

Stages of Dissent: Metatheatre as a Syntax of Socio-Political Resistance

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Abstract

This article examines metatheatre in modern drama as reflection and opposition, specifically analysing Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*. These three plays employ metatheatrical techniques such as play-within-a-play, doubling, direct address to the audience, and breaks in narrative to discuss concepts of identity, power, and performance. By bringing into focus the construction of theatre and socio-political conventions, these metatheatrical devices allow the plays to subvert concepts of gender, power, and colonial histories. This paper contends that metatheatre continues to be a useful method of challenging the politics of representation and pushing the frontiers of the theatrical form by examining the ways in which they employ theatricality to subvert expectations. Stoppard uses Shakespearean inversion to stage existential absurdity while Karnad synthesises folk tradition with postcolonial concerns and Churchill dismantles fixed identity via role reversals and cross-casting.

Keywords: Metatheatre, political resistance, gender performativity, identity, narrative disruption, contemporary theatre

Introduction

Theatre has always been a mirror, reflecting and refracting cultural fears, social hierarchies, and political tensions. Lionel Abel originally used the term 'metatheatre' in his seminal work *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* to suggest that theatre "dramatises the theatricality of life and the lifelikeness of theatre" (1963, p. 60), transforming the stage into

a critical locus for consciousness instead of merely a space for imitation. Hornby and later scholars described metatheatre as “any moment, episode, or element of a play that calls attention to the play as play” (Hornby, 1986, p. 31). Metatheatre does not allow the theatre to project the illusion of reality and requires the audience to watch the play with greater critical awareness, either by breaking the fourth wall, featuring a play within a play, or using a narrator speaking directly to the audience. Metatheatre is now a strong formalist method in contemporary theatre for interrogating representational models, power, and identity. Through emphasis on theatricality and subverting linear narratives, it forces audience members to consider the ethical and political meanings of the play and challenges passive spectatorship. In *The Haunted Stage*, Carlson asserts that “the self-conscious performance draws attention to its own constructedness, as well as to the ideological structures that dictate its production and reception” (2004b, p. 7). Thus, metatheatre serves not only as a stylistic technique but also as a mode of cultural and political commentary.

In this paper, the artistic and political aims of metatheatre are analyzed in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana*, and Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*. All three plays employ self-reflexivity to transgress the borders between self and role, performance and reality, and actor and character, regardless of their varied cultural backgrounds. Stoppard employs metatheatre as a way of negotiating existential dislocation through Shakespearean intertextuality and Churchill subverts gender and imperial ideology. Karnad, on the other hand, merges postcolonial critique with traditional Indian forms. These plays, more concerned with performance than narrative, employ metatheatre as a form of transgression against theatrical, social, and political norms, and invite audiences to re-evaluate their place in society’s power dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

Though Abel devised the term ‘metatheatre’, the idea and methodology have evolved greatly since then. Metatheatre, a self-referential theatrical subgenre, “dramatises not life itself, but the representation of life” (p. 60), allowing characters to project their own theatrical nature. This is particularly relevant in contemporary times since it emphasises the continuous performative nature of human identity and social existence.

Hornby expands on this concept in his 1986 book *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* by describing five different metatheatrical devices such as play-within-a-play, direct address to the audience, self-referential characters, role-play within a role—when a character plays another character or adopts a role within the play and literary or real-life reference, i.e. when a play directly references other plays, literary works, or real events.

In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980), Elam reiterates that theater works through signs. By emphasising these signs, metatheatre transforms the dramatic action into a semiotic debate. This self-referential aspect questions the illusion/reality dichotomy because the stage no longer attempts to represent life but instead challenges the authenticity of representation. To understand the politics of representation, one must study how performance makes sense beyond surface-level realism.

