



# Theatre Academy

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# Theatre Academy

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# Theatre Academy

## CONTENTS / İÇİNDEKİLER

### RESEARCH ARTICLES/ ARAŞTIRMA MAKALELERİ

- 96** Deconstructing the Politics of Linguistic Mutation in Tom Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*  
(Tom Stoppard'ın *Dogg's Hamlet* ve *Cahoot's Macbeth* Adlı Oyunlarında Dilsel Mutasyon Politikasının Yapısökümü)  
Sarra JOUINI
- 105** A Brief Survey of Gender Parity in the Theatre Industry  
(Tiyatro Sektöründe Cinsiyet Eşitliği Üzerine Kısa Bir Araştırma)  
Florentina GÜMÜŞ, Yeliz BİBER VANGÖLÜ
- 116** The Spatial-Temporal Canvas That We Call the Stage: Text and Performance in *Final Solutions*  
(Sahne Dediğimiz Mekânsal-Zamansal Tuval: *Final Solutions* Adlı Oyunda Metin ve Performans)  
Manivendra KUMAR, Ananya GHOSHAL
- 136** Beyond Verbatim: Embodied Truth and the Limits of Language in *House Arrest*  
(Verbatim'in Ötesinde: *House Arrest*'te Vücut Bulan Hakikat ve Dilin Sınırları)  
Mehmet ÜNAL
- 153** Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, Postcolonialism and Hybridity in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and August Wilson's *Radio Golf*  
(Lorraine Hansberry'nin *A Raisin in the Sun* ve August Wilson'ın *Radio Golf* Adlı Eserlerinde Avrupa-merkezcilik, Afrika-merkezcilik, Postkolonyalizm ve Melezlik)  
Olfa GANDOZ



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# Deconstructing the Politics of Linguistic Mutation in Tom Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*

Tom Stoppard'ın *Dogg's Hamlet* ve *Cahoot's Macbeth* Adlı Oyunlarında Dilsel Mutasyon Politikasının Yapısökümü

## ABSTRACT

Tom Stoppard's theatrical works, *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth*, serve as a significant exemplification of linguistic and political power dynamics. These plays represent a transformative shift that depicts the workings of hegemony in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War era. Stoppard, a Czechoslovakian native, crafted these satirical works in response to the brutal persecution of critical intellectuals and censorship of their dissident works. The plays voice the intellectual restlessness of the time, resisting the status quo, and illustrating the tensions that led to the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Stoppard's innovative linguistic experimentation transforms Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, into an entirely novel linguistic system, named "Doggspeak," which derives inspiration from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. This new linguistic transformation acts as a catalyst for social and political change, resisting surveillance and censorship of free speech. Stoppard's plays, therefore, use language to alter power relations, creating space for political defiance. This paper delves into two key questions: How does Stoppard modify language in the dramatic setting, and how does this linguistic transformation shift power relations within the plays? By creating a new linguistic system, Stoppard outmanoeuvres oppressors and wittingly turns language into an instrument for political rebellion. He stages a truncated, mutant version of Shakespeare's plays where they are banned, giving voice to the intellectual restlessness of Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. Stoppard's plays posit that language is not merely a tool for communication, but also a vehicle for social and political transformation. Through linguistic mutation, Stoppard subverts the existing power structures and challenges the hegemony of the oppressors. This essay argues that Stoppard's plays showcase the crucial significance of language in the struggle for political and social change, emphasizing the crucial role that language plays in shaping our perceptions and understanding of the world.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Stoppard, Wittgenstein, Censorship, Linguistic Mutation

## ÖZ

Tom Stoppard'ın tiyatro eserleri, *Dogg's Hamlet* ve *Cahoot's Macbeth*, dilsel ve politik güç dinamiklerinin önemli bir örneğini sunar. Bu oyunlar, Soğuk Savaş döneminde Çekoslovakya'daki hegemonyanın işleyişini tasvir eden dönüştürücü bir değişimi temsil eder. Çekoslovakyalı olan Stoppard, bu hicivsel eserleri, eleştirel entelektüellerin acımasız bir şekilde zulme, muhalif eserlerinin ise sansüre uğradığı bir döneme yanıt olarak kaleme almıştır. Oyunlar, dönemin entelektüel huzursuzluğunu dile getirmekte, statükoya direnmekte ve 1989 Kadife Devrimi'ne yol açan gerilimleri göstermektedir. Stoppard'ın dilde yenilikçi deneyselliği, Shakespeare'in *Hamlet* ve *Macbeth* oyunlarını, Ludwig Wittgenstein'in *Felsefi Soruşturmalar*'ından esinlenen "Doggspeak" adlı tamamen yeni bir dilsel sisteme dönüştürür. Bu yeni dilsel dönüşüm, sosyal ve politik değişim için bir katalizör görevi görür, gözetime ve ifade özgürlüğünün sansürlenmesine direnir. Stoppard'ın oyunları, bu nedenle, dili güç ilişkilerini değiştirmek için kullanır ve politik meydan okuma için alan yaratır. Bu makale iki temel soruyu araştırmaktadır: Stoppard dramatik ortamda dili nasıl değiştirir ve bu dilsel dönüşüm oyunlardaki güç ilişkilerini nasıl değiştirir? Stoppard yeni bir dilsel sistem yaratarak baskıcıları alt eder ve dili bilinçli bir şekilde politik bir başkaldırı aracına dönüştürür. Shakespeare'in oyunlarının kısıtlanmış, mutant bir versiyonunu yasaklandıkları yerde sahneleyerek 1970'lerde Çekoslovakya'nın entelektüel huzursuzluğuna ses verir. Stoppard'ın oyunları, dilin yalnızca bir iletişim aracı değil, aynı zamanda sosyal ve politik dönüşüm için de bir araç olduğunu ortaya koyar. O, dilsel mutasyon yoluyla mevcut iktidar yapılarını altüst eder ve ezenlerin hegemonyasına meydan okur. Bu makale, Stoppard'ın oyunlarının politik ve sosyal değişim mücadelesinde dilin hayati önemini sergilediğini, dilin dünyayı algılayışımızı ve kavrayışımızı şekillendirmede oynadığı hayati rolü vurguladığını savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Shakespeare, Stoppard, Wittgenstein, Sansür, Dilsel Mutasyon

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## Introduction

Tom Stoppard is a self-proclaimed introspective writer. He would write his plays with a fountain pen and read them into a cassette recorder while playing all the roles and improvising stage directions. The manuscript remains under constant revision as Stoppard keeps polishing his texts, undergoing mutations and transmutations before and even after being rehearsed and performed on stage. This reflective and self-critical approach to writing is quintessential to the creation of Stoppard's time-bending dramatic art. In fact, earlier versions of his plays are a testament to the evolution of his linguistic prowess and intellectual inquisitiveness. Although the end product often implicates an adroit use of language, Stoppard is not only celebrated for crafting intricate and stimulating dialogues but for intersecting art and reality and communicating topical struggles through humor and wit that are "as fresh today as when they were written" (Gussow, 1984). In *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*, he perpetuates the anti-totalitarian ethos that governs both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* while carrying on the legacy of word invention. Unlike his more famously-known debut play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) which is steeped in Beckettian paralysis, this overtly political ensemble joins amusement with instruction and clads Shakespeare in dissident comedy. In the present article, I elucidate how Stoppard adapted Shakespeare to the context of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and how the two interconnected one-act plays destabilize the manipulative and indoctrinating practices of political authority. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the crucial impact of artistic creation in the struggle for political and social change, emphasizing the pivotal role that language plays in promoting free expression and countering repressive and hegemonic regimes.

## State Surveillance and the Rise of The Living Room Theatre

### *A Reality Czech*

*Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* explores the consequences of the freedom of expression behind the silent walls of Prague. The émigré background of Stoppard opened his eyes to the political scene of the period. His theatrical piece does not only express refusal but liberates itself from the constraints of conformity (Sammells, 1988, p. 89). *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* is a sardonic comment on Stalinism and its totalitarian structure of terror. That is why, it is essential to understand the major socio-political turbulences that led to the creation of the Stoppardian dissent comedy.

In 1981, Stoppard wrote an open letter to President Husák expressing his frustration and disappointment at the continuous refusal of his return VISA application to Czechoslovakia and the despicable indifference towards his numerous attempts to visit his friend Vaclav Havel. In the letter, he deplores the impossibility of communication and transparency on the part of the Czechoslovakian officials and writes: “The occupational prejudice of playwrights is that things only move forward with dialogue” (Stoppard, 1981, p. 18). Stoppard’s art dramatically changed from disdain of political involvement to commemoration of the dissenting voice.

Jindrich Chaloupecký (2002), one of the formative Czech art historians and critics described Czechoslovakia as a place “of diverse and sophisticated culture” (p. 31) until its people were “presented with something incredibly barren, monotonous and base as to defy reason” (p. 31). Membership in organizations became compulsory. Demonstrating loyalty to the regime became a daily activity. There was no time for private thought. In his book *Artificial Hell*, Bishop (2012) writes: “The ownership of private property was systematically eliminated, along with privacy and individuality as an emotional and psychological refuge” (p. 131). In order to ensure its dominance, the repressive regime boosted its state surveillance through artistic censorship. Indeed, theatrical performances were banned by the Communist authorities. It was perceived as a subversive activity that undermined and even threatened the existing authorities.

### ***Resistance through Performance and The Living Room Theatre***

This act of demoralization and destruction of a long-standing cultural heritage was met by resistance from The Living Room Theatre idealized by Pavel Kohout who staged small and private performances of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in the apartment of the actress Vlasta Chramostova and also in the homes and country houses of other dissidents. In his article “Shakespeare and the Czech Resistance”, Procházka (1996) underscores the significance of these private shows. The critic insists that Kohout did not indulge in these risky performances because of the “strong tradition” of Shakespeare; he simply aimed at creating a “social bond” between the performers and the audience (p. 61). Due to the nature of the theatrical space, stage directions were read aloud, expressively, replacing bodily movements. Non-dramatic parts were omitted and so were some characters. Performers had to constantly change roles and reconstitute personal voices. Some passages were put to music performed by the banned singer Vlasta Tresnak which strengthened the bond against the system.



The emergence of the Living Room Theatre defied the government's panoptic system. It necessitates a gathering of a trusted audience which is not only prohibited but also highly risky because anyone could report back to the state. In fact, the state, as a modern hegemon, does not operate alone. In political science, hegemony starts at the level of the state but also infiltrates societal relations. Michel Foucault writes that any individual can exercise power and everyone can oversee and monitor as the state does. Power is thus "automatized" and "disindividualized" (Foucault, 1995, p. 202). Once it becomes the norm, the focus shifts to the self concealing all outward interaction. In a process of what Foucault calls 'individuation', the people become self-operating and start monitoring themselves. Hence, the end product is "a collection of separated individualities" (Foucault, 1995, p. 201) which eventually abolishes all hope of reunion and cultural exchange.

### ***Shakespeare, Metamorphosed***

What Stoppard manages to so creatively execute is to transform a literary canon such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to reprimand totalitarianism in a parodic fashion. He surpasses the bounds of the Czechoslovakian influences detailed above and exploits characters that exhibit misfit to promote serious reflection that leads to uncontested laughter. He revivifies characters from past tragedies and casts them anew into a disorderly present where they strut and fret upon the stage unaware of the heaviness of the message they carry.

In *Cahoot's Macbeth*, events take place in a living room in a flat in the Eastern Bloc city under police-state control. A version of *Macbeth* is being performed by Cahoot's troupe. An inspector interferes. He warns the performers that their activities can be provocative to the authorities. He then leaves after the coronation of Macbeth, the tyrant, which he takes to be a happy ending. In *Cahoot's Macbeth*, characters from *Dogg's Hamlet* appear. In the latter, a group of students, who are under the tutelage of Professor Dogg, are rehearsing *Hamlet*. When they are busy preparing the stage, they communicate in Dogg Language only: it is a language composed of English words that have completely different interpretations. This method is derived from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. It was appealing for Stoppard because it presented the possibility of writing a play which had to teach the audience the language in which the play was written. Rank (2010) writes that *Cahoot's Macbeth* offers "a lesson on free expression under difficult circumstances" (p. 171) and so the use of a new language breaks the shackles on

communication imposed by the regime. Filicia Londré (2001) asserts that “artists under a totalitarian regime are physically walled in”, adding that “their thoughts and creative imaginations will always find some form of expression – a whole new language if necessary” (p. 319).

Performing Shakespeare in the Eastern Bloc is overtly anti-system. In Stoppard’s play, the inspector declares: “Shakespeare- or the Old Bill, as we call him in the force- is not a popular choice with my chief, owing to his popularity with the public, or as we call it in the force, the filth” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 192). What is popular with the public becomes unpopular with the state. In his book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams (1976) explains that hegemony is not only the ruling of one predominant class but the acceptance of this class as the norm and the common sense. So, hegemony feeds on the consent of the submissive with power being in the hands of the dominant class. The dominant class in this context is the one-party system in Czechoslovakia and it is hence the locus of hegemony. What Stoppard’s play does is that it breaks the chain of submission by fiercely engaging in the outlawed activity of theatre. It becomes even more dreadful when the players kindle the spirit of Shakespeare and invite their trusted audience to watch. The consequences are absolutely dire. “Jobs lost, children failing exams, letters undelivered, driving licences withdrawn, passports indefinitely postponed” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 192).

