessman, with aspirations to live like the white lower middle class, and the illiterate emigrant sharecropper from the South struggling to survive at the bottom of the heap in a Northern ghetto, but the context and psychological impact of that humiliation were likely to be very different. If, in colonial West Africa or India, close proximity to white authority figures, and the desire to 'improve oneself' could lead to outward – and sometimes internalized – deference on the part of 'white-collar' natives, the same was unlikely to be the case for the majority, whose contact with the white instruments of their colonial subjection was in any case often minimal. Apart from the humiliations enforced by the colour bar or petty apartheid the experience of colonial oppression was, for the masses, more likely to be blatantly economic and social, involving exploitation of their labour and

disregard for what they might regard as their basic human rights, than subtly psychological.

A paradox, then, of the native experience of colonial (or, in the case of the black American, a sort of quasi-colonial) domination and oppression is that it was often not the poorest and most exploited but the more educated and relatively more privileged, those having closer contact with the agents of colonial domination, who felt most keenly the psychological and cultural impact of their subjugation. The classic studies of this syndrome are those by the Antillean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who identified what he calls 'a massive psycho-existential complex' in the relations between the coloured colonized and white colonialists, involving 'an existential deviation' forced on its victims by white civilization and European culture.

Central to Fanon's thinking is Hegel's perception of *recognition* as the basis of self-consciousness and of human relationship: 'Self-consciousness exists *in itself* and *for itself*, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized.'¹ In this world of 'reciprocal recognitions' every individual requires the recognition of the other so as to win what Fanon calls 'the certainty of oneself'. We all, in other words, experience our being through others. What has happened, in the historical relations between whites and blacks, is that because of its belief in its racial superiority, associated with the economic and military dominance of colonialism, the white race has disrupted the reciprocity of this fundamental process of recognition. The black person looks for the human recognition accorded him by the other; but when the other is white, that acknowledgement is withheld, and the black is deprived of his 'certainty of himself'. So the black man 'makes himself abnormal'; and the white 'is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion'.²

In this process of mutual recognition and cultural relationship language is crucial. In chapter one of *Black Skin, White Masks*,

¹ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, quoted in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press, 1986, p. 216.

² *Ibid.*, p. 225.

entitled 'The Negro And Language', Fanon declares that 'to speak is to exist absolutely for the other'.³ The act of communication through speech implies the agreement, by the speaker, to be at least for that moment a subject who voluntarily functions as an object for the other. At the same time, to 'speak a language is to take on a world, a culture' (p.38). The problem, in Fanon's view, is that given the relations between black and white, the white other only recognizes the humanity of his black interlocutor to the extent that the latter has mastery of the 'white' language: 'The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language'⁴ – which is also the mastery of French culture. A European foreigner trying to communicate with a French person but ignorant of his or her language may cause frustration but will not be despised, since it is understood that that person has a language, a history, a culture of his or her own. Not so the black, who is credited with none of these attributes: he can only aspire to the status of an honorary Frenchman, to the extent that education gives him a language that endows him with at least the appearance of 'civilization'. Fanon notes that such attitudes have been accepted even by many blacks: the black immigrant to France changes his language and self-presentation, and is a different person when he returns home; the African black may pretend to be an Antillean, and the Antillean is annoyed when he is taken for an African, since it is thought that the latter is less 'civilized', less 'French', than the person from the Caribbean.

There were important cultural differences between British and French colonialism, with its 'assimilationist' policy of creating 'black Frenchmen', and Fanon is in any case careful to insist that his observations and conclusions are valid only for the francophone West Indies, his personal experience of which – along with his work for the Algerian national liberation movement – so deeply influenced his theories. Moreover, he recognizes that the form of cultural and racial alienation experienced by those educated persons like himself is 'of an almost intellectual character', and quite different from the experi-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

ences of, say, a labourer, or a peasant in francophone West Africa or Indo-China. Nevertheless, Fanon asserts that 'the same behaviour patterns obtain in every race that has been subjected to colonization'.⁵

Fanon spoke with the authority both of personal experience and of his knowledge as a psychiatrist. Much that he wrote is echoed by other black writers and intellectuals, with quite different kinds of colonial or oppressed histories, when they comment on the psychological and cultural phenomena of subjugation. For example the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, whose work we shall consider later, has written of 'the fragmented and even distorted consciousness of the black people in the midst of a domineering culture'.⁶ And the black American writer James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, writes eloquently of what he believes has been the characteristic experience of generations of black Americans:

This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation, fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him, and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible – this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains for all its horror, something very beautiful.⁷

Baldwin's evocation of the desire to confirm a vital sense of identity and self-worth is a need described by many writers whose cultural legacy is one of subjugation and oppression. It is the inevitable reaction to a social context in which an alien, white power calls the shots, has the power to define, to judge. It is evidently not a single, unitary experience, the same in all contexts. The desire for self-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, London: Methuen, 1993, p. 52.