Theatre can transform ideology by deconstructing illusions and laying bare its processes, suggests Fischer-Lichte (2008). Carlson (2004a) describes metatheatre as a space for recycling history, identity, and memory in order to expose underlying ideological processes. This accords with Butler's performativity hypothesis that holds that identity is a reiterated performance and does not constitute the true essence of the self (1990). Metatheatre aims to subvert the idea of a stable identity through emphasis on roles and scripts. Brechtian epic theatre was the first to arouse political consciousness through the *Verfremdungseffekt*, by breaking narrative coherence and encouraging critical thinking. Metatheatre today incorporates most of these devices in its approach.

Self-conscious, fractured, and hybrid forms of performance, according to theorists such as Bharucha and Bhabha, challenge cultural authority in postcolonial contexts. Metatheatre thus emerges as a gesture of cultural resistance that reappropriates agency for subaltern identities and counters dominant narratives. Metatheatre is anti-realistic and anti-mimetic and serves as something greater than an art form through means such as egregious theatricality, plays-within-plays, and direct address. It allows playwrights to challenge and subvert norms in gender, politics, and culture by laying bare the struggles of character, plot, and genre and bringing the audience into the act of representation.

Subordination and Spectacle in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) is a great

example of metatheatres being both, philosophical inquiry and an artistic experiment. In recasting *Hamlet* from the viewpoints of two minor characters, the play reworks the Shakespearean revenge tragedy to place it in a metafictional environment in which narrative authority, identification with characters, and dramatic inevitability are repeatedly threatened. In addition to providing entertainment, Stoppard's plays challenge assumptions regarding fate, agency, and theatrical representation.

By conceiving of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as the main characters who are oblivious to the greater story that drives them, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* stresses the ontological ambiguity of the two lesser characters in *Hamlet*. On the basis of absurdist devices such as circular speech and coin tosses, identity and agency are shown to be performances subject to forces beyond themselves. Standing on the shoulders of Beckett and Ionesco, Stoppard presents death as theatrical through employing the metatheatrical Player and his troupe to disrupt deterministic assumptions. Carlson (2004a) contends that identity is a social construct, and Fischer-Lichte (2008) envisages metatheatres as an attempt to reveal audience complicity and dispel representation. Stoppard integrates these two approaches to produce an evolving aesthetic.

Used satirically and revealingly in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, metatheatres makes explicit the play's inherent fictionality and challenges the standard assumptions regarding the audience, authorial power (such as Shakespeare's and Stoppard's), and narrative truth. Following Butler's notion that performance of identity can subvert dominant norms, the play presents theatre and literature as fluid media that can upset ideological conclusiveness. It captures the paradox of contemporary alienation—awareness without agency and performance without meaning—using self-awareness as a mechanism of critique. Stoppard not only undoes the 'Hamlet' myth, but also eschews closure and embraces theatricality, challenging viewers to consider their place in living through political and theatrical structures.

Hayavadana

Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971) brings together Indian theatre traditions, questions of post-colonial identity, and philosophical conundrums. Through the use of masks, doubling, and direct address, through

reference to classical conventions like *Yakshagana*, and through the use of the Bhagavata as narrator, the play subverts chronological narrative and classical realism in its effort to insist on its own concept of theatre, which is metatheatrical and becomes a political and aesthetic tool for delivering a strong critique of cultural idealism, individuality, and legacy forms.

The core narrative of *Hayavadana* is a retelling of the *Kathasaritsagara* tale, in which the young and beautiful Padmini is compelled to choose between the physically strong Kapila and the well-educated Devadatta, her husband. The play challenges the existential question of what makes the real “self” —the head or the body—after the heads of the two men are inadvertently swapped during a ritual. Evoking the play’s own fractured dramaturgy, this metaphysical question challenges the idea of the wholeness of cultural identity in a postcolonial context as well as the notion of a unified personal identity.

Hayavadana, uses *Yakshagana*, a classical folk theatre convention from Karnataka that integrates dance, music, narration, and improvisation—a dominant metatheatrical strategy. This genre, which transcends Western realism, welcomes illusion-breaking strategies that allow actors to address the audience and transcend their roles. Central to it is the character of Bhagavata, who is simultaneously a storyteller and a figure who breaks the fourth wall to inform viewers that what they are witnessing is an invented narrative. This creates a sense of Brechtian estrangement in Indian aesthetics, where there is a greater emphasis on *rasa* (emotional essence) than on the replication of realism. Karnad uses metatheatre to reveal the instability of identity, witnessed by the head-switching between Devadatta and Kapila, which also questions the mind-body dichotomy, gendered desire, and the idea of ideal masculinity.