The Inspector knows that these dramatic works may give rise to unwanted and dangerous intellectual spur. He says: “The fact is, when you get a universal and timeless writer like Shakespeare there’s a strong feeling that he could be spitting in the eyes of the beholder when he should be keeping his mind on Verona” (p. 192). Right here, is an accusation of defiance; yet for the Inspector, it has not broken out yet. He needs personal action that is not clad in Shakespearean characters. He admits:

The chief says he’d rather you stood up and said ‘there’s no freedom in this country’, then there’s nothing underhand and we all know where we stand. You get your lads together and we get our lads together and when it’s all over, one of us is in power and you’re in gaol. That’s freedom in action. (p. 192)

The Inspector’s use of the word ‘freedom’ is farcical. Freedom in action would be an actual proof of state defiance. To stand up and say there is no freedom is a free ticket to life in shackles. The Living Room Theatre was not meant to be safe. It was meant to combat the system from within by widening the circle of dissidents.

Outside the living room, the players cannot risk being recognized as intellectuals or artists

because the system would simply annihilate them. For instance, the performer in the role of Macbeth used to sweep floors, and before that, he used to be a night watchman and before that a trolley porter. Now he works at a kiosk at a tram terminus; but originally, he is an actor named Landovsky (Stoppard fashions this character after Pavel Landovsky the famous Czechoslovak actor who was banned from acting in public). These not-so-much-of-career stages were marked by constant surveillance and so the Inspector remembers Landovsky from the outside world where he has no defiant voice whatsoever but, more dangerously, he remembers him for his role as a button-molder in the Norwegian play “Peer Gynt”. Although Landovsky insists that he has not worked for years, the Inspector reminds him of his omnipresence. He says “I’m the cream in your coffee, the sugar in your tank, and the breeze blowing down your neck” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 188). Then, he reveals that he enjoyed Landovsky’s former performances and asks for his autograph which he claims is for his daughter. Deceitful and manipulative, he strives to get hold of a proof that Landovsky still exists as an actor which is incriminating. At that point and if not careful, almost anything anyone says could be held against them. The Inspector, being the vocal advocate of the state, says “I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down and played back at your trial” (p. 206). His language is both hostile and threatening. As he approaches Landovsky, he says:

You’d better get rid of the idea that there’s a special Macbeth which you do when I’m not around and some other Macbeth for when I am around which isn’t worth doing. You’ve only got one Macbeth. It’s what we call a one-party system. (p. 188)

The linguistic hegemony here empowers the one-party state and disarms the artist.

### **“If it’s not Free Expression!”: Weaponising Doggspeak to Alter Power Relations**

The Inspector comes back to the flat when Act Five is about to begin. It coincides with the presence of a lorry driver called Easy who comes to deliver building materials. Easy does not belong to the circle of intellectuals yet he possesses the ultimate tool to neutralize the domineering presence of the state embodied by the Inspector. He cannot understand English and speaks Dogg, a playful language invented by Stoppard whereby English words are stripped of their original definitions and acquire new meanings. For instance, ‘what’ means ‘eleven’, ‘plank’ means ‘ready’ and “gymshoes” means “excellent”. When the Inspector asks, “Where did you learn it?” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 206), the hostess responds that Dogg language cannot be instructed but rather caught. What follows is the enactment of Act Five of *Macbeth* in Dogg language. Therefore, English, the

common linguistic medium that the Inspector understands and expects to hear completely disappears from the performance. This supposedly predominant language is replaced with an alternate, funny-sounding, linguistic innovation that the players quickly catch and it does not seem to bother anyone in the audience but the Inspector. He is dazzled and confused; but is unable to decode what the Actors are saying. He suspects it to be an act of “hostility towards the Republic” (p. 207) but cannot possibly condemn any mischief or anti-state incitement. He says through the phone, “How the hell do I know? But if it is not free expression, I don’t know what is” (p. 207).

The last act the Inspector witnesses is the crowning of a tyrant which he joyfully lauds. He does not comprehend the last scene which entails the killing of Macbeth, the usurper and the crowning of Malcolm in his stead after receiving the support of his people. In other words, the performance is concluded with the rule of legitimacy and justice over tyrannical violence which is a flagrant act of animosity towards the status quo. Had he decoded the language, the Inspector would have unquestionably ordered the arrest of the troupe which he keeps threatening all night long. In this context, hegemony resides in the dominant language and tumbles down upon the persistence of another. The diffusion of Dogg language shifts the paradigm of power relations within the living room whereby the Inspector is the incarnation of the sovereign state to which the players are expected to submit. Submission here is understood in terms of compliance with the dominant culture that is being actively propagated notably in terms of linguistic conformity and artistic silence.

Doggspeak is employed by the artists as a form of free expression that defies censorship. It is reminiscent of George Orwell’s Newspeak, the official language of Oceania, the totalitarian superstate in *1984*. Only Doggspeak is used to diminish the range of state control thus becoming a form of resistance against the panoptic system and its mechanisms of power. Rather than internalizing the surveillance and disciplinary gaze of the inspector, the characters employ a language that grants them agency and enables them to evade his control.

Dogg language is not restricted to everyday jargon but can be used in performing a Shakespearean play. The infamous soliloquy of Macbeth in Act V, Scene 5, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time . . .” (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 211) is translated into “Dominoes, et dominoes, et dominoes, Popsies historical axle-grease, exacts bubbly fins crock lavender” (Stoppard, 2011, p. 209). In the

ears of the Inspector, they are regular English words that cannot possibly formulate a meaning because of their seemingly chaotic structure. Dogg language becomes the ultimate *coup de théâtre* that allows for the show to go on and for the final scene to take place without the interference of an inspective force. In using Dogg language, the players are the ones who are redefining reality and reshaping consciousness after long being victims of social and economic domination.

## Conclusion

*Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* earned critical praise for adapting Shakespeare to the context of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. Much like *Macbeth*, it is fraught with overriding ambitions, totalitarian violence but most relevantly resistance against the establishment. The play stems from the borderland of *Macbeth* to destabilize the manipulative and indoctrinating practices of political authority. In these two interlocked plays, Stoppard first reduces *Hamlet* into a fifteen-minute play that is further abridged into a two-minute 'ENCORE'. In the second one, *Macbeth* does not exactly undergo the same condensation as most of it is played straight; but it is still shortened following the fashion of the underground Living-Room Theatre. These metamorphosed plays and metaplays are highly important and central to the dramatic peculiarity of Stoppard. Although he does not talk about being an engaged writer nor does he admit to having any particular conviction or social objective other than the love of writing, his confession in an interview with Philip Roberts in 1978 is quite suggestive: "There is no such thing as pure art- art is a commentary on something else in life (...) art ought to involve itself in contemporary social and political history as much as anything else" (p. 84). Eventually, through linguistic experimentation and thematic cross-pollination, Stoppard allows his palimpsestic writing to be metamorphosed from a purely selective textual transfer or a theatrical reproduction of Shakespeare into a linguistic reconfiguration of an iconic work of drama that topples a self-praising, ostensibly triumphant yet profoundly paranoid tyrannical system within the small walls of an Eastern Bloc living room.

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# A Brief Survey of Gender Parity in the Theatre Industry

## Tiyatro Sektöründe Cinsiyet Eşitliği Üzerine Kısa Bir Araştırma

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### ABSTRACT

Throughout centuries, women have been excluded from theatre, an otherwise significant part of Western culture. Even after they have been allowed to attend theatrical performances, perform on stage, and publish their work, their contributions have been obscured or downgraded. In modern times, the inequality between male and female playwrights and theatre practitioners saw only marginal improvement. This study investigates the presence of women as playwrights and directors in the 40 plays uploaded to the National Theatre at Home platform in the year starting with December 2020. Studies conducted since the 1980s have systematically pointed out the lack of equal opportunities for men and women in the theatre industry. Our findings comply with relevant studies and attest that gender parity is far from being attained despite efforts to include more women in theatre in various roles.

**Keywords:** National Theatre at Home, Survey, Gender Parity

### ÖZ

Yüzyıllar boyunca kadınlar, Batı kültürünün önemli bir parçası olan tiyatronun dışında tutulmuşlardır. Tiyatro gösterilerine katılmalarına, sahnede performans sergilemelerine ve çalışmalarını yayımlamalarına izin verildikten sonra bile, katkıları gizlenmiş veya küçümsenmiştir. Modern zamanlarda, erkek ve kadın oyun yazarları ve tiyatro uygulayıcıları arasındaki eşitsizlik sadece marjinal bir iyileşme göstermiştir. Bu çalışma, Aralık 2020 ile başlayan bir yıl içinde National Theatre at Home platformuna yüklenen 40 oyunda oyun yazarı ve yönetmen olarak kadınların varlığını araştırmaktadır. 1980'lerden bu yana yapılan çalışmalar, tiyatro sektöründe kadın ve erkekler için fırsat eşitliğinin bulunmadığına sistematik olarak işaret etmektedir. Bulgularımız ilgili çalışmalarla uyumludur ve tiyatrodaki çeşitli rollerde daha fazla kadının yer almasına yönelik çabalara rağmen cinsiyet eşitliğinin sağlanmaktan uzak olduğunu göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** National Theatre at Home, Anket, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği

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## Introduction

It is widely acknowledged today that, historically, numerous professions have been largely inaccessible to women; nonetheless, some women have still succeeded in making significant contributions across various professional fields, despite the fact that their contributions have ultimately either been marginalised or obscured from history. The field of theatre serves as a prominent example since there is ample data on the historical development of the art form. The first theatrical performances date back to ancient times and although scholars have yet to reach a definite conclusion, it is largely agreed that in those early times, women's presence at theatre was not even allowed (Day, 2016). Regardless, Goldhill (1997) takes as "uncontested facts" that in Ancient Greece, "no women participated directly in the writing, production, performance or judging of the plays" (p. 62). In the following centuries, women could definitely attend theatrical performances, yet, the first professional actresses appeared on stage much later. In Britain, this development took place after the Restoration of King Charles II to the throne in 1660, when "it is known that a woman played Desdemona in a production of *Othello* by Thomas Killigrew's King's Company" (Howe, 1992, p. 19). Furthermore, women's contribution to the development of theatre has been efficiently suppressed until the seventeenth century, as evidenced by the sparse number of plays from earlier periods (Case, 1988). For feminist scholars and playwrights searching for a female tradition and a female canon of plays, there are very few examples to draw on. In Sue-Ellen Case's (1988) opinion, if these few examples managed not to disappear from history, it is by virtue of certain privileges, either "by class, by their beauty, by their association with men of influence, or perhaps because their work manifested some similarities with the works in the [male] canon" (p. 28). Given such weak representation in the theatrical domain, Ferris' (1990) argument that "women had absolutely no part in their own dramatic image-making" (p. 19) seems to be particularly compelling.

Gradually, women managed to make their way into theatre, without this meaning that their share has been, or is, as a matter of fact, equal. Lafler (2004) reports that from 1670 until 1695, apart from Aphra Behn's work, "no other woman had plays produced" (p. 81) on the British stage. In the following period, between 1695 and 1705, only thirty-one "of the nearly two hundred new plays staged" belonged to female playwrights (p. 86). Prior to the latter half of the eighteenth century, "only ten female playwrights were active" (p. 88); this number did not see significant growth in the decades to come.



In 1987, Gardiner conducted research into the employment of women in the English theatre. Her report begins with statistics from 1984 when only seven per cent of the plays performed were written by female playwrights and less than 50 per cent of the management or senior artistic posts were held by women (Gardiner, 1998, p. 97). Three years later, when Gardiner's study was published, the picture was not improved significantly and "only 7 women held the post of artistic director in a building-based theatre company, compared with 41 men" (p. 101). Of equal significance is that, in the matter of plays written or adapted from books by women, they accounted for less than 17 per cent of the total number of plays staged in the main house of permanent theatres (p. 102). A study from 1994 by Long follows Gardiner's research and investigates what has changed in seven years, revealing that "in virtually every post investigated, women are under-represented" (Long, 1998, p. 107), and "overall only 20 per cent of all work staged during 1994 was by women" (p. 106). The disparity in male and female employment within the theatre industry is striking, and it appears that the passing of time has not significantly benefited women in this particular field.

### **The National Theatre at Home Case Study**

In the twenty-first century, one might expect these figures to have become a thing of the past; however, this does not seem to be the case. Referring to the British Theatre Repertoire's report dating back to 2013, theatre critic Lyn Gardner (2015) asserts that the report found that while 30 per cent of new plays were written by women one decade earlier, in 2013, the percentage has risen only by one point. One of the leading feminist theatres in the UK, the Sphinx Theatre Company (2020) continues the tradition started by Gardiner in 1987 of researching 'what share of the cake'<sup>1</sup> women get in theatre. Through research conducted in 2019, the company published a comprehensive report revealing that "women theatre artists still have not reached parity in employment and status in English theatre" (p. 2). Once again, the findings of previous studies, which had reported a relative lack of women in the theatre industry, were corroborated: only 31 per cent of artistic directors were female, 38 per cent of staged plays were written by women, and 16 per cent of the revivals were by women.