⁷ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, London: Penguin, 1964, p. 84.

validation, for a secure sense of identity, might involve a psychological internalization of a white 'ideal', and be expressed, like the conduct of Fanon's Antillean in France, as mimicry of white language, behaviour and attitudes. But this is an extreme type of reaction to subjugation, and as Baldwin points out, 'I do not know many Negroes who are eager to be "accepted" by white people, still less to be loved by them.'⁸ A quite different kind of response to the need for a recognition of one's human worth may be resistance and self-assertion, and what Soyinka calls the 'quest for racial self-retrieval', the recovery of 'an authentic cultural existence'.⁹ It is just such a sustained and strong resistance, the oppressed person's achievement of his or her own 'authority', which Baldwin identifies as the 'something very beautiful' contained in the struggle to achieve identity.

We must be cautious, even so, about assuming that all colonized or oppressed peoples have somehow 'lost' their 'identity'. Soyinka, for example, is scathing about the kind of modern African writer who 'even tried to give society something that the society had never lost – its identity'.¹⁰ The exercise of oppressive power may have sought to impair – or at least had the effect of doing so – the sense of a unique cultural identity by eradicating it altogether, or by bastardizing it, or by marginalizing it to the point of impotence. Some subjugated peoples, the Australian Aborigines for example, have been so culturally devastated by white invasion that many of its members have virtually lost all connection with, and sustenance from, their cultural heritage. But in colonized societies with rich indigenous cultures (for example West Africa or India) that remained largely intact – whatever the colonialists may have wished or done – not only was cultural identity not lost, it has served as a potent weapon in the struggle for independence and liberation.

Similar caution is necessary about the issue of language in subordinated cultures, which as Fanon and others have shown is crucially related to the need for a secure cultural identity, and to the achievement of self-worth and self-determination. It is rather fashionable, in discussions of post-colonial literature and drama, to assert

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, pp. 86, 87.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

that colonial subjugation robbed indigenous writers of their own 'voices', reducing them to mimicry or silence. Only gradually, according to this line of thought, did post-colonial writers throw off their linguistic and cultural chains, re-appropriating the language of subjection and reforming it to become an authentic expression of their own experience. Though there are enough elements of truth in this account to make it persuasive, there are also serious omissions and distortions. It tends to ignore – perhaps because of linguistic ignorance – the remarkable range of literature and performance in indigenous languages that articulated criticism of and resistance to colonial rule and its characteristics. It also seems hard to square with a passage such as the following, from the Australian Aboriginal dramatist and poet Jack Davis's autobiography:

I had always been interested in language, and found the English language and its history exciting to study. The hidden roots of English, in particular Latin and Greek, made the dictionary a constant source of fascination to me. Now that I was living among the Nyoongahs, that interest embraced the Nyoongah language.¹¹

What Davis expresses here is his fascination both with English, in the case of the Aborigines the language of a particularly barbaric oppression, and with his own tribal language – with apparently no great distinction made between them, or sense of resentment against the 'alien' tongue.

Something equally surprising – at least if one thinks of post-colonial writers as 'silenced' by the language of colonial subjection – is expressed by the Indian playwright Badal Sircar, whose work will also be discussed later:

To us, it [i.e. English] is not a neutral language. It is associated with the British imperialist rule over our country. By rights and by nature I should feel aversion to it. Yet this language has been more of a medium of my education than my own language –

¹¹ Jack Davis with Keith Chesson, *Jack Davis: a Life-Story*, Melbourne: Dent, 1988, p. 55.

and for me this language has been a window to the wide world. Hence, logically, I should be thankful to it. Another contradiction.¹²

And yet another is that in spite of Sircar's personally positive feelings about the 'imperialist' language (which still, paradoxically, provides the common language for educated Indians) his view is that it would be an entirely inappropriate language for his own theatre, and that his Bengali compositions resist completely successful translation into English.

These examples are not intended to demonstrate that post-colonial writers, whatever the (mainly Western) theorists may say, have been really quite comfortable with the inherited colonial language, but to suggest the real complexity of the language issue. If some, like Badal Sircar and of late the Kenyan playwright and novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, have renounced English as an artistic language and prefer to compose in their native tongues, others – such as Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott – have preferred, whatever their sense of ambivalence about it, to write in the 'imperialist' language, forging distinctive and often strikingly powerful styles of English. Such choices have implications, of course, for the nature and extent of their audience: as Ngugi points out, 'the choice of a language already predetermines the answer to the most important question for producers of imaginative literature: For whom do I write? Who is my audience?'¹³ And this in turn, as he insists, has implications for what they write about and what attitudes they take to their material. In any case, though the post-colonial dramatist can hardly avoid issues of language and the ambivalent and often contradictory feelings attached to them, what needs to be stressed is the richness with which they have created the linguistic means to render their and their people's experiences. Whether in their own indigenous languages, or in some inflection of the perhaps both loved and hated colonial tongue, it seems to be latter-day metropolitan arrogance – however well-meaning – to suppose that the native has ever been rendered

¹² Badal Sircar, unpublished manuscript, 1988.