Padmini’s oscillations illustrate Butler’s contention that identity is created through social repetition and not through nature. Here, identity is developed through cultural symbols and roles instead of an essential self and is therefore more plastic. *Hayavadana*, who is a horse-headed man in search of wholeness, symbolises postcolonial hybridity and identity breakdown. His final metamorphosis into a whole horse parodies the pursuit of wholeness based on colonial/classical notions of cleanliness and coherence. Karnad’s metatheatre uses indigenous forms to subvert traditional narrative forms by accepting fragmentation rather than a

comforting conclusion through such satirical reversals, as well as by challenging essentialist traditions.

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad involves the audience actively in songs, direct speeches, and interruptions, shattering the theatrical illusion and denouncing passive observation. Like Brecht and Stoppard, he uses metatheatre to stimulate analytical reflection and not emotional engagement. This exposure of the theatrical frame, in accordance with Carlson's definition of metatheatre as "theatre about theatre" (p. 7) enables the audience to see their own role in meaning-making. Through a blending of postcolonial and formalist approaches and devices such as masks, doubling, and storytelling, Karnad challenges traditional notions of gender, national identity, and dramatic structure. In the end, the play presents identity as context dependent and negotiable rather than necessary or fixed.

Hayavadna illustrates how metatheatre can be harnessed as an instrument of cultural inquiry. It embodies the postcolonial condition through form—through fractured narratives, unfinished transformations, and exposed theatricality—instead of representation. As opposed to Western metatheatre's usual embrace of individual alienation, Karnad's metatheatre plays up cultural hybridisation and conflict in an effort to undermine traditional norms and precepts. The play is, therefore, more than a play about bewilderment, for it adopts uncertainty as its artistic and political approach, eschewing the comfort of wholeness in favour of critical engagement. Karnad achieves a dramaturgy that is both international and Indian, timeless and modern, through the interaction of an older form with newer reflexivity in a metatheatre that challenges not only what is represented but also who represents and why.

***Cloud Nine*—Temporal Dislocation and Performativity as Metatheatre**

Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) is a classical tragedy which uses metatheatre as a profoundly political tool and also as artistic innovation. The play subverts conceptions of time, gender, race, and identity through cross-casting, non-linear timelines, and intertextual irony. Employing metatheatrical strategies in its two acts—one set in 1970s London and the other in Victorian colonial Africa—Churchill reveals and criticises the performative systems of power, more specifically patriarchy, heteronormativity, and colonialism. The outcome is a dramaturgy that subjects to scrutiny the assumptions of the audience regarding their notions of social reality.

One of the striking features of *Cloud Nine* is the drastic temporal shift between Act I and II. Act I occurs during the Victorian period but as an absurdist, highly structured colonial melodrama, and Act II moves to a realistically conceived London of the 1970s. However, though the characters feel that over a century has elapsed, in fact only 25 years have passed. This manipulation of theatrical time is what Carlson terms “ghosting,” or the return of the past through theatrical representation. It highlights how the ideologies, particularly those of race and gender, continue to linger over time in spite of what appears to be change and development.

The need for such an official break is to present “how the past exists in the present, not just as a memory or influence but as something that has shaped us,” states Churchill (*Serious Money*, 1986, p. 45). This turns the shifting of time into a metatheatrical action that reminds the audience that time in theater is constructed and a means, and that social progress should not be taken for granted. It also conforms to the Brechtian practice of destroying the illusion of continuity and prompts onlookers to view the themes of the play critically.