It is clear that an even more conscious effort as well as a broader perspective is necessary to amend the gender gap in the theatre industry. While all theatre companies are crucial in achieving

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is a reference to the title of Gardiner's study.

this goal, certain theatres seem to be of particular significance. The Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, more widely known as the National Theatre, is one such theatre for various reasons. First of all, it is a leading theatre institution with a remarkable cultural significance, yet, it also represents the national character of theatre in Great Britain and secures a good portion of funding from the Arts Council. Writing for *The Guardian*, Sam Potter (2013) notes the under-representation of plays written by women in the National Theatre's programme and challenges Rufus Norris, who was to become the artistic director in 2015 and will, in fact, remain so until 2025, to strive for gender equality. In a direct address to Norris, she ends the piece with the words: "Why not make it your aim for the National Theatre to achieve gender equality in writing in the next 10 years? Women are already writing the plays. Go on – I dare you". Norris has actually taken up the challenge as Aston (2020) points out his commitment "to achieving a 50:50 gender split for women directors and playwrights by 2021" (p. 16), an endeavour which he does not seem to have fully accomplished as evinced by the National Theatre's report for the year 2021-2022 (*Equity, Diversity and Inclusion*).

Informed by research such as Gardiner's (1998) and the Sphinx Theatre Company's (2020), this study is comprised of a survey related to the employment of women in the 40 plays uploaded on the National Theatre's streaming service, i. e., the National Theatre at Home platform<sup>2</sup>, in the first year of its existence (December 2020-December 2021). The elements examined here are the number of plays written by women, the number of plays adapted from books and plays written by women, and the number of plays directed by women<sup>3</sup>. In order to avoid excessive congestion within the text, information pertaining to the examined plays is provided as an appendix at the end of the study. The layout of the plays corresponds to the order in which they were uploaded to the platform during the given period.

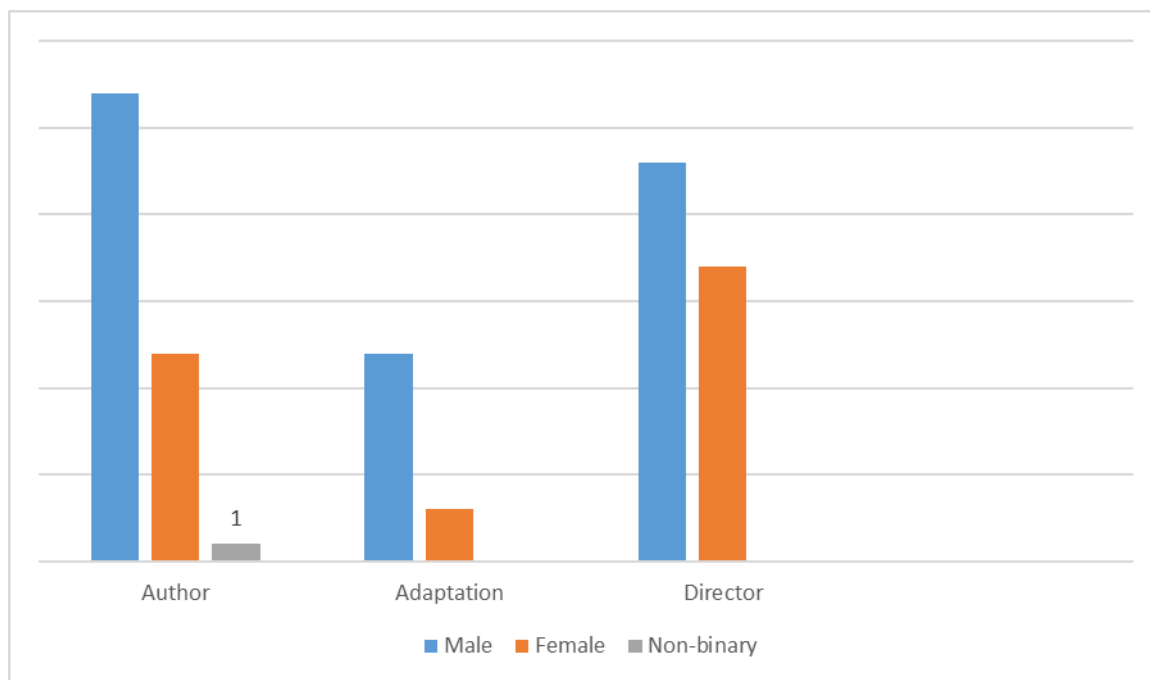
The National Theatre at Home was initially launched as a free-stream programme of 16 plays on YouTube for 16 weeks starting in April 2020. This initiative came as a response to the first lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and it continued as a subscription-based platform from December 2020 on. The endeavour made it possible to rent a single play or to subscribe

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<sup>2</sup> The platform can be accessed here: <https://www.ntathome.com/>

<sup>3</sup> This study is, in fact, part of a more extensive research that investigates the representation of women in the 40 plays uploaded on the National Theatre at Home platform between December 2020 and December 2021. The tool employed for analysing the parts written for women is the Sphinx Test (<https://sphinxtheatre.co.uk/resources/>), developed by the Sphinx Theatre Company. This study will be published elsewhere by the authors of this article.

monthly or for annual unlimited access. Bringing on a great deal of suffering and loss to many people, the pandemic has also “precipitated a huge change in perspectives on digital theatre, building interest from audiences and artists” (*Annual Report 2020-2021*, p. 8). Although the theatres opened their doors permanently in June 2021, the National Theatre’s streaming service, just like other forms of digital theatre, seems to be a permanent feature of theatre to come.



*Figure 1.* Distribution of male, female, and non-binary individuals in the examined plays.

The raw results of the survey conducted in this study show that from the corpus of 40 plays, only 12 belong to female authors (30 per cent). 15 out of the 40 plays are adaptations and only three of them are based on works by women (20 per cent). Finally, 17 plays are directed by women (42.5 per cent), which seems to be the area where gender parity has nearly been achieved. The above figure is meant to visually represent the lack of equality between men and women’s opportunities. Before proceeding, the following point has to be clarified. This study builds on the presumption that a female name corresponds to a woman and a male name to a man. Nevertheless, in the case of Kae Tempest, the playwright of *Paradise*, the author identifies as a non-binary person, which may also be the case for the other authors/directors this study focuses on. However, there was no available information on the Internet regarding such choice.

Going a step further, a closer examination of these figures reveals a distinct perspective. The

27 plays authored by male writers are attributable to 18 individual men, while the 11 plays attributed to female authors correspond to an equal number of women. What this ultimately means is that, unlike a female playwright, a male playwright has more chance to have more than one work produced, which, in turn, increases the chance of obtaining new contracts and winning awards. Within the 40 plays examined in this study, there are novels written by women which are later adapted for the stage while there is no play by a female playwright that has been adapted. Regarding the director posts, 17 plays are, in fact, directed by eight women and the other 24 are directed by 14 male directors. This analysis suggests that, unlike male directors, there are fewer female directors to choose from in the theatre industry and some of the female directors were offered more than one production by the National Theatre.

Some further considerations should be devoted to the fact that the authors and the directors are not the only significant agents in a theatrical production. Every production involves the contributions of numerous individuals. However, examining the number of women employed for each of the 40 plays would have been a challenging endeavour. For instance, for the first play in this study, *The Deep Blue Sea*, the entire crew amounts to 162 people, including the cast, ensemble, creative team, production team for broadcast, production team for National Theatre, people who receive special recognition for the National Theatre at Home delivery, and finally, the joint chief executives and deputy artistic director. The other reason for restricting the study to only these elements is that the authors and the directors are the names usually included in the production poster, as is also the case with the description provided for each play on the NT at Home streaming service. Finally, even if the percentage of women employed in posts other than those measured by the present study (such as designers and technicians) might be higher, thus far, the authors and the directors are the primary posts by which gender parity has been measured in the theatre industry.

## **Conclusion**

While the present survey deals with a small number of theatrical productions and is limited to a single theatre, it still serves as a representative sample since the National Theatre is one of the leading theatres internationally and its streaming service seems to be one of the most well-known attempts to offer theatre lovers access to digital theatre globally. Despite its limitations, our findings are in correlation with more comprehensive studies conducted by established figures and institutions, such as the Sphinx Theatre Company.

Even though the National Theatre and its streaming service are not strictly interchangeable entities, during the period when the pandemic rendered live theatre infeasible, it was only the National Theatre at Home platform that effectively represented the theatrical productions of this national institution. It must, however, be stated that the general picture of the plays uploaded after 2021 is quite different from that displayed in the first year of the platform's existence. In the following years, a smaller number of ancient and Shakespearean plays were uploaded, which provides space for more recent pieces of writing and, presumably, for more women to have their work represented. What this further implies is that the National Theatre was unsure of the platform's reception and turned predominantly to established male authors to ensure its success.

In the spring of 2025, the National Theatre will finally have its first female artistic director, that is Indhu Rubasingham, who will have followed six men holding this post since 1962. Potter (2013) reports that the only theatre with less work of women playwrights being produced other than the National Theatre was, at the time, the Donmar Warehouse. As a writer and director herself, Potter points out that "the appointment of a woman as the artistic director of Donmar had done nothing to improve that – in fact, Josie Rourke is yet to programme a single play written by a female writer in the theatre's main space"<sup>4</sup>. While Rubasingham's appointment is a development to celebrate, it remains to be seen what it will mean for the employment and representation of women in theatre since the system in which the theatre makers operate is still widely male-dominated.

Another positive step is that the members of a campaign to address the under-representation of women in theatre have secured a meeting with the Arts Council England (Luckhurst, 2024). Gender parity is not only a matter of cultural attitudes towards women, but it strongly depends on economic support, and the involvement of Arts Council England in this pressing issue may provide the necessary factor for a remarkable change. The data regarding the pervasive gender imbalance in theatre is still considerable in the twenty-first century and while a possible solution will have to be multifaceted, it looks like British theatres (and ideally all others) should adopt a policy of equal distribution of works by male and female playwrights as a starting point even if that might undermine some of the artistic choices. The same should be the case while appointing directors.

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<sup>4</sup> This statement was later corrected as there was one play written by a female playwright which Josie Rourke included in the programme of Donmar Playhouse. However, a single play by a female playwright does not really contradict Potter's main point.

Indeed, there is no shortage of noteworthy plays written by women (Lucy Kirkwood, Michaela Coel, and Winsome Pinnock, to name a few) and directed by female directors (such as Miranda Cromwell, Nadia Fall, and Carrie Cracknell). Having seen remarkable productions written and directed by women through the National at Home platform, as few as they may be, a global audience can now attest to this.

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## Appendix

<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author/s</b>	<b>Director</b>
<i>The Deep Blue Sea</i>	2016	Terence Rattigan	Carrie Cracknell
<i>Amadeus</i>	2017	Peter Shaffer	Michael Longhurst
<i>Coriolanus</i>	2014	William Shakespeare	Josie Rourke
<i>Dara</i>	2015	Tanya Ronder/Shahid Nadeem	Nadia Fall
<i>I Want My Hat Back</i>	2015	Jon Klassen	Wils Wilson
<i>Medea</i>	2014	Ben Power/Euripides	Carrie Cracknell
<i>Mosquitoes</i>	2017	Lucy Kirkwood	Rufus Norris
<i>Othello</i>	2013	William Shakespeare	Nicholas Hytner
<i>Phèdre</i>	2009	Ted Hughes/Jean Racine	Nicholas Hytner
<i>The Cherry Orchard</i>	2011	Andrew Upton/Anton Chekhov	Howard Davies
<i>Three Sisters</i>	2020	Inua Ellams/Anton Chekhov	Nadia Fall
<i>Yerma</i>	2017	Simon Stone/F. G. Lorca	Simon Stone
<i>Julie</i>	2018	Polly Stenham/August Strindberg	Carrie Cracknell
<i>Angels in America I</i>	2017	Tony Kushner	Marianne Elliott
<i>Angels in America II</i>	2017	Tony Kushner	Marianne Elliott
<i>Antigone</i>	2012	Don Taylor/Sophocles	Polly Findlay
<i>Behind the Beautiful Forevers</i>	2015	David Hare/Katherine Boo	Rufus Norris
<i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i>	2017	Tennessee Williams	Benedict Andrews
<i>Consent</i>	2017	Nina Raine	Roger Mitchell
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	2018	William Shakespeare	Nicholas Hytner
<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	2012	William Shakespeare	Dominic Cooke
<i>All My Sons</i>	2019	Arthur Miller	Jeremy Herrin
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	2019	William Shakespeare	Nicholas Hytner
<i>A View from the Bridge</i>	2016	Arthur Miller	Ivo van Hove
<i>Chewing Gum Dreams</i>	2014	Michaela Coel	Nadia Fall