¹³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics*, London: Heinemann, 1981, pp. 53–4.

mute. Post-colonial writers and artists, like ordinary people, seem always to have been able to communicate what they wished to their chosen audiences.

If there have been linguistic traps that the post-colonial dramatist has been forced to negotiate, there have also been issues of class, ethnicity and nationality that could not be avoided. The general context informing these debates concerning identity and language is the desire for cultural self-determination and an integrated identity, what Soyinka has called 'cultural certitude', and the attempt to achieve it through a kind of cultural 'return to roots'. This is expressed in different ways by different writers, but they seem to have something like the same thing in mind. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for instance, speaks of the fundamental aim of 'restoring the African personality to its true human creative potentialities in history', involving 'a return to the roots of our being', which seems to have much in common with Soyinka's call for the 'evocation of an authentic tradition in the cause of society's transformation process', which he also sees as a 'self-retrieval' or 'cultural recollection'. For Derek Walcott this process seems to involve the artist, and specifically the actor, in a 'return through a darkness whose terminus is amnesia' if West Indian theatre is ever to express the authentic cultural being of its people: 'For imagination and body to move with original instinct, we must begin again from the bush. That return journey, with all its horror of rediscovery, means the annihilation of what is known.'¹⁴ And the idea is evidently as important in contemporary Indian theatre as it is amongst writers of Africa and the black diaspora: during the 1988 national drama festival in New Delhi a 'Theatre of Roots' round-table was convened to discuss the progress of a scheme first implemented some four years earlier.

The common impulse to a 'return to roots' has forced many writers to confront other dilemmas relating to race, class and nationhood. K. S. Kothari, one of the moving spirits behind the 'theatre of roots' movement in India, has spoken of 'both the need and search for that indefinable quality called 'Indianness' in Indian

¹⁴ Derek Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says: An Overture' in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986, pp. 25–6.

theatre'.¹⁵ But what can such 'Indianness' be, in a nation made up of several major religions, so many different classes and social groups, so many different peoples and languages, so many and diverse regional interests? Again, Soyinka and Ngugi, themselves writing from apparently differing political positions, have articulated the need to restore the African cultural personality as a major element of social development, but what is it that must be restored? Nigeria and Kenya, as national entities, are the creations of British imperialism, the forcible amalgamations of different peoples with different languages and often widely diverse cultures. In their histories since independence intense class and factional conflicts, involving widely differing economic interests, standards of living and ideologies, have developed within the fragile arena of the nation-state. Can there really be a 'Nigerianness' or a 'Kenyaness', or simply an 'African-ness', which somehow transcends all these factors?

The belief that there are indeed such essences has sometimes led to what Edward Said calls 'nativism' – phenomena, such as the negritude movement, which conjure up potent images of what a people or community was supposed to be before colonialism. As Said points out, such imagery is ahistorical, concerned more with 'the metaphysics of essences' than with any ascertainable historical realities. This kind of 'return', in cultural terms, is often associated with some mood or other of nostalgia, and the exaltation of what Soyinka scornfully calls 'the resuscitated splendours of the past' and Derek Walcott 'a schizophrenic daydream of an Eden' that existed before exile. Politically, it may be the ideological banner waved by reactionary nationalism, or the tattered cloak that conceals the nakedness of corrupt, incompetent and exploitative politicians.

But there is evidently another altogether more positive side to the idea of a cultural 'return'. This has to do with the urgent need of subjugated peoples, as an essential part of the process of decolonization, to recuperate their own histories, their own social and cultural traditions, their own narratives and discourses – all in the service, not of a myth of racial essence, but of what Said describes, citing Fanon,

¹⁵ K. S. Kothari, "'Theatre of Roots', Encounter with Tradition', *TDR*, 33:4 (T124).

as a 'liberation' that is also 'a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness'.¹⁶ Such an encounter with the real past and with real traditions may for many have to include, as James Baldwin points out, the confronting of horror, anguish and humiliation. It is of course bound to bring tensions and contradictions to the surface, and to provoke difficult questions. It is likely to force, say, a Nigerian or Indian dramatist to consider – if he or she is a Yoruba or a Gujerati drawing on specific cultural materials from his or her particular ethnic well – how effectively he may hope to recuperate and communicate a collective 'self-apprehension' for his *national* audience. Or to ponder, with Soyinka, on whether the new African nations (or, one might add, the subcontinent of India) 'may not actually possess a unified culture', and to debate his ambivalent conclusion that 'we cannot afford to agonise unnecessarily over the suspicion'.¹⁷ But such a 'return to roots' will be a creative and healthy process if it rediscovers and reinterprets what that same writer calls 'those elements which render a society unique in its own being, with a potential for its progressive transformation',¹⁸ rather than an ideologically convenient mythology.