Cloud Nine's most remarkable metatheatrical tool is arguably its casting. Throughout Act I, Churchill demands that a man act out the role of Betty, a white Victorian lady, and a white actor perform Joshua, a Black servant who is dedicated to his colonial master. In Act II, individuals are cast more ‘realistically’ according to their nature, even though gender fluidity continues. Cross-racial and cross-gender casting of gay men powerfully stages Butler’s performative theory of gender—a set of repeated gestures, acts, and stylisations that construct the complex reality of gender—over assumptions of it being false. By staging identity as an act, Churchill shatters the illusion of authenticity. By staging Betty as a man in Act I, femininity is shaped according to masculine ideals. Joshua’s white body is also a representation of Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry, signifying internalised oppression. Here, metatheatre becomes a way of unmasking knowledge; The audience not only observes the characters performing their roles, but through their awareness of the theatrical frame, they actively participate in destabilising the characters’ fixed identities, highlighting how meaning is co-created between performance and reception.

Churchill weaves her criticism of colonial and gender ideology into

the fabric of *Cloud Nine* through the parody of patriarchal and colonial power in Act I by caricaturing Victorian mores. Clive's uptight power is rendered absurd at home and at the imperial level through his stiff and mannered dialogue. Conversely, Act II's fragmented layout reflects the constant, forced process of identity construction in an ostensibly free society. Amid these transformations—Edward's queerness, Lin's sexuality, and Betty's self-expression—the characters still experience conflict, showing that liberation is not a straightforward or unbounded state. Churchill depicts freedom as a shifting open-ended process negotiated within both the individual psyche and the broader social frame.

One of the main issues in the play is the indestructible relationship between role and self, that is, how people internalise social norms and then act according to them. The play demonstrates that identity is governed and awarded via performance as opposed to being inherent. Theatre is a site in which actors, as well as audience members, can shift, as per Fischer-Lichte's theory of performativity. Due to the metatheatrical organisation of *Cloud Nine*, featuring actors noticeably changing roles, sexes, and emotional registers, the audience is encouraged to take note of these changes as they unfold.

Moreover, Churchill's doubling technique, wherein the same actor plays many roles in each act, confuses the difference between role-playing within theater and in real life. Consequently, power, memory, and identity are all intensely interfolded. The audience is continually reminded that the characters are not 'real people' but creations of cultural scripts. Consequently, *Cloud Nine* serves to explore the extent to which one's view is influenced by performance. Churchill employs metatheatre in *Cloud Nine* to redefine power dynamics, shifting the focus from not only who is perceived but also how. She pushes the audience into unreliable, fluctuating meanings and disrupts passive spectatorship by disavowing realism. Players begin writing their own narratives, especially women and LGBT individuals. This transformation from repression to self-revelation is embodied in Betty's last speech. Here, metatheatre becomes both productive and deconstructive, such that identities can be created that are not circumscribed by colonial and patriarchal norms. Carlson underscores that metatheatre disrupts social as well as theatrical convention by laying bare the mechanics of representation itself.

Using metatheatre as both a critique and a method of production Churchill challenges the ways in which gender, racism, and empire are represented through cross-casting, temporal dislocation, and structural experimentation. Her dramaturgy is more about revealing the barebones of scripts, roles, and systems than representation. In this instance, metatheatre is an ethical tool that forces the audience to question the theatrical reality they take for granted instead of seeing it as an alienating technique. Finally, Churchill demonstrates that identity, just like theatre, is constructed instead of given, and that the only way to oppose repressive discourses is by actively embracing new roles.

Metatheatre as a Political Aesthetic

Together, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Hayavadana*, and *Cloud Nine*, demonstrate that metatheatre is not simply a collection of technical devices but possesses a robust political aesthetic. It is a potent tool for subverting prevalent conceptions of identity, authority, and reality in diverse cultural and theatrical environments—British absurdist drama, Indian postcolonial folk theatre, and feminist experimental theatre. It resists traditional narratives by conceiving the audience as active interpreters instead of passive consumers.