<i>Everyman</i>	2015	Carol Ann Duffy/Anonymous	Rufus Norris
<i>Frankenstein</i>	2011	Nick Dear/Mary Shelley	Danny Boyle
<i>Frankenstein</i>	2011	Nick Dear/Mary Shelley	Danny Boyle
<i>Hamlet</i>	2015	William Shakespeare	Lyndsey Turner
<i>Hansard</i>	2019	Simon Woods	Simon Godwin
<i>Treasure Island</i>	2015	Bryony Lavery/R. L. Stevenson	Polly Findlay
<i>Home</i>	2013	Nadia Fall	Nadia Fall
<i>Under Milk Wood</i>	2021	Dylan Thomas/Siân Owen	Lyndsey Turner
<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	2014	Tennessee Williams	Benedict Andrews
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	2021	Emily Burns/William Shakespeare	Simon Godwin
<i>Ian McKellen on Stage</i>	2020	-	Sean Mathias
<i>Top Girls</i>	2019	Caryl Churchill	Lyndsey Turner
<i>Paradise</i>	2021	Kae Tempest/Sophocles	Ian Rickson
<i>Rockets and Blue Lights</i>	2021	Winsome Pinnock	Miranda Cromwell
<i>This House</i>	2013	James Graham	Jeremy Herrin

# The Spatial-Temporal Canvas That We Call the Stage: Text and Performance in *Final Solutions*

## Sahne Dediğimiz Mekânsal-Zamansal Tuval: *Final Solutions* Adlı Oyunda Metin ve Performans

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### ABSTRACT

The article studies the significance and function of stage directions in Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (1993). The stage directions propel the play-text to transcend into a performative script. Scholars Jisha Menon (2013) and Aparna Dharwadker (2005) commend Dattani's 'innovative' dramaturgy for realistically representing the urban-middle-class home along with the complex social issues pervading this social milieu. This article argues for their assertion and extends their studies by examining the source of Dattani's inventive stagecraft – his stage directions. It argues that Dattani challenges the label of dramatic text through his stage construction and stage directions. These directions add theatricality and render a visual appeal to the written text, which acts as a 'drama' for the students and critics of literature and a 'fabel' or a blueprint for other directors. The ostension of multiple levels of space-time in the text through stage directions reifies the mise-en-scene in the readers' minds and also foregrounds Dattani's reformist method of creating a conflict in his readers/audiences' minds. Using a comparative analysis of the stage directions in the play-text by Dattani and a stage production by the Delhi-based Asmita Theatre under the direction of Arvind Gaur, it foregrounds Dattani's extravagant and complex construction of the stage. It studies his distinct usage of the stage as a 'spatial-temporal' entity and establishes that Dattani's stage directions are quintessential to his reformist agendas.

**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani, Post-Independence Indian Theatre, Indian Stagecraft, Reform, *Final Solutions*

### ÖZ

Bu makale, Mahesh Dattani'nin *Final Solutions* (1993) adlı eserinde sahne yönergelerinin anlamını ve işlevini incelemektedir. Sahne yönergeleri, oyun metnini performatif bir senaryoya dönüştürmektedir. Araştırmacılar Jisha Menon (2013) ve Aparna Dharwadker (2005), Dattani'nin 'yenilikçi' dramaturjisinin, kentsel orta sınıf evini ve bu sosyal ortamı etkileyen karmaşık sosyal sorunları gerçekçi bir şekilde temsil etme konusunda övgüye değer olduğunu belirtmişlerdir. Bu makale, bu değerlendirmeyi savunur ve Dattani'nin yaratıcı sahne tasarımı ile sahne yönergelerinin kaynaklarını inceleyerek bu çalışmalarını genişletir. Makale, Dattani'nin sahne inşası ve sahne yönergeleri aracılığıyla dramatik metin etiketine meydan okuduğunu savunur. Bu yönergeler, yazılı metne teatral bir nitelik katar ve ona görsel bir çekicilik kazandırır; böylece metin, edebiyat öğrencileri ve eleştirmenler için bir 'drama', diğer yönetmenler içinse bir 'fabel' veya taslak olarak işlev görür. Sahne yönergeleri aracılığıyla metindeki çoklu zaman-mekân düzeylerinin gösterilmesi, okurların zihnindeki mizansen somutlaştırırken, Dattani'nin okurların/seycilerin zihninde bir çatışma yaratmaya yönelik yenilikçi yöntemini de ön plana çıkarır. Delhi merkezli Asmita Tiyatrosu'nun Arvind Gaur tarafından yönetilen sahne prodüksiyonu ile Dattani'nin oyun metnindeki sahne yönergelerinin karşılaştırmalı analizi kullanılarak, Dattani'nin sahne tasarımının ne kadar gösterişli ve karmaşık olduğu vurgulanır. Makale, Dattani'nin sahneyi 'mekânsal-zamansal' bir varlık olarak kullanma biçimini inceler ve sahne yönergelerinin onun reformist gündemlerini yansıtmada ne kadar önemli olduğunu ortaya koyar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mahesh Dattani, Bağımsızlık-Sonrası Hint Tiyatrosu, Hint Sahneçiliği, Reform, *Final Solutions*.

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## Introduction

In the Indian dramatic tradition, the stage has been a significant aspect of theatrical performances. From classical Sanskrit theatre, which was governed by one of the most comprehensive compendiums of dramaturgy and performing arts, the *Natyasastra* (c.200 BCE-200 CE), to the modern Indian theatre, influenced by European techniques of stagecraft, the inclusion of the stage as an integral part of the story has been observed in every tradition of Indian drama. Even regional folk theatre forms such as *Jatra*<sup>1</sup> and *Yakshagana*<sup>2</sup> from Bengal and Karnataka, respectively, use a minimalist<sup>3</sup> and precisely designed stage to depict scenes ranging from a palace to a battlefield. In terms of stagecraft, post-independence Indian drama is an amalgamation of all these traditions. However, the most prominent influence on it is that of the European realist theatre. R. K. Yajnik, in his book, *The Indian Theatre* (1933), observes:

There is a distinct line of continuity from the Gupta golden age [...] when Kalidasa wrote plays for the Gupta royal court theatre and the Sanskrit drama reached its zenith, through its decline and ruin after the Mohammedan conquest in the twelfth century and the cultivation of the medieval “Mystery and Morality” popular stage in the villages, where this type of play still lingers down to the most modern performances on the Indian stage. In fact, the Indian theatre of today marks the meeting point of three main streams, viz., the ancient classical drama, the medieval popular stage and the British influence. (p. 19)

Yajnik’s assertion, while valid for plays written during the pre-independence era, does not emphasize the overarching presence of European theatre models in the post-independence dramatic tradition. The use of the stage in the post-independence period has largely been a conjugation of Indian stories with the techniques of European stagecraft. Playwrights such as Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) and Vijay Tendulkar departed<sup>4</sup> consciously from the earlier conventions of theatre in terms of form and content. When studied in comparison, the stage directions of the post-independence Indian playwrights appear in conformity with the modern European playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

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<sup>1</sup> *Jatra* (meaning a procession) emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Bhakti movement of Krishnaism by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It began as a procession of dance performance by the devotees. Later, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, religious fervour was replaced by secular themes.

<sup>2</sup> *Yakshgana* means the songs of the demi-gods. It developed between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Karnataka. It is a combination of traditional dance, drama, and music to present stories from mythology and other cultural legends.

<sup>3</sup> In terms of stage props, this is used to amplify the atmosphere on stage.

<sup>4</sup> See Vasudha Dalmia’s *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*. According to Dalmia, the most obvious difference between the drama of the pre-and post-independence eras is the playwrights’ departure from allegorical patriotism to the inner worlds of the people.

Mohan Rakesh (2015) for instance, describes in his *Asadh Ka Ek Din* (One Day in the Season of Rain, [1958], 2015) the house of Mallika<sup>5</sup> in his opening stage directions:

*An ordinary room. The walls are made of wood, but their lower portion is plastered with smooth clay. Hindu swastika symbols are painted here and there in vermilion. The front door opens into a dark entranceway. On either side of the doorway are small niches containing little unlit clay lamps. A door upstage left leads to a second room. When this door is open, only one corner of a simple bed is visible.* (p. 69)

Rakesh's precise stage directions corroborate irrefutably to Ibsen's stage construction, as observed in his *A Doll's House* ([1879], 2018). Ibsen (2018) describes in the opening directions:

*A room furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly. At the back, a door to the right leads to the entrance-hall, another to the left leads to Helmer's study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, and beyond it a window. Near the window are a round table, armchairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking-chair; between the stove and the door, a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small bookcase with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove [...]* (p. 6)

These stage directions, located almost three-fourths of a century apart, present sharp evidence of the influence of Western realist drama on its Indian counterpart. The stage in the various streams of Indian theatre post-independence has predominantly been proscenium. Experimentations in terms of stagecraft were mostly in terms of the backdrops and sceneries as employed by the various Parsi theatre companies during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, or in terms of the use of modified "rectangular platforms" (in Tanvir, 2016, p. 11) for creating a separate space for ritualistic performances by Habib Tanvir (1923–2008). Conversely, playwrights such as Tendulkar used the proscenium stage to present the psyche and sufferings of individuals in urban-middle-class society on stage. Later, influenced by the Theatre of the Roots movement during the 1970s, the stage was used to present modern renditions of classical Sanskrit plays.

Nevertheless, the same cannot be claimed about the plays written in English, as Radha Ramaswamy notes in her introduction to the 2006 edition of the *Final Solutions*:

An examination of the early history of this drama [Indian drama in English] reveals that most writers wrote only one or two plays. Asif Currimbhoy, with twenty-five plays, is the exception. T.P. Kailasam and Nissim Ezekiel wrote about half a dozen plays each. Of the 400 odd plays written between the end of the nineteenth century and 1970, almost all are closet plays – that is they have not been produced for the stage. In fact, many

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<sup>5</sup> A central character in the play.

were not even written with performance in mind. (p. xi)

It was only during the 1980s and the 1990s that Indian English playwrights emphasized the stage as the central aspect of theatrical performances. With the emergence of playwrights such as Manjula Padmanabhan (born 1953), Uma Parmeswaran (born 1938), Poile Sengupta (born 1948), Dina Mehta, and Mahesh Dattani, attention was directed towards “Performance” (Schechner, 1973, p. 8). Their plays, especially Dattani’s, have been credited by Aparna Dharwadker (2005) as the first playwright to initiate “a new phase in the naturalization of English as a theatre medium in India” (p. 83).

A brief overview of the extant scholarship on Dattani reveals a dearth of attention towards his stagecraft. A tautological pattern emerges, pointing to more scholarly attention toward the thematic reverberations of the latent and deep-rooted issues in the Indian socio-cultural milieu in his plays. One of the most renowned studies on Dattani and specifically on *Final Solutions* is undertaken by Jisha Menon in her *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* (2013), in which she studies the generation of traumatic memories through mimesis and political performances that “transform into strident and implacable politics of identity” (p. 3). Another major work on Dattani is Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri’s *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction* (2005), that studies in detail the themes of communal prejudices, ruptured identities, complexities of familial bonds, and generational conflicts. Also significant in this regard are the essays in the collection *Indian Drama in English* (2011) edited by Kaustav Chakraborty. The essays, such as *History Through Modernity: An Analysis of Final Solutions*, by Samipendra Banerjee and *Mahesh Dattani’s Final Solutions: A Reconsideration*, by Ketaki Datta, examine comprehensively the profound socio-cultural issues that the play presents.

Arguably, the only significant attention to Dattani’s stagecraft and his use of the stage as a space projecting multiple time periods is found in Aparna Dharwadker’s *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2005) and in a chapter titled *Reading the Stage: The Self-Reflexivity of the Texts* in Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri’s book. Their analyses do not track beyond the visible functions of the stage directions, viz., to represent the living rooms of modern Indian homes. The article furthers Dharwadker’s (2005) assertion that Dattani’s dramaturgy presents on stage the “home” as a place of resentment, neurosis, confrontation” and “barely suppressed violence” (p. 277). It explores the subtleties of depths that his stagecraft adds to his plays both at the technical and the thematic level. It traces his

stage directions as the source of his theatrical vision, a process which Richard Schechner (1973) defines as “scening” (p. 13) that involves the manifestation of the play as scenes to the playwrights.

Mahesh Dattani, inspired by his role models such as Tendulkar, Elkunchwar, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Paul Zindel,<sup>6</sup> chose to write for the stage to present a realistic picture of urban Indian society. He has carved a distinct niche for himself among the contemporary generation of Indian English playwrights by virtue of what Aparna Dharwadker (2005) calls “inventive dramaturgy” (p. 277). Dattani’s utilization of the “stage” as a space that “either represents several domestic spaces simultaneously or several spaces among which home is central” (2005, p. 277) has established him as the emancipator of Indian English drama from overt literariness. He has also been the director for all his plays and has infused stage directions in a manner that, when read in the context of the story, appear as complements to the dialogues and conversations between the characters. Dattani’s stage direction is a crucial link between the various layers of the plot and the events and incidents<sup>7</sup> that propel the story forward. Evaluating the significance of his stagecraft in *Final Solutions*, the article studies Dattani’s stage directions as an integral part of his reformist agendas. His stage directions provide ample evidence of his seriousness as a director who implants an accurate picture of the scene in his readers. The article, for this purpose, attempts to present a contrast between Dattani’s stage direction and the stage directions used in a different (Asmita Theatre’s 2020) production of *Final Solutions* by Arvind Gaur. The contrast does not intend to prove one director’s vision better than the other; instead, it only emphasizes Dattani’s intricate and profoundly creative imagination that helps him imagine a stage while writing the play.