For the post-colonial playwright theatre has meant both traditional indigenous performance – which has often had to be rediscovered and reinvented – and the theatre that the colonists brought with them from the metropolitan power, usually in particularly impoverished and amateur forms. In the latter case, its penetration was almost entirely restricted to urban areas, sometimes only to the larger, more 'metropolitan' cities. Its audiences, at least outside elite educational institutions, were mainly white colonists and the more 'culture conscious' of the indigenous bourgeoisie. Its legacy was the imposition of the proscenium arch stage, the 'well-made' realist play, and, in the British Empire, Shakespeare.

It is easy to see the absurdity of an audience sweating its way through a stilted performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1993, p. 278.

¹⁷ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, pp. 138–39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

An Inspector Calls in an ill-equipped colonial hall on a hot tropical night in Africa or India, especially when all around, unknown or unacknowledged, were indigenous theatrical riches that the Western avant-garde would one day set out on cultural safaris to 'discover'. Less obvious is the likelihood that such performances, inadequate as they may have been, were often windows to new and exciting artistic worlds for prospective young dramatists who were fascinated by Shakespeare's language, by the psychological insights of an Ibsen or a Priestley, and by the wonders – however limited in such settings – wrought by modern stage technology. So yet another contradiction: metropolitan theatre as imposition and at the same time as catalyst; as alien import and as access to new experience that was not all alien since at its best and most interesting it spoke to some at least of our putative young dramatists' experiences. And if, like a Soyinka or a Sircar, one then went to the metropole, to witness and even participate in the theatrical experiments being conducted – we are speaking now of the 1960s – at theatres such as the Royal Court in London or by companies such as the Living Theatre in America, then the contradictions could only be heightened – especially when the young post-colonial dramatist's excited contact was with Western practitioners who, ironically, were drawing much of their inspiration from their (usually highly selective) acquaintance with 'colonial' theatre.

If such Western influences have been formative for young post-colonial playwrights, so has been the desire, usually once a certain artistic maturity has been achieved, to reacquire (or acquaint) themselves with their indigenous theatrical and performance traditions. In contrast with the Western tradition of realist drama and acting, these traditional modes of performance are usually stylized, often incorporate dance, music and song, and operate from an oral rather than a literary base. In relation to the dramatists discussed here, they embrace a remarkable range, including Indian classical and folk forms, West African and Caribbean storytelling performance, Yoruba ritual dramas performed in honour of Ogun and other deities, Aboriginal storytelling and corroborees, and preaching in black American churches.

The rediscovery (or, sometimes, discovery) of indigenous

performance traditions has often served to emphasize the limitations of Western realism in terms both of writing and performance. For Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad, for example, it has offered a means of escape from the physical constraints of the proscenium arch stage, with its distinctive and for them alien separation of the worlds of stage and audience. As Suresh Awasthi has pointed out, the first proscenium arch theatres built in Bombay and Calcutta in the 1860s radically changed the traditional character of Indian theatrical space, which had included an intimate, interactive relationship between spectators and actors and the capacity to watch performances from different angles and levels, allowing a constantly changing perception of the action. As we shall see, however, the 'return' to traditional theatre has not entailed an acceptance, by either Sircar or Karnad, of the traditional values associated with it. As Karnad has pointed out, in the hands of a playwright with a dissenting political agenda and a contemporary sensibility¹⁹ the forms of folk theatre can be used for critical and subversive ends.

But the post-colonial dramatist's reversion to native traditions of performance has done more than provide him or her with a rich source of stylistic or dramaturgical conventions and devices. We said earlier that traditional theatre also constitutes one of the main artistic means of cultural recuperation generally; and in this respect the rediscovery of the indigenous traditions allows the dramatist to tap into the current that energized the cultural past. The full significance that such an engagement may have is revealed by Wole Soyinka's reflections on the 'drama of the gods' in his *Myth, Literature and the African World*. For Soyinka, the preservation of his society's awareness of its interrelation with the natural and spiritual orders requires the enactment of communal ritual drama in which the protagonist-actor relives the god Ogun's original, redemptive journey across the 'dark continuum of transition' connecting the 'worlds' of the living, the ancestors and the unborn. Through his immersion in the 'primal reality' of the drama, the ritual actor performs a vital function for the community; 'he is enabled empathically to transmit its essence to the choric participants of the

¹⁹ See chapter 7 below.

rites²⁰ and thus to energize and strengthen them. In spite of 'ritualistic earthing' – provided by the surrounding participant-audience as well as sacrifices and propitiations – the ritual protagonist, like Ogun, risks personal destruction, presumably in the form of psychic disintegration, as he makes his journey across the abyss of transition. The stage of ritual drama, then, is not a place of mimetic representation, but the dangerous arena of spiritual confrontation and transformation. By comparison, literary-based tragic drama is a rather pale shadow – a 'mundane reflection' in Soyinka's phrase – of this ritual performance. But it is nevertheless the experience of confrontation and integration with cosmic forces, conducted on behalf of an entire community, that Soyinka seeks to recreate.