The methodological strategy employed in this paper is predicated upon intersections of dramaturgy, performance theory, and critical identity studies. Following Abel, Hornby, and Fischer-Lichte's concepts, the research envisions metatheatre as a structural procedure and an epistemological instrument. In other words, it discloses the representational mechanisms that allow playwrights to reverse the conventions of political, theatrical, and social power.

Metatheatre as Deconstruction of Power and Realism

In all three case studies discussed in this paper, metatheatre, which abjures the unsubstantial conceits of conventional theatre or 'true' identity, operates as a necessary deconstruction of mimesis. The Player's avowed theatricality and the dearth of narrative resolution in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* challenges the notion of shared destiny and free will. Similarly, *Hayavadana's* syncretic combination of folk drama and philosophical parable defies the notion of wholeness in cultural, corporeal, and linguistic senses. At the same time, *Cloud Nine* uses temporal interruption and stylised casting to deconstruct the dual

ideologies of colonialism and patriarchy. In all instances, metatheatre disassembles the ideological framework of representation.

Audience as Co-Creators of Meaning

Aside from revealing systems, the plays turn the audience into an important participant. Metatheatre, drawn from Fischer-Lichte's concept of performance as transformation and Brecht's alienation effect, requires engagement and disallows passive spectatorship. The audience is constantly reminded of the constructed nature of what they are viewing—and, by extension, of the world beyond the theatre—by Churchill's direct address and cross-casting, Karnad's conscious inventions, and Stoppard's existential pessimism. This reflexivity becomes pedagogy, allowing both metatheatre and the play to have an artistic as well as a socio-political role.

Global Resonance of Metatheatrical Resistance

These instances are enough to demonstrate that metatheatre bridges cultural and geographical boundaries. These plays, drawn from various traditions of dramaturgy—Indian mythology, feminist critical theory, and European modernism—are brought together by their determination to expose the politics of presentation. This enables them to reclaim the stage as a site for redefining identities and challenging authority. Metatheatre continues to develop as an international theatrical practice and is currently engaging with immersive theatre, digital media, and global narratives. Its fundamental aim, nonetheless, of exposing the misconceptions underlying theatre and culture and offering a voice of artistic dissent persists.

Conclusion: The Meta in the Political

In addition to its dramaturgical function, this paper has undertaken an examination of the ways in which metatheatre operates as a politicised aesthetic that can transform perceptions among audiences and disrupt dominant cultural norms. In drawing on theoretical constructs developed by Abel, Hornby, Fischer-Lichte, Carlson, and Butler, it has made the case that metatheatre's peculiar reflexivity—its relentless concern with theatricality—operates as a form of critique and opposition across historically, nationally, and ideologically disparate contexts.

Through close readings of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Karnad's *Hayavadana*, and Churchill's *Cloud Nine* the conversation has gone beyond the confines of genre and geography. Though differing in style, all three plays illustrate how metatheatre can undermine authority, destabilise identity, and distort reality. Stoppard's tragicomic reversal of *Hamlet* lays bare theatre's own shortfalls in responding to absurdity and destiny; Karnad revives classical performative methods to place the audience in a resisting relationship to cultural ideals of wholeness and hence question divided postcolonial selves; and Churchill resists colonial and patriarchal frameworks through disruptions of time and cross-casting, revealing the social constructedness of roles and the potential to reimagine them.

Together, these case studies illustrate how metatheatre works both as an interventionist tool and a self-reflexive critique. By deflecting attention from the normative diegesis of theatre and towards society and the audience, it encourages active questioning, reflection, and participation. In this regard, metatheatre aligns with Brecht's 'alienation effect' and with poststructuralist descriptions of identity, authorship, and the fragility of meaning. More importantly, the analysis proposes that metatheatre has become a global aesthetic, preserving its strength as a tool of resistance in confronting existential, political, ecological, and cultural crises in both the Global South and the West. In the end, metatheatre is at once contemporary and eternal—a place where lines among politics and spectacle, role and self, art and life are constantly disrupted. Its continued relevance is in the reminder that even the most artificial forms of theatre are capable of shedding light on the deepest truths of our common human condition.

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