Dattani calls the stage a ‘spatial-temporal’ canvas that can hold the audience’s sense of space and time for a specific duration. The audience has to surrender their beliefs of space-time and is required to absorb the story’s timeline, which is made possible through the use of the stage and the actors. Thus, the stage becomes a powerful entity that brings alive a story through actions and makes drama one of the most sophisticated forms of storytelling. Besides the gripping stories, themes, and subjects of his plays, it is his use of the stage as a tool to present the latent yet pervading social issues that has placed Dattani distinctly among Indian English playwrights and made him a pioneer of reformist Indian playwrighting. To study Dattani’s stagecraft, it is

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<sup>6</sup> See Utpal K Banerjee in Conversation with Mahesh Dattani. *Indian Literature*, 2004, Vol 48, no. 5. pp. 161-167.

<sup>7</sup> Dattani distinguishes events from incidents by stating that events are planned happenstances in a play while incidents are impulsive, coincidental and arising from the character.

quintessential primarily to study his stage construction and use of the space through precise directions.

### **Dattani's Stage: Constructing A Space Beyond Time**

John McRae (2016) writes in his introduction to *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) that “Mahesh Dattani is always adventurous in his ways of using the theatrical space at his disposal: multiple levels, breaking the bounds of the proscenium, wondrously inventive use of lighting to give height, breadth and depth...” (p. 60). Dattani's stage construction involves multiple sections and levels. Both in *Final Solutions* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, his stage is divided into separate areas and levels that perform diverse functions, ranging from suspending characters in a “shoonya,” nothingness (Dattani, 2005, p. 64); to confronting their inner thoughts as in *Muggy Night*; and to reflect the perspectives and positions of the characters within the story as in *Final Solutions*. Dattani (2005), in his stage description for *Muggy Night*, notes:

*The stage is divided into three acting areas. The first is a small flat, beautifully done in 'ethnic chic' fashion... The windows overlook the Mumbai skyline and act literally as a window to the city with its glittering lights...*

*The second area, a completely non-realistic set comprising three levels, is black and expansive. Characters in this area are immediately suspended in a 'shoonya' where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts.*

*Below this is Kamlesh's bedroom. The bedroom is realistic, but hidden behind a gauze wall, giving it some mystery and secrecy. (p. 64)*

This division of stage, while appearing complex and profound in the description, becomes challenging for other directors to reconstruct. The contrast to Dattani's ingenuity is reflected in the minimalist use of the stage by other directors in their productions of the plays. Arvind Gaur, for instance, in his production of *Final Solutions*, keeps the furniture minimal to allow space for his mob/chorus, who are far greater in number than what is prescribed by Dattani. Another remarkable example of Dattani's expansive stage construction can be found in his play *Dance Like a Man* (1989). Dattani (2005) again uses the stage as a space transcending chronological constraints and establishes the contrast between past and present, the old and the modern, through his directions:

*A dimly-lit room in an old-fashioned house in the heart of the city... a huge arched doorway. There is a rather modern-looking rear panel behind the entrance with a telephone and a modern painting on it... (p. 448)*

As fascinating as the description appears, it becomes immensely challenging for a director to create a stage with similar magnitudes of diversity. Mithran Devanesen (2005), another director who has

directed *Dance Like a Man*, notes in his introduction to the play:

The challenge to both my actors and myself as director was not just to bring the issues the play raises to the fore but also to bridge Dattani's verbal ingenuity with a strong visual element.

I used a minimalistic approach to set design, which gave me the freedom to choreograph movement and composition with broad strokes, sometimes sculptural in quality and often fluid like a dancer in full flow... (p. 445)

What is evident from the above examples is that Dattani's stage has its signature traits that other directors seldom emulate. The primary reason for this stark contrast in stage construction is the playwright's grand vision when writing the play. His text becomes performative in the elaborate stage directions that help the reader create a vivid image of the stage in their minds.

A salient characteristic of Dattani's stage construction is that his stage is expansive and diverse, involves a high degree of fluidity in time, and can present the contrast between present and past on a single set. Hence, the stage in Dattani's plays evolves as an entity with its own distinct characteristics. However, how it complements the story and what its role is in the accomplishment of Dattani's reformist aspirations is a question that we shall explore in the following section.

### **Staging Reform: Social Issues in *Final Solutions***

Dattani's fourth play, *Final Solutions*, was banned from the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival in 1992 due to the communal riots, which was then performed in 1993 (in Ramaswamy, 2005, p. viii). The plot revolves around the central character, Ramnik Gandhi, and his family, which includes his mother, Daksha/Hardika, his wife, Aruna, and his daughter Smita. It presents contrasting perspectives on religious faith and communal disharmony from three generations of the family. The play can also be read as a commentary on the thought process of people who are self-proclaimed liberals. Dattani tests Ramnik's liberal mindset by introducing Bobby, another central character who deliberately renounces his religious identity, and Javed, Bobby's binary opposite, who was brainwashed into extremism. Both of them are from a different religion and have been chased by a blood-thirsty mob but refuse to accept Ramnik as their savior. Maintaining the uniformity of his stage construction from his earlier plays, Dattani, in *Final Solutions* as well, uses multiple areas and levels for different characters. The play opens with a comprehensive description of the first appearance of the stage, as Dattani (2005) notes:



*The stage is dominated by a horse-shoe or crescent-shaped ramp, with the end sloping to the stage level. Most of the actions of the Mob/Chorus take place on the ramp... Within the confines of the ramp is a structure suggesting the house of the Gandhis with just wooden blocks for furniture. However, upstage, perhaps on an elevation, is a detailed kitchen and a puja room. On another level is a room with a roll-top desk and an oil lamp converted to an electric one, suggesting that the period is the late 1940s. (p. 3)*

Dattani presents a vivid distinction between the past and the present perspectives on the stage by dividing the stage into different levels. The detailed stage direction also establishes the different periods on a single stage, from the 1940s to “after forty years” (Dattani, 2005, p. 6). The vivid directions describing the construction of the horse-shoe or crescent-shaped ramp levelling down to the platform, where Ramnik’s family is positioned, allow him to establish the dominant presence of the mob/chorus in the play. Dattani goes further by adding levels to his stage and notes that there is a kitchen and Puja room on an elevated level symbolising the purity and reverence associated with these places in a Hindu household. Also, the position of Daksha/Hardika’s room on another elevated level with an oil lamp suggests both – the retrospective view of the past and the higher position that older adults hold in Indian families.

The story begins with Daksha’s reading of the events around the independence from her diary:

DAKSHA (*reads from her diary*) “Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages. (*Thinks for a while.*) Today? ... (*Picks up a pen and scribbles.*) 31 March 1948. (*Reads out.*) 31 March 1948. (Dattani, 2005, p. 4)

The stage directions in this fragment, “reads from the diary, thinks for a while”, though appearing trivial, perform two essential functions: a. they make the character come alive for the reader, and b. they help the actor to make it realistic and believable. This process of highlighting the intricacies of human nature is what Vasudha Dalmia has called the individuation of characters in her book *Poetics, Plays and Performances* (2006). Dattani, through such trivial yet significant directions, presents a natural person on stage instead of contrived characters. The significance of these trivial stage directions is affirmed by Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri (2005), who says that “[I]t is in a performance that the text reveals its meanings and intentions through skilful acting in an environment designed with the appropriate measure of visual drama” (p. 108). By placing strategically these small stage directions, Dattani provides infinite spaces for infinite actors to enact the same scene in different environments and with varying degrees of skill. Gaur’s production provides further evidence emphasizing the significance of stage directions as the blueprint for

future renditions. The actress playing Hardika in Gaur’s production indeed “reads from the diary” and “thinks for a while,” however, she performs these actions as if talking to the audience and thus makes the directions and the text, in Chaudhuri’s terms, become “self-reflexive” (Chaudhuri, 2005, p. 106).



Figure a. Source: *Asmita Theatre: YouTube*. Hardika breaks the fourth wall while reading from the diary. (Timestamp, 08:17) **Note:** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur’s written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

The play (text) proceeds with Daksha placing the diary near her feet and Hardika (old Daksha) picking it up. Dattani writes in the stage direction that Daksha leaving her diary, rises up, and a slow drumbeat is heard while she stands behind Hardika with her back to the audience (Dattani, 2005, p. 6). Through this small act of placing and picking up the diary, Dattani represents a passage of forty years and the transition of time. The same transition in Arvind Gaur’s production is depicted through the costumes and makeup of the characters (Hardika wearing a white sari and a white wig to denote her old age).



Figure b. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube*. A still representing the transition from Daksha (in yellow sari) to Hardika (in white sari). (Timestamp, 08:18) *Note:* The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

Dattani, in his stage directions, emphasises specifically the actions of the mob/chorus. While writing the play, he very neatly delineates the appearance of the mob/chorus on stage and their transition from chorus to the mob and vice-versa. He notes:

*The Mob/Chorus comprises five men and ten masks on sticks. The masks are strewn all over the ramp. The player 'wears' a mask by holding the stick in front of him... There are five Hindu masks and five Muslim masks. The Mob/Chorus become the chorus when they 'wear' either the Hindu or the Muslim masks... The players of the Mob/Chorus do not belong to any religion and ideally should wear black.* (Dattani, 2005, p. 3)

Contrastingly, Arvind Gaur, in his production, presents the mob by increasing the number of players in the mob/chorus (approximately twenty). There are no multiple elevated levels for different characters and groups. The image below from the YouTube channel of his theatre group, Asmita Theatre, highlights the difference between Gaur and Dattani's direction.



Figure c. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube*. A still depicting the mob. (Timestamp, 21:09). *Note:* The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

Significantly, the chronological distance between Dattani's writing and Gaur's production of the play is almost three decades, and Dattani did not have the technological advantage that Gaur had<sup>8</sup> in 2020<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, both Dattani's text and Gaur's production successfully establish the domineering presence of the mob/chorus on the stage. The only significant difference is that Dattani uses only five players on an elevated stage with masks "strewn all over the ramp" (Dattani, 2005, p. 3) to establish an idea of the mob. In contrast, Gaur, given the austerity of his stage, brings in a real mob to perform the mob sequences. Arvind Gaur's production does not rely on masks and black costumes but makes all the players wear white shirts and black trousers. Dattani's emphasis on the mob/chorus' use of masks to change identities from Hindu to Muslim and vice-versa highlights the faceless mob mentality in both communities, and the readers/audiences are questioned about their opinions on the mob from their respective communities. Also, Dattani mentions in his stage directions that the mob/chorus, once behind the masks, becomes more frenetic, and their actions are accompanied by a slow drumbeat that grows louder once they go behind the mask. The transition of the chorus into a mob is also highlighted through Dattani's directions. He presents a crowd in which, even if there is a counterpoint, it fades due to their aggressive actions, and their "questions become statements" (Dattani, 2005, p. 7):

CHORUS 1: (*pounding with his stick*). Send ... them ... back.

Pause

CHORUS 4: (*questioning*). Send them back?

CHORUS 2: (*pounding with his stick*). Drive ... them ... out.

Pause.

CHORUS 5: (*questioning*). Drive them out?

CHORUS 3: Kill the sons of swine!

*"They repeat their lines till they overlap. CHORUS 4 and 5 get more aggressive till their questions become statements. By the end of it, they are an unruly mob crying out for blood [...]"*. (Dattani, 2005, p. 7)

Aldous Huxley, in his appendix to *The Devils of Loudon* (1922), calls this fanaticism "crowd-delirium" and deems it "immediately more dangerous to social order [...] to reasonableness and mutual tolerance [...] than either drink or debauchery" (p. 364). Dattani achieves the effect of delirium through the lucid directions along with the intense dialogues. His representation of a mob

<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that Gaur's directorial vision is dependent on technology. On the contrary, he keeps the stage furniture minimum and allows the actors to drive the story forward.

<sup>9</sup> Asmita Theatre's YouTube channel states the year of uploading this performance as 2020.

and its actions presents, in Eugenio Barba's (2010) words, "a recognisable space...transformed by the forces of performance" (p. 45). For the readers/audience, this transformation occurs in both the physical space (the stage) and the reader's mind, making them aware of their perceptions of the mob and questioning them. Stage directions from the playwright become more crucial in scenes where the mob becomes vengeful and bloodthirsty. For instance, in Act II, when the mob heckles Bobby and Javed and then chases and beats them, the chilling atmosphere is not evoked by the dialogues and argument between Bobby, Javed, and the mob, instead it is Dattani's stage direction that creates a sense of horror and fear, giving goosebumps to the reader:

CHORUS 2: Look what he has! (*Fishes out a prayer cap from Javed*).