For Derek Walcott, too, traditional performance is a source of more than technical inspiration. If, in his view, the state has politicized and commercialized 'folk' art for its own ends, it has not succeeded in colonizing the genuine folk imagination, and he has beautifully evoked its world and its significance for the making of theatre:

And there were vampires, witches, gardeurs, masseurs [usually a fat black foreign-smelling blackness, with gold-rimmed spectacles], not to mention the country where the night withheld a whole, unstarred mythology of flaming, shed skins. Best of all, in the lamplit doorway at the creaking hour, the stories sung by old Sidone, a strange croaking of Christian and African songs . . . They sang of children lost in the middle of a forest, where the leaves' ears pricked at the rustling of devils, and one did not know if to weep for the first two brothers of every legend, one strong, the other foolish.²¹

The oral folk tradition has profoundly influenced his own and West Indian theatre, Walcott observes, primarily by communicating its symmetry, its universal sense of triadic structure:

²⁰ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 33.

²¹ Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says', pp. 23–4.

It kept the same digital rhythm of three movements, three acts, three moral revelations, whether it was the tale of three sons or three bears, whether it ended in tragedy or happily ever after.

It has sprung from hearthside or lamplit hut-door in an age when the night outside was a force, inimical, infested with devils, wood-demons, a country for the journey of the soul, and any child who has heard its symmetry chanted would want to retell it when he was his own story-teller, with the same respect for its shape.²²

If the folk-tale performance offers a formal model for the Caribbean playwright it has also, at least for Walcott, been a larger cultural inspiration – 'a country for the journey of the soul'.

Extraordinary as it would have seemed at the peak of its power in the 1930s, the British Empire had virtually ceased to exist by the early 1960s. The first wave of decolonization, mainly in the Middle East and South East Asia, occurred in the late 1940s, soon after – and partly because of – the Second World War. The second wave began in 1956, with the first tropical African country, Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast), gaining its independence in 1957. By 1963 most of the former British colonies in Africa were independent, as also were Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago.

But for all the high hopes of the radical nationalists, who had achieved independence so quickly and in many (but not all) cases painlessly, their freedom from colonial subjection did not mean the end of domination *per se*. If colonialism involved the direct political and economic control of a subject territory, in the period of neo-colonialism since independence control has typically been exercised indirectly, by means variously of unequal trade relations, indebtedness, and the threat (and sometimes the reality) of military or economic force. In this new age of imperialism the two great imperial powers have been the USA and, until its recent demise, the USSR.

The forms of subordination prevailing until very recently in the 'client' states of the Eastern Bloc and in the peripheral capitalist countries of the Third World were very different (and diverse even

²² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

amongst themselves), but one feature in common has been the important role in both of cultural manipulation in supporting political and economic subjugation. An indication of this, in Eastern Europe, is paradoxically suggested by the crucial roles played by cultural forces and institutions in the overthrow of the ruling communist governments – for example, the churches in the German Democratic Republic and the liberal progressives, many of them associated with the arts and media, clustered around the playwright-president Vaclav Havel in the Civic Forum movement, in what used to be Czechoslovakia. For the Kenyan writer and political dissident Ngugi wa Thiong'o, cultural imperialism 'becomes the major agency of control during neocolonialism'²³ and 'the cultural and the psychological aspects of imperialism become even more important as instruments of mental and spiritual coercion'.²⁴ What Ngugi has in mind is effective Western (primarily American) control of news and information, of the images disseminated on television, video, film and radio, of book and magazine publishing, and even of higher and more specialized forms of education and training.

Nominal independence, then – at least for those who agree with Ngugi and other radical critics of the contemporary world order – is no guarantee of cultural self-determination. The struggle goes on, in a particularly intense form, for the definition and assertion of an authentic rather than an imposed identity, by those who have long been subjugated and subordinated. As Edward Said points out, 'the assertion of identity is by no means a mere ceremonial matter' in the contemporary world.²⁵ And indeed, given the many failures of democracy and development as well as the blatant corruption and power seeking in the post-colonial nations, their writers and intellectuals can no longer confidently evoke the images and emotions that fuelled the earlier national independence movements. In some cases these have calcified or been distorted into reactionary political and cultural 'returns', to roots identified in religious terms (for example, as fundamentalist Islam or Hinduism) or as some kind of ethnic 'essence'.

²³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics*, p. 5.

²⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre*, London: James Currey, 1993, p. 52.

²⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p.42.

In such post- but neocolonial contexts dramatists have created theatre for a variety of urgent cultural functions. They have often been concerned to use the stage to define and affirm their people's cultural 'personality' – in the face of continuing cultural, economic and political subjugation – by recovering the past, freed from the biases of metropolitan or mainstream history. They have often sought to expose the forces that still obstruct liberation, whether these be, for blacks in America, Australia or South Africa, the oppressions of dominant white society or the mendacity of ruling indigenous elites, or – and these are sometimes the most potent antagonists, and the most difficult to confront – attitudes and behaviour ingrained within the oppressed themselves. They have sometimes looked inward, questioning the nature, status and effect of art and the artist in their societies. And they have also, at their finest, intimated where might be found the sources of cultural renewal – for culture is a continuing process of decay and renewal – where one might at least begin the journey towards the country of the soul.

Derek Walcott and a Caribbean theatre of revelation

When Frantz Fanon made his remarkable analysis of the psycho-existential nature of relations between dominators and dominated under colonialism, he admitted that he was writing from the specific perspective of an educated Antillean, and that therefore 'my observations and my conclusions are valid only for the Antilles'.¹ But at the risk of self-contradiction he also insisted, a little later in the same work, that 'the same behaviour patterns obtain in every race that has been subjected to colonization'.² It may be that though the same behaviour patterns do indeed apply more or less universally, they may be more in evidence in, and more acutely relevant to, certain conditions of subjection than to others. There is at least the possibility that Fanon's insights into the problematic complexities of interpersonal relations, in a racist and colonial context, spring not just from his particular vocational interests as a psychiatrist but derive, more generally, from the distinctive character of colonial forms of domination in the Caribbean. Marked by its distinctive history of plantation slavery and ethnic multiplicity (European and African, but also Indian and Chinese), and the particular kinds of interpersonal racial interaction associated with that history, it may be that there has tended to be an especially intense psychological dimension to the Caribbean experience of domination that has not been felt, at least not in such an acute form, in some other colonial and neocolonial contexts.

Fanon notes, with wry humour, some of the nuances of racial

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

discrimination between Antillean blacks themselves, and between Antilleans and other blacks from francophone Africa. Many commentators have observed the significance attached to gradations of skin colour in the West Indies, even in the post-independence era. And, in what seems to be a related phenomenon, several West Indian writers, including V. S. Naipaul and the subject of this discussion, Derek Walcott, have commented on another common Caribbean psycho-cultural characteristic, at least among some of the educated black elite – the desolating sense that nothing genuinely original or worthwhile could be created on these islands, that its inhabitants in general and, alas, its artists in particular, have been doomed to the sterile mimicry of others, caught – and lost – as they have been between their originating cultures (African but also Indian and to some extent Chinese) and the metropolitan colonial or neocolonial societies (Britain, France, America).

In Walcott's case it is easy to see that such a perception might well be reinforced by his twenty-year struggle to establish a professional theatre company in Trinidad – by far the most sustained attempt to do so – which ended in failure and disillusionment. A similar conviction may also be strengthened, at least for those seeking artistically serious but commercially viable theatre in the West Indies, by the relative lack of popular enthusiasm for theatre in general compared with other forms of entertainment such as music and sport. When theatre does exercise a popular appeal, it is mainly because of its exploitation of comedy and sentiment. Nor can it be said that there has been steady progress towards a more satisfactory and hopeful state of artistic affairs. Emigration has taken away many of the Caribbean's brightest and best, traditionally to Europe but more recently to North America; while tourism, the American mass media and the 'glamorous' images of the American way of life have had a deep and debilitating effect on West Indian culture and self-identity.

This persistent and somewhat despondent sense of West Indian cultural mediocrity, at least as far as 'serious' theatre is concerned, has to be set next to the extraordinary vitality of its popular music, song and dance, as well as the vigour of its prose fiction and poetry. Over the years a debate has developed about the

relationship between 'low' and 'high' theatrical forms and about what, if anything, in the former might offer a basis for the growth of a popularly based but artistically serious drama. The most significant of the perceived growth-points for a vital but exploratory Caribbean theatre is Trinidadian Carnival (though some other islands have now adopted it, partly for touristic reasons), which grew out of the African slaves' adaptation of carnival entertainment originally imported by whites from Europe. The veteran West Indian scholar and playwright Errol Hill argues in his authoritative study of Trinidadian Carnival that it can form the basis of a 'national theatre'; and Hill has tried, as have others, to put his own prescription into practice, for example in *Man Better Man*, which incorporates carnivalesque elements of music, song and dance. Whether such an evolution is possible, or even desirable, remains debatable; what is clear, thus far, is that in spite of awareness of, and occasional individual attempts to exploit, the theatrical resources of Carnival and other traditional forms such as spirit-possession performances, the Papa Diable masquerade, the Crop-Over and the Jonkonnu, these have in general played little if any major role in the development of West Indian theatre forms. By far the most popular form is in fact comedy, in guises little different in terms of theatrical conventions from those found in many other cultures.