*Chorus 1 takes the cap and covers Javed's face with it. Javed deliberately wears it on his head with dignity, whereas Bobby has removed his handkerchief. The Mob/Chorus picks up the Hindu masks on a slow drumbeat [...]*

CHORUS ALL: You pray to a God you do not know! You pray to a nothing. You do not know his form. And you seek to destroy our gods! Drive them out! [...]

*The Chorus give chase and some of their blows strike the two men who cry out in [...]*  
*The young men come to the door – it could either be a real door or a barebone representation of it – of the Gandhis. They shout and pound at the door, crying out, 'Help us! Save us! For God's sake, somebody save us!'*

*Ramnik and Aruna come to the door but do not open it. A spot on Hardika and Daksha as they both cover their ears while the two men continue with their appeals. Smita enters too. Ramnik finally opens the door and the two men enter and quickly shut the door behind them [...].* (Dattani, 2005, p. 19)

The exact sequence in Gaur's production is presented by the mob holding the two men by their arms and collars, and when it is established that they are Muslims (when one of the mob players' finds a skull cap in Javed's pocket), they run around the empty half of the stage enacting a chase. Javed and Bobby are chased by the mob, who simultaneously chant religious slogans.



Figure d. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* The mob chases Bobby and Javed. (Timestamp; 22:32). **Note:** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

The contrast here is not between how the scenes are presented but between the realism of Gaur and Dattani's precise language in his stage directions. The "disgusting vice of herd-intoxication – of downward self-transcendence into sub-humanity by the process of getting together in a mob" (Huxley, 1922, p. 365) is presented in Gaur's production through a herd of people who do not see the human in others. Gaur's mob is a contrivance of reality, representing the mobs and their chants during recent times. At the same time, Dattani's mob is the result of the playwright's imagination, which also acts as a model for manoeuvring this scene for future renditions. His stage direction for the above-displayed chaos, besides being accurately written, also leaves intermittent voids for the actors and future productions. Chaudhuri (2005) notes:

Once out of the playwright's hands, the text of the play will immediately acquire a life of its own. Interpreted by the director, enacted (and again interpreted) by the actor before a live audience, the dynamics of the theatre is, needless to say, resonantly polyphonic, with each voice adding its own reverberations to the play-in-performance. (p. 108)

The polyphonic resonance in the case of Dattani's play is an epiphenomenon of his stage directions that allow both the actor and the director to read, interpret, and perform the sequence according to their skill and style.

Interestingly, the comments that Dattani makes as stage directions also appear as companion pieces to the following action. A significant example is noticed in the first act in Dattani's text when Smita is preparing Lord Krishna's idol to put it to sleep, the chorus "whispers", "... we are neither idol makers nor idol breakers" (Dattani, 2005, p. 13). The stage direction also brings out the intended irony when Aruna asks Smita to be pure in her mind and deeds. At the same time, in the following sequence, Dattani makes Daksha fling the "pallav" (veil), a symbol of pure conduct in Hindu culture, off. The same event in Arvind Gaur's production is shown by emphasizing the words "be pure" (Dattani, 2005, p. 13) while Daksha flings her veil in the other part of the stage. Another example of the direction complementing the story and the reformist agendas is found towards the end of the first act when the mob demands Ramnik to throw out Bobby and Javed so they can kill them. Dattani (2005) writes:

*Spotlight on Ramnik. The Hindu Chorus strikes more stylized positions on top of the*

*ramp and speaks from within their masks.*

RAMNIK: What harm have they done to you?

CHORUS 1: Set an example.

CHORUS ALL: Stop them.

CHORUS 1: Before they do harm.

CHORUS ALL: Tame them. ...

CHORUS ALL: Thwart them. So we may live in peace.

RAMNIK. We? ...

CHORUS ALL. Do you doubt us? Your own people? ...

*The lights change and the Chorus becomes a Mob again.* (p. 22)

Huxley (1922) calls incidents such as the above “the final symptom of herd-intoxication,” which, unsurprisingly, demand “maniacal violence” (p. 366). The mob’s call to Ramnik to throw the two boys out is intensified by the stage directions before and after the conversation, which adds to the heated atmosphere. Arvind Gaur very effectively portrays this scene through an imaginary door which the chorus keeps beating consistently while Ramnik keeps them from breaking it by pushing his back against the door.



Figure e. Source: *Asmita Theatre: YouTube*. Ramnik defends Bobby and Javed from the mob by standing against an imaginary door. (Timestamp, 24:18). **Note:** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur’s written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

Another significant instance of Dattani’s stage direction complementing the dialogues is noted towards the end of the second act when Smita reveals that Javed is one of them, hired to “...create riots. To... throw the first stone!” (Dattani, 2005, p. 39). However, the gravity of this

revelation is amplified by Bobby's acceptance of defeat, followed by Dattani's detailed direction:

BOBBY (*to Smita*): I had won him over. I had ... almost won him over.

*Smita is horrified at this truth. She cannot speak. She rushes out. Javed knocks down the glass of milk and in frustration pounds his forehead with his fist. Ramnik advances towards Javed. Bobby steps in front of Javed protectively.* (Dattani, 2005, p. 39)

The stage direction adds to the already tense situation between Ramnik and Javed, but Dattani also uses it to expose Ramnik's self-proclaimed liberal mindset. He offers a job to Javed in an act of condescending sympathy. Still, when Javed rejects the offer, and Smita reveals the truth, Ramnik fails his liberal values and advances aggressively towards him.

Any discussion on *Final Solutions* would remain incomplete without studying, arguably, the most iconic scene in the play. Towards the end of Act III, when Bobby and Javed are about to leave, Dattani, for one last time in the play, gives the readers goosebumps. He makes Bobby's character act whimsically and creates an incident<sup>10</sup> that leaves a profound impact on the readers/audience. He writes:

HARDIKA: You can't understand how I feel.

RAMNIK: I can. They are not to blame.

HARDIKA: I cannot forget. I just cannot forget.

*There is an ominous silence. Bobby and Javed look visibly defeated.*

*Aruna enters, hair wet and loose, looking fresh after a bath. She brings in a puja [for worshipping] tray. She moves to the puja room, [...] Bobby and Javed turn away from her and move towards the door. Aruna rings the prayer bell, shattering the silence.*

*Javed stops. He stiffens. Bobby realizes what is happening to him. He stares in the direction of the bell, which is being rung to wake up the God.* (Dattani, 2005, p. 72)



<sup>10</sup> An incident for Dattani is different from an event. Refer to point 3.



Figure f. Source: *Asmita Theatre: YouTube*. Gaur's representation of the traumatic effect of the bell on Javed. Bobby holds Javed from reacting. (Timestamp, 1:29:04) **Note:** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

The stage direction in the present scene sets up the reader for the climax of the play. Though Dattani informs the audiences or readers about Javed's traumatic childhood experiences involving the prayer bell through Bobby's narration,<sup>11</sup> he makes the effects visible only in the present scene. Contrastingly, in Gaur's production, Javed does not stiffen but moves aggressively towards Aruna, who is ringing the bell. Bobby holds him from doing anything irrational in his trance while the others look perturbed. The situation has a strange effect on Bobby himself, who suddenly begins to walk towards Aruna. As Dattani (2005) continues:

BOBBY: There is one final deed to be done, Javed.

*Deliberately removes his footwear and advances towards the puja room slowly. Low drumbeat.*

*God knows, my intentions are pure. (Aruna notices him coming towards her.) It has to be done to prove to them [...]*

ARUNA. Stop! (*Bobby is near the puja room*). Stop him!

*Bobby suddenly picks up the image of [God] Krishna, which is tiny enough to sit in his palm.*

*Put that back! Oh God! No! [...]*

BOBBY: (*Extends his hands and shows the image to everyone*). See! See! I am touching God!

CHORUS ALL: (*Pounds [the floor] thrice*). We are not idol-breakers!

BOBBY. Your God! My flesh is holding Him! Look, Javed! And He does not mind!  
*The Mob/Chorus pounds.*

BOBBY: He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated! (pp. 72-73)

<sup>11</sup> Bobby reveals that, as a child, Javed was mistreated for touching their neighbour's letter, which the postman asked him to deliver.

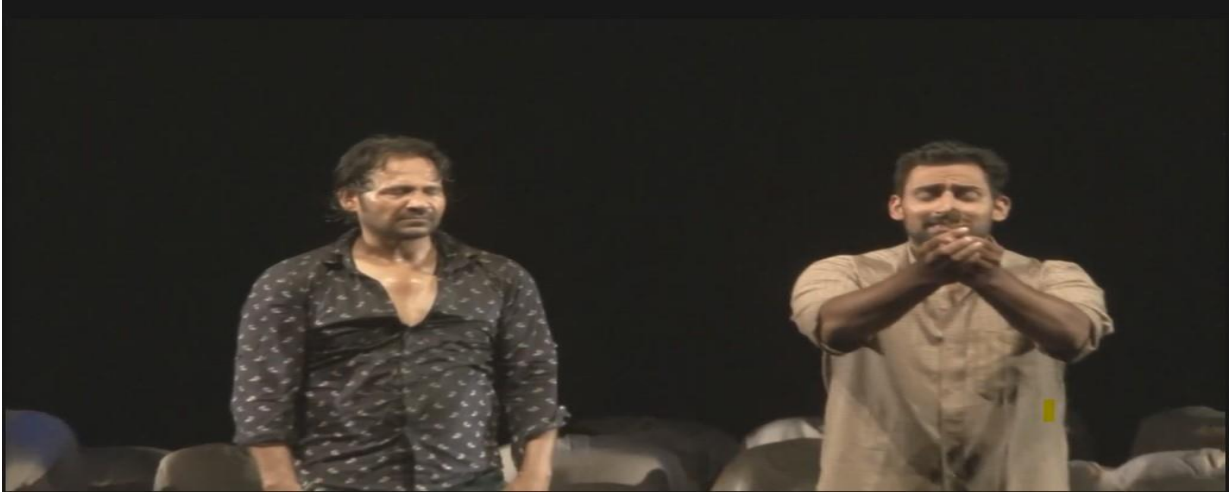


Figure g. Source: *Asmita Theatre: YouTube*. Bobby's final deed. (Timestamp, 1:29:50) *Note:* The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

During the first half of the story, these two are hated for toppling the Gods; during the latter half, they are hated for picking Him up. In Gaur's production, the most significant difference in the representation of this scene is the background performance of the mob/chorus, who drop to their knees as if pounding the ground with their knees instead of using the mask sticks as in Dattani's direction. Bobby's "final deed" of picking up the idol of Krishna and resting it on his palm is an act of breaking numerous unwritten, unspoken stereotypes that are considered sacrilege. The scene conveys a strong message to those who believe that respecting and worshipping the deities of other religions is a sin to one's own religion. It is also a message to those who believe that allowing 'others' to access their religious premises is equivalent to blasphemy.

Dattani uses similar scenes throughout the play to communicate his reformist visions. For instance, Javed's sarcasm at the Hindu caste system, when he says, "We do love our own blood. Unlike you who treat your own like shit which can't be touched" (Dattani, 2005, p. 32); his argument with Hardika who asks him whether he has ever contemplated going to Pakistan to which he replies, "I prefer Dubai" (p. 70). Amidst all the major scenes, questioning communal ideologies and prejudice, Dattani finds significant space for issues pervading societies across the world. Issues such as women's oppression appear repeatedly in the play. For instance, Hari beats Hardika upon hearsay that she ate "their food" (meat), Ramnik's condescending attitude towards Aruna's beliefs in rituals and customs while boasting of his liberal and progressive mind. He is chided by Smita,

who says that expressing her feelings about her mother's religiousness to him "would have been a triumph for you [him] – over Mummy. And I [she] couldn't do that to her" (p. 60); and also, her conversation with Hardika who deems Smita foolish "To think you [she] can create your [her] freedom" (p. 68). These scenes, complemented by precise stage directions, leave the audience with several questions about what it means to have a liberal and progressive mind. However, Dattani, like his inspirations (Tendulkar, etc.), does not fall for the illusion of providing unrealistic solutions and rather ends the play on tough ground for all the characters. The Gandhis are left with questions about their perspectives on religion and progressivism. The two Muslim men, Bobby and Javed are left to introspect the extremities of following and not following religion. While the readers/audience are left with questions about their perspectives on the issues played before them. Interestingly, Dattani himself claimed<sup>12</sup> that it would have been extremely difficult for him to do *Final Solutions* in the present times.

## Conclusion

Aparna Dharwadker (2005) calls Mahesh Dattani the "most successful contemporary playwright in English" (p. 64) and has credited his works as "the first to challenge effectively the assumption that Indian drama written in English represents a disjunction between language and sensibility, material and medium" (p. 83). The reason for this is not only the thematic resonance of Dattani's plays to contemporary Indian society but also his dexterity as a playwright-director. His plays are not just dramas in the conventional literary sense of the word but instead a 'Drama' that Richard Schechner (1973) defines as a – "written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map" (p. 7) of performance. The article argues for this assertion and examines Dattani's *Final Solutions* as a "self-reflexive" play that accentuates Dattani's craftsmanship as a director.

*Final Solutions* has been studied time and again for its emphatic call to the social consciousness of people to see beyond the us versus them narrative of divisive politics. The play has also been studied for its recreation of the traumatic memories of partition by Jisha Menon. This article extends these studies by integrating to the profound social appeals Dattani's penchant for stage design and construction. It begins by contextualizing Dattani among the earlier and post-independence traditions of Indian English drama. It also tries to trace him in the broader streams

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<sup>12</sup> He made the assertion while addressing a class of aspiring creative writers in a workshop organised by IIT Jodhpur. I was there as a participant.

of post-independence Indian theatre and the profound influences of the Western realist playwrights on the Indian stage, especially, Henrik Ibsen.

Advancing through a perusal of Dattani's stage construction in his plays, the article reports that it involves a certain degree of extravagance (by using multiple levels and spaces for nothingness) and is remarkably different from the stage construction of other Indian playwrights. It yields that the stage directions in *Final Solutions* complement the dialogues in the story, rendering them lucid theatricality, and also act as blueprints for other directors in the construction of the mise-en-scene. They act as companion pieces to the dialogues and reveal the layered meanings. They also highlight the irony and, in other instances, emphasize the seriousness of the situation. Dattani, in his stage direction, employs a distinct technique of providing the readers with knowledge about the story that is rarely accessible to them. The study also finds that Dattani's stage directions are irreplaceably significant in the presentation of the mob and its fanatic mentality, which Huxley (1922) calls the "social equivalent of cancer" that secretes a poison under the influence of which the mob starts to "behave with a savage violence" (p. 367). By contrasting Dattani's stage directions with another stage production of the play under the renowned director Arvind Gaur, the article identifies Dattani's orientation towards performance in the play-text itself. The study concludes that his stage directions posit a difficult challenge for other directors who then employ their own skills to achieve similar effects.

The article studies *Final Solutions* as a play reverberating contemporary reality and submits that Dattani's reformist agendas, combined with his stagecraft, have established him in a league of his own among the present Indian playwrights. He has not only emancipated the tradition of Indian English drama from the label of closet drama but also made it a living-thriving performative tradition.

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# Beyond Verbatim: Embodied Truth and the Limits of Language in *House Arrest*

Verbatim'in Ötesinde: *House Arrest*'te Vücut Bulan Hakikat ve Dilin Sınırları

## ABSTRACT

In an era marked by the proliferation of media images and the blurring of fact and fabrication, Anna Deavere Smith's *House Arrest* (1999) offers a compelling exploration of truth, language and the pervasive influence of media in shaping public perception. Through verbatim text, minimalist staging and emotionally resonant performance, Smith highlights how individuals, particularly those from marginalised groups, are vulnerable to having their narratives distorted or controlled by those in power. In light of media effects theories, including framing, agenda-setting and Marshall McLuhan's concepts of the 'global village' and 'the medium is the message,' this article analyses how the play compels a critical examination of media manipulation and the subtle ways language constructs individuals' understanding of truth. Transcending its historical context, *House Arrest* emerges as a timely call for heightened media literacy and a discerning approach to information consumption in a world increasingly characterised by political polarisation and misinformation. Ultimately, Smith advocates for an active engagement with diverse perspectives and a recognition of the limitations of language by encouraging the audience to cultivate a more conscious and critical relationship with the information that surrounds them.

**Keywords:** Anna Deavere Smith, *House Arrest*, Media Effects, Verbatim Theatre, Performance

## ÖZ

Medya imgelerinin çoğaldığı ve gerçek ile uydurmanın bulanıklaştığı bir çağda, Anna Deavere Smith'in *House Arrest* (1999) eseri hakikatin, dilin ve medyanın kamusal algıyı şekillendirmedeki yaygın etkisinin ilgi çekici bir incelemesini sunar. Verbatim metin, minimalist sahneleme ve duygusal açıdan yankı uyandıran performans aracılığıyla Smith, özellikle marjinal gruplardan gelen bireylerin anlatılarının iktidardakiler tarafından çarpıtılmaya veya kontrol edilmeye karşı nasıl savunmasız olduklarını vurguluyor. Çerçeveleme (framing), gündem belirleme (agenda-setting) ve Marshall McLuhan'ın 'küresel köy' (global village) ve 'araç mesajdır' (the medium is the message) kavramları da dahil olmak üzere medya etkileri teorileri ışığında bu makale, oyunun medya manipülasyonuna dair eleştirel bir incelemeyi nasıl zorunlu kıldığını ve dilin bireylerin hakikat anlayışını nasıl incelikli bir şekilde inşa ettiğini analiz etmektedir. Tarihsel bağlamını aşan *House Arrest*, siyasi kutuplaşma ve yanlış bilgilendirmeyle giderek daha fazla karakterize edilen bir dünyada, artan medya okuryazarlığı ve bilgi tüketimine yönelik seçici bir yaklaşım için zamanında yapılmış bir çağrı olarak ortaya çıkıyor. Sonuç olarak Smith, izleyicileri onları çevreleyen bilgilerle daha bilinçli ve eleştirel bir ilişki kurmaya teşvik ederek farklı bakış açılarıyla aktif bir etkileşimi ve dilin sınırlarının tanınmasını savunur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Anna Deavere Smith, *House Arrest*, Medya Etkileri, Verbatim Tiyatrosu, Performans

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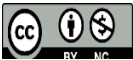
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## Introduction

In an era defined by a constant influx of media images and a blurring of the lines between fact and fabrication, the pursuit of truth emerges as a complex and often elusive endeavour. Anna Deavere Smith's compelling documentary play, *House Arrest: A Search for American Character in and around the White House, Past and Present* (1999), confronts this intricate relationship between truth, language and the pervasive influence of media. Through verbatim transcripts of interviews with individuals caught in the throes of political scandals, Smith constructs a multifaceted exploration of how narratives are constructed and perceptions are manipulated.

This article examines how *House Arrest* uncovers the manipulative potential of language, particularly within the realm of political discourse. By analysing Smith's verbatim technique, minimalist staging and her characters' intricate relationships with language and embodiment, this article illuminates the play's preoccupation with the representation of truth in a media-saturated world. Drawing upon Marshall McLuhan's concepts of the 'global village' and 'the medium is the message,' as well as theories of media framing and agenda-setting, this analysis investigates how *House Arrest* prompts a critical examination of the relationship between the media and precedence. The play compels the audience to acknowledge the often-invisible forces that shape their understanding of truth, power dynamics and the political landscape.

## Embodied Testimony: Smith's Verbatim Approach

Smith's use of verbatim theatre in *House Arrest* exemplifies the manipulative potential of language within political discourse. First coined by Derek Paget in 1987, 'verbatim theatre' refers to a specific type of documentary theatre. He defined it as a form of theatre using recorded interviews with everyday people, transcribed and often performed by the interviewers themselves (Paget, 1987, p. 317). Although terms like 'documentary theatre,' 'verbatim theatre,' 'theatre of testimony' and 'tribunal plays' are often used interchangeably, their sources and methods can vary. For instance, verbatim theatre relies on interviews with ordinary people, whereas tribunal plays use edited transcripts from official legal proceedings (Paget, 2008, p. 135; Wake, 2010, pp. 5-6). Despite this, verbatim theatre can be seen as a distinct form within the broader category of documentary theatre. However, this distinction is more prominent in the UK and documentary theatre is commonly used as an umbrella term for all non-fiction theatre in the US by rarely distinguishing verbatim theatre as a separate category (Wake, 2010, p. 6). While the term

‘documentary theatre’ might be more prevalent in the US context, Smith’s work exemplifies the specific techniques and aesthetic principles that define verbatim theatre as a distinct and powerful form.

As a leading practitioner of verbatim theatre, the American playwright and actress, Anna Deavere Smith is renowned for her series of one-woman performances *On the Road: In Search of the American Character*, in progress from the 1980s onwards. Her one-woman-performance series include *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1991), *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) and *House Arrest: A Search for American Character in and around the White House, Past and Present* (1999). In her performances created based on interviews, she acts all the characters herself by appearing on the stage with bare feet. She explains how she has adopted her performing style as well as why she performs in bare feet as follows:

[M]y grandfather told me when I was a little girl, “If you say a word often enough, it becomes you.” And having grown up in a segregated city, Baltimore, Maryland, I sort of use that idea to go around America with a tape recorder... to interview people, thinking that if I walked in their words – which is also why I don’t wear shoes when I perform – if I walked in their words, that I could sort of absorb America. (Smith, 2021)

The notion of being in someone else’s shoes is thus represented by bare feet in her performances. She does not wear shoes because the implication is that she is in the shoes of the character she is performing. She utilises a tape recorder in her interviews accordingly and emphasises in her performances that everything she does is “word for word of a tape” (Smith, 2021). She endeavours to imitate the interviewees’ tone of voice, mimics and even their postures in her performances. The real-life descriptions of the interviewees from age, race and gender to what they wear are projected through slides on the stage and their utterances—including the fillers like ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ as well as repetitions—are performed exactly as how they were uttered during the interviews<sup>1</sup>. She asserts that these fillers and non-verbal sounds are “rhythmic beats that inform the development of character” (Smith, 2004, p. 5). As a part of the performing technique, she repeats the exact words and expressions of the interviewees over and over until she is able to mentally grasp the true nature of the characters becoming the interviewee by imitating everything that meets the ears. This is very crucial for her in the performances since she believes that “people speak in organic poems” (Smith, 2021). Through this organic poetry, it is possible to analyse and identify the speaker according to

<sup>1</sup> Her methods have provided the basis for many of the currently popular forms of Verbatim Theatre in the United Kingdom, namely Playback and Headphone or Recorded Delivery (Keen, 2017, p. 41).



the Australian playwright Colette F. Keen (2017):

Through this repetition of words and rhythms, the organic poetry that people speak is revealed, providing insights into why the voice hesitates or why the voice does not hesitate. Insights are gained into what is happening inside a person that makes them scared to speak, silences them, makes them stutter, and makes them search for words, make mistakes or talk non-stop. (p. 54)

Every tiny detail in a speech can be evaluated as a clue as to what is happening inside the speaker and the effects of the event they are talking about. In other words, according to Keen, how a character tells something is as crucially important as what they tell in Smith's plays in the revelation of the character and the truth.

Although she has not been trained as a journalist, Smith self-identifies as “an actress who’s moving through the world as a journalist” (Najera, 2014) and her works are described as “a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism and intimate reverie” (MacArthur Foundation, 1996). Dissatisfied with the practice of classical journalism, Smith aims to reveal the truth beneath the official declarations and devastating social incidents misrepresented by the media by interviewing common people in her plays. She, however, changes her target group in *House Arrest* and rather puts the voice of the representatives of the media and government officials forward to reveal the relationship between the press and the government

Smith's *House Arrest* transcends the conventional boundaries of documentary theatre, transforming it into embodied narratives. Utilising interviews with a diverse range of individuals—politicians, journalists, historians and people from all walks of life—the play explores the scandals surrounding Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky, Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings and Gary Hart, with a particular focus on the complex interplay between the presidency and the press. By presenting these events and their reverberations through multiple and often conflicting perspectives, Smith cultivates “a sense that there might be multiple, conflicting understandings of these realities” (Bottoms, 2002, p. 58). This multiplicity of viewpoints underscores the play's central preoccupation with the challenges of representing truth and the elusive nature of objectivity, particularly within a media landscape often driven by sensationalism and competing narratives.

Smith's minimalist staging further emphasises this focus on multiplicity and subjective experience by eschewing elaborate sets and props as well as foregrounding the body as the primary vehicle for conveying meaning as a choice underscored by her own deliberate decision to perform barefoot. Deniz Aras and Ahmet Beşe (2023) highlight the significance of the performer's physical

presence by stating that “the physical presence of the body will disrupt and break illusory reality, creating a reality that is not merely reported to the audience but experienced by them” (p. 18). Stripped of theatrical artifice, the raw physical presence of the actor becomes the central conduit for navigating the weight of history, the complexities of memory and the search for understanding within a contested and often fragmented reality. As Xavier Lemoine (2013) suggests, this approach becomes a “postmodern version of performing hybridity” (p. 237) that transcends mere mimicry or impersonation. Smith’s meticulous embodiment of vocal inflexions, gestures and postures allows her to channel the essence of her interviewees by removing theatrical artifice to expose the raw power of the body in conveying not just words but the unspoken emotions, memories and historical legacies embedded within them. Through this embodied transformation, she examines the complexities of identity formation within a multifaceted society.

This emphasis on the body as a primary site of meaning-making is central to Smith’s approach to documentary theatre. As she physically and vocally embodies their words and gestures, her embodied portrayal of interviewees demonstrates the transformative power of this form. Through embodying the lived experiences of historical figures, the audience confronts the biases that shape understandings of the past. Richard Schechner (1999) characterises Smith’s approach as ‘deep mimesis,’ a process distinct from mere ‘pretend’ that resonates with the techniques of African, Native American and Asian ritualists (p. 63). This emphasis on deep mimesis underscores the transformative potential of Smith’s performance style by highlighting its capacity to move beyond superficial imitation.