More than any particular performance mode, it is the folk imagination that has deeply influenced and helped shape West Indian theatre, both directly through its borrowing of characters, stories and images from the rich oral tradition and, more pervasively, through its inheritance of the imaginative world of the folk-tale. Though the traditional folk-tale and its performance traditions are evident in many West Indian plays, nowhere have they been more richly exploited than in the drama of Derek Walcott, or more beautifully evoked than in his memoir-cum-critical essay, 'What The Twilight Says: An Overture' (see introduction, pp. 9-11). Walcott is without doubt the major - indeed the only major - dramatist that the Caribbean has so far produced. Describing himself as a 'mongrel', a 'neither proud nor ashamed bastard', Walcott has had a long and pioneering career in West Indian and especially Trinidadian theatre, in the course of which he has been artistically faithful to his self-

proclaimed 'mongrelism', constantly experimenting with a range of theatrical form, genre and theme. Exploiting the narrative and formal possibilities of folk-tale and legend in such plays of the 1950s and sixties as *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, Walcott has subsequently extended his range to include versions of European classics (*The Joker of Seville* and, more recently, his dramatized adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* for the Royal Shakespeare Company), tragi-comedy (*Remembrance*), a musical about Rastafarianism (*O Babylon!*), comedy and farce (*Pantomime*, *Beef, no Chicken*), and drama in which the distinctive lyricism of his poetic language is combined with the urgent exploration of the tensions of West Indian politics, culture and art (*The Last Carnival*, *A Branch of the Blue Nile*).

Walcott no doubt includes himself in the category of writer he calls 'the mulatto of style', whose efforts to purify the language of the tribe inevitably invite accusations of treachery, assimilation, pretentiousness and 'playing white'.³ The diversity of his writing, even if we consider only his work for the stage, indicates the numerous attempts to absorb both his inheritances, African and European (Ashanti and Warwickshire, to be exact) - to find a language, a style, a form that can authentically express West Indian reality without mimicry of either. Walcott has written powerfully of the forms that cultural mimicry may take, and of the bonds that the West Indian artist must break to release him- or herself from such servitude. The quest for liberation from the pervasive sense of colonial subordination and inauthenticity, the search for 'a dialect which has the force of revelation', has been the main impulse shaping the variety of formal experiments he has undertaken as a playwright. It has also influenced the content of his dramatic writing, giving it a remarkable degree of thematic continuity. Underlying Walcott's drama over many years has been a constant theme, expressed through his preoccupation with characters who have a fundamental quarrel with West Indian reality.

In his earliest published plays this hostility is presented as elemental, inscribed in the harshness of the natural environment and in the

³ Derek Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says: An Overture', p. 9.

even harsher lineaments of human nature. The struggle here is against the indifferent cruelty of the sea from which Afa and the other fishermen of *The Sea at Dauphin* are doomed to seek their livelihoods; or against the diabolical evil of the white planter who destroys Ti-Jean's two brothers before he is finally mastered by the young man's cunning stratagem against oppression; or, as in *Malcochon, or The Six in the Rain*, it is presented as the savagery of the human beast, finally redeemed, even as he is murdered, by the mad old outcast Chantal.

In these early plays Walcott achieves, for Caribbean theatre, qualities associated in European drama with Synge and Lorca. The elemental experience of the peasant characters is presented in an already assured combination of folk-tale structure, with its universal symmetry ('the one armature from Br'er Anancy to King Lear'), and the local, poetic force of peasant dialect. Inspired by the folk stories he heard sung or told in his youth, Walcott brings his narratives to theatrical life through such devices as *conteurs*, on-stage musicians, song and dance, choruses and masks. The dramatic world thus created achieves, in theatrical terms, something of that timeless, legendary quality associated with the folk-tale in all cultures. At its finest, in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), this creative exploitation of folk narrative in the theatre succeeds in forging a new version of the expressionistic, psychological dream play that can evoke not only an individual's anguished consciousness but the dramatist's complex sense of the condition of his people.

Though the possibilities of the folk tradition have provided one theatrical model for Walcott's writing, he has also experimented with formal possibilities offered by the Euro-American tradition. As a rule, where the quarrel with West Indian reality involves peasant or working-class characters struggling against their natural or social environment, sometimes in the process invoking a vision of Africa as their salvation, Walcott's form is popular and often modelled on folk story. But when the dramatic conflict is generated by or associated with the tension between 'West Indianness' and the characters' relation to white, European culture, his use of dramatic form is recognizably 'Western' and contemporary.

Several of the plays in this latter category specifically explore

the dilemmas of the artist in a subordinated culture, featuring characters whose personal and artistic identities are markedly affected by the tensions they experience between their West Indianness and the cultural power of the metropolis, whether this be identified with Paris, London or New York.

In *Remembrance* (1977) the artist is a minor Trinidadian writer and schoolteacher, Albert Perez Jordan, whose abiding love has been for the English language of Britain and its traditional literature. Not a great deal that's evidently or conclusively 'dramatic' happens in the play. In the course of an interview with a young reporter from the local newspaper, Jordan's reminiscences blend with the words of his stories and scenes from the past on which they were based. In the first story, the satirical 'Barrley and the Roof', Jordan's son Frederick, an aspiring artist, paints the stars and stripes on the roof of the family home, but refuses to sell it to an American art collector, Barrley, much to his father's disgust. In the second, 'My War Effort', Jordan's story (set in Trinidad during the Second World War), blends into a flashback of his relationship with his English boss at the information office, a Miss Esther Trout (Hope in the fiction), whom he courts like a black Englishman – or rather a parody of an Englishman – quoting *Henry V* and playing the gallant officer and gentleman as he proposes marriage to her. Then, at lunch one day, she accepts, to be greeted by Jordan's silence and his quick exit to the men's room:

I went to the men's room for twenty years. . . . A mortal error.
To stay within the boundaries of my race and not cross over,
even for love. Esther! I'll never look upon her like again. Since
then I have been a mind without a country. From that day
onward I have always known my place. The end. (p. 46)

But a few moments later Albert does find himself looking upon her like again, or so he persuades himself, in the person of Anna Herschel, a young American drifter with a baby. She stays for a while, Albert reliving his memories of Esther and encouraging his son to leave Trinidad and go off with her. But in spite of their affection for each other she leaves alone, and Frederick resolves to stay on the island and continue painting. Jordan is left alone, quoting Gray's *Elegy* as

he hears in memory the voices of the generations of children he has taught.

There are dramatic weaknesses in *Remembrance*, especially in its second act: the arrival and departure of Anna are both implausible, and her relationships with Jordan and Frederick are too sketchy to be completely interesting, or to develop effectively the parallel with Esther. There are references throughout to another son killed during Black Power riots seven years previously, whose grave Jordan has never visited on his day of remembrance; but the character's inability to cope with the tragedy of his death seems to extend into Walcott's dramatic treatment, which never satisfactorily integrates its emotional significance into the theme of remembrance.

The play works best when it evokes with pathos and humour the mixture of memory, desire and regret, of fiction and the reality on which it is based, in Jordan's mind. It captures both the poignancy and absurdity of an older West Indian's love for and cowardice towards a British culture that has formed him but to which he can never belong, and which makes him psychologically a misfit everywhere, even in his own society. At one point Esther responds to Jordan's literary English with 'Your accent is almost flawless, Mr Jordan. When are you going to be yourself?' The answer seems to be never: for all his solidity as a dramatic character, Jordan is a portrait of the artist as a failure in life and art, both fractured by his inability to forge an authentic identity as a black Trinidadian.

In two of his plays, *Pantomime* (1978) and *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1983), Walcott's portrait of the post-colonial artist focuses specifically on actors and the theatre. *Pantomime* is a two-hander in which a former actor from England, Harry Trewe, tries to interest his Trinidadian factotum, Jackson Phillip, a retired calypsonian, in putting together a show to entertain the guests at his none too successful guest house on Tobago. Harry's idea is for them to do sketches based on *Robinson Crusoe*, but with the roles reversed to give the audience a bit of innocuously light satirical entertainment. Jackson thinks the idea 'is shit' but eventually begins to improvise on it to try to demonstrate to his boss its historical implications. Through role-play he shows Harry how, if the roles were really reversed, he would have to play the servant for three hundred years,

performing the pantomime of being the white man's shadow. The white man smiles at his servant 'as a child does smile at his shadow's helpless obedience', but

after a while the child does get frighten of the shadow he make. He say to himself, That is too much obedience, I better had stop. But the shadow don't stop, no matter if the child stop playing that pantomime, and the shadow does follow the child everywhere. . . . He cannot get rid of it, no matter what, and that is the power and black magic of the shadow, boss, bwana, effendi, bacra, sahib, until it is the shadow that start dominating the child, it is the servant that start dominating the master. (p. 113)

Harry's enthusiasm for his own idea dwindles as Jackson warms to his improvisation, inventing a new language that his servant will have to learn and forcing his discomfited boss to play the ignominious roles of a large seabird and a goat, which the black *Crusoe* will kill and skin to make a parasol and hat. When Harry announces that he's 'had enough of this farce' and wants Jackson to stop, he's told that this is the story of history itself: 'This moment that we are now acting here is the history of imperialism; it's nothing less than that. And I don't think that I can – should – concede my getting into a part halfway and abandoning things, just because you, as my superior, give me orders. People become independent' (p. 125).

What Harry and Jackson come to acknowledge is that they are both socially miscast. As Jackson says: 'You see, two of we both acting a role here we ain't really believe in, you know. I ent think you strong enough to give people orders, and I know I ain't the kind who like taking *them*. So both of we doesn't have to *improvise* so much as *exaggerate*. We faking, faking all the time' (p. 138).

When they resume their role-playing in act two it is with a new intent, the servant seeking to make a reformed man of his lonely, empty boss. As Jackson role-plays Harry's wife the Englishman's bitterness and aggression towards her are revealed and apparently exorcised through the emotion aroused. Harry achieves a new understanding: 'An angel passes through a house and leaves no imprint of his shadow on its wall. A man's life slowly changes and he does not