Smith’s presence on stage by embodying multiple characters simultaneously also underscores the shared humanity that connects diverse individuals. Jill Dolan (2008) articulates this concept as follows:

By allowing a multiplicity of characters to speak through her African American female body, Smith foregrounds the notion that gender is socially constructed and performative, as well as allowing a hopeful dialogue of difference that may lead to a more compassionate sense of common humanity. (p. 68)

Dolan’s observation highlights how Smith’s performance transcends individual representation to illuminate broader societal dynamics. Specifically, through the embodiment of diverse characters within a singular physical presence, fixed notions of identity are dismantled. The audience bears witness to the transformation of gender, often perceived as an inherent and immutable

characteristic, into a fluid and performative construct. Facilitated by Smith's transformative embodiment, this dismantling of fixed categories fosters a 'hopeful dialogue of difference' by encouraging empathy and understanding across social divides. The act of witnessing a multitude of voices and perspectives emanating from a single body underscores the interconnectedness of human experience by prompting a deeper appreciation for the commonalities that bind humanity despite perceived differences.

### **The Convergence of Past and Present: Embodied Transformation**

Beyond its impact on perceptions of identity, this *dismantling of traditional binaries* achieved through Smith's embodied performance also extends to a reconfiguration of power dynamics. Carol Martin (1993) notes that Smith's embodied performances generate a 'convergence of presences' that challenges traditional conceptions of power and authority:

Smith gives these people the chance to speak as if to each other — in much the same way a 'spirit doctor' brings ancestors or other spirits in contact with the living — in the presence of the community of the audience (p. 45)

This convergence operates on multiple levels. Firstly, it collapses the distinction between performer and performed as Smith's body becomes a conduit for a multitude of voices by blurring the lines between her own identity and the identities she embodies. Secondly, it collapses temporal boundaries by bringing the past into the present through the invocation of historical figures and their words. This blurring of temporal distinctions allows past and present to coexist and engage in dialogue by challenging linear conceptions of time and suggesting the ongoing relevance of historical voices in contemporary social and political contexts. By collapsing the distinctions between the performer and the performed as well as the present and the past, this convergence disrupts hierarchical power structures. It fosters a more inclusive and dialogic comprehension of social and political realities by creating a space where marginalised voices can be heard and where the complexities of power can be examined through a multiplicity of perspectives.

The power of Smith's *House Arrest* resides in her remarkable capacity to embody diverse figures, collapsing the distance between historical periods and contemporary concerns. By inhabiting figures as distant as Thomas Jefferson<sup>2</sup> and as recent as Bill Clinton<sup>3</sup>, Smith

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was a Founding Father of the United States and served as the third President of the United States (1801-1809).

<sup>3</sup> Bill Clinton was the 42<sup>nd</sup> president of the United States (1993-2001).

demonstrates how the complexities of power, scandal and the pursuit of truth transcend specific eras. This is not a mere presentation of historical figures but rather an invitation to recognise the persistent resonance of the past in the present. Through the juxtaposition of narratives across time, the audience is confronted with the enduring legacies of slavery, as seen in the contrasting perspectives of Elizabeth Keckley, a formerly enslaved woman who became Mary Todd Lincoln's<sup>4</sup> dressmaker and Cinder Stanton, a historian discussing Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings<sup>5</sup>. This convergence of the past and the present is further highlighted through Smith's embodiment of both Anita Hill<sup>6</sup> and Maggie Williams<sup>7</sup>, figures embroiled in the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings. By giving voice to both women, Smith illuminates how the struggle for social justice and the dynamics of race, gender and political testimony continue to shape contemporary discourse. Smith further amplifies this sense of historical continuity by including figures outside the political sphere, such as Studs Terkel, a renowned oral historian, and Lizzie McDuffie, a White House cook for FDR<sup>8</sup>. Through their narratives, seemingly distant historical moments are rendered immediate by revealing the ongoing relevance of past struggles and triumphs in navigating the present.

### **Beyond Words: Embodied Truth and Linguistic Ambiguity**

*House Arrest* explores a complex and dynamic relationship between embodied expression and the limitations of language in the pursuit of truth. The play highlights the body's raw and undeniable eloquence by suggesting its capacity to bear the weight of history, trauma and lived experience in ways that surpass verbal articulation. As a reviewer for *TheaterMania* observes, Smith's performance, even when using verbatim text, evokes a powerful sense of embodiment: "When you think back on any particular scene from *House Arrest*, the picture in your mind is likely to be a combination of Smith and her interview subject" (Anonymous, 2000). Simultaneously,

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Todd Lincoln (1818-1882) was the wife of Abraham Lincoln, the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. She served as First Lady from 1861 to 1865.

<sup>5</sup> Sally Hemings (1773-1835) was an enslaved woman of African descent who was owned by Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States.

<sup>6</sup> Anita Hill is known for her public testimony in 1991 during the Senate confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas, who was nominated by President George H.W. Bush for a position on the Supreme Court. Hill accused Thomas of sexual harassment when she worked under him at the U.S. Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the 1980s. Televised nationally, her testimony sparked a national debate about sexual harassment, power dynamics in the workplace and the treatment of women who come forward with allegations of misconduct.

<sup>7</sup> The former Chief of Staff to First Lady Hillary Clinton

<sup>8</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, President

Smith acknowledges the inherent ambiguities and fragmentation within language itself. Her commitment to verbatim techniques captures both the authenticity of spoken words and their potential to obscure, distort or fall short of expressing the full complexity of experience. Smith's goal is not to mimic but to "allow a person's actual words... to reveal aspects of his or her character" by often leading to a "surprisingly sharp physical and vocal impression" (Anonymous, 2000). Characters stumble over their words, repeat phrases and employ pauses and silences by creating a fragmented linguistic landscape that mirrors the often messy and contradictory nature of human communication. Rather than undermining the play's authenticity, these moments of linguistic uncertainty serve to enhance it. They remind the audience that truth often resists simple categorisation by revealing itself through the interplay of embodied presence and the imperfect, yet powerful, tool of language.

Throughout the play, hesitant repetitions convey the characters' unspoken emotions and the inherent limitations of language in articulating profound experiences. This is especially evident in Maggie Williams's account of her polygraph test. Punctuated by nervous laughter, her fragmented sentences demonstrate the emotional weight of public scrutiny and the trauma of institutional disbelief:

Well /<sup>9</sup> you know / it's like going to the electric chair<sup>10</sup> / (*She laughs.*) [...] Uh / ya know, / I just / I just / ya know you just feel like a common criminal. / (*She laughs.*) is what you feel like / is like a common criminal. (Smith, 2000, p. 91)

Coupled with the nervous laughter that erupts, the repetition of phrases like 'you know' and 'I just' conveys a palpable sense of her anxiety and unease. Followed by a silence that allows the weight of that image to settle, the stark comparison to 'going to the electric chair' further underscores her fear and vulnerability. In these moments, silence transcends the mere absence of sound, eloquently conveying the depth of Williams's pain and powerlessness.

While Williams's struggle to articulate her experience reveals the limitations of language in the face of trauma, other characters in *House Arrest* demonstrate how language can be deliberately manipulated to obfuscate truth. President Clinton's strategic parsing of the word 'is' in response to accusations regarding Monica Lewinsky offers a potent example of linguistic manipulation

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<sup>9</sup> In the original work, the words uttered by interviewees at once are given on separate lines. For this reason, even if one word is spoken at a time, one line is used for that word. In order to save space in the study, lines are indicated with slash (/) and speeches are given in paragraph format.

<sup>10</sup> "She is referring to the Whitewater Hearings, in which she had to testify" (Smith, 2000, p. 91).

within the political sphere. Delivered with calculated lawyerly precision, his now-notorious phrase, “It depends on what the meaning of is is” (Smith, 2000, p. 112) exemplifies how language can be strategically employed to obfuscate truth and evade accountability. Facing allegations of perjury regarding his relationship with Lewinsky, Clinton deliberately focuses on the semantic ambiguity of the word ‘is.’ Rather than addressing the substance of the accusations—the nature of his relationship—he deflects attention towards a seemingly philosophical debate about the verb ‘to be.’ A characteristic of legalistic argumentation, this tactic allows him to sidestep direct engagement with the allegations while creating an illusion of engagement. Rather than clarifying meaning, the repetition of ‘is’ further obscures the issue by highlighting the inherent slipperiness of language and its susceptibility to manipulation by those in positions of power. While ostensibly conveying a commitment to honesty and transparency, Clinton’s performance ultimately reveals a profound disconnect between words and their intended meaning within the realm of political discourse. His manipulation of language demonstrates how those in power can exploit the inherent ambiguities of words to evade accountability and shape public perception.

These instances of linguistic ambiguity and repetition as well as silence and pause underscore the inherent challenges of conveying truth through language alone. By adopting the often imperfect and nonlinear nature of human speech, Smith’s verbatim approach underlines that truth may not be easily contained within neat and readily definable categories. Smith challenges the audience to engage in attentive listening thereby recognising the nuances of language, the potency of silences and hesitations as well as the limitations of words in representing the complexities of human experience. The implication of Smith’s approach is that a more comprehensive understanding often resides in the spaces between words that are in the unspoken and the unexpressed.

### **The Power of Framing, Media Manipulation and Agenda Setting**

Beyond examining the inherent ambiguities of language, *House Arrest* explores the media’s deliberate manipulation of language, especially within the context of political scandals. The play illustrates how journalists, often operating within a framework of sensationalism and pre-existing biases, employ language strategically to shape narratives, control the flow of information and ultimately influence public perception. As a central element in Smith’s critique of media ethics, this manipulation resonates with framing theory. Framing is the process of shaping news content

through careful selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration of specific details to promote a particular interpretation of an issue (Tankard et al., 1991). In other words, the way information is presented—the frame it is placed within—powerfully shapes the audience’s understanding and interpretation. Smith counters this potential for media distortion by employing a verbatim technique, allowing her subjects to speak for themselves, unmediated by journalistic interpretation.

Embedded within media language, this inherent power of framing is directly addressed by Gary Hart<sup>11</sup> in the play. Reflecting upon his own political downfall, a consequence of media scrutiny of his personal life, Hart poses a series of poignant questions: “What-is-the-meaning-of-language? / It’s: what is the power, what is / the control of the political process?” (Smith, 2000, p. 54). These inquiries expose the intricate connection between language, power and control within the realm of political discourse. Triggered by allegations of infidelity, Hart’s downfall exemplifies how the media can weaponise language to shape public perception and influence political outcomes. His pointed questions highlight the media’s capacity not only to report events but to actively construct the frameworks through which those events are interpreted. Through its ability to shape narratives and frame information, the media possesses immense influence by moulding public opinion and directing the course of political events. Amplified by a media eager for scandal, the framing of Hart’s alleged indiscretions ultimately overshadowed any discussion of his political platform or potential for leadership. His experience underscores the media’s potent capacity to determine which voices are heard, which narratives dominate and consequently, whose version of truth prevails in the public sphere.

Throughout *House Arrest*, Smith skilfully interweaves scenes featuring various journalists<sup>12</sup> by illuminating their biased reporting and use of framing techniques to shape public perception. The play demonstrates how the strategic selection of details, the omission of others and the deployment of emotionally charged language contribute to the construction of narratives that serve particular agendas, often at the expense of presenting a balanced and objective account of events. This critique is illustrated by a former photographer for *US News and World Report*, Brian Palmer’s cynical reflection on photojournalism:

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<sup>11</sup> He was a prominent Democratic senator from Colorado who ran for President of the United States twice, in 1984 and 1988. His 1988 campaign was abruptly derailed by a media scandal involving allegations of an extramarital affair.

<sup>12</sup> R.W. Apple, Journalist - *The New York Times*; Michael K. Frisby, Journalist - *The Wall Street Journal*; Walt Whitman, Journalist; Christopher Hitchens, Journalist - *The Nation*, *Vanity Fair*; Brian Palmer, Photographic Journalist; James Callender, Journalist.

Like so many things in the journalistic realm these days / that's kind of market driven,  
/ so / your competitors are there, / so you have to be there. [...] it does feel a little bit  
like you're just there / to, / watch the body. / And see, / you know and and and to to  
you know cover your organization / or protect (in the Washington lingo) / your  
organization in case / the unmentionable happens. / The unmentionable? / I mean just  
in case POTUS / gets you know POTUS gets waxed. / Oh right. / PRESIDENT-OF-  
THE-UNITED-STATES. (Smith, 2000, pp. 62-63)

Palmer's language reveals a stark detachment from the human element of news by reducing a potentially tragic event to the cold observation of 'watch[ing] the body.' His use of insider jargons like 'cover your organization' and 'POTUS gets waxed'<sup>13</sup>, further exposes a prioritisation of institutional interests and a cynical perspective that undermines objectivity. Driven by competition and the pursuit of sensational visuals, this framing often results in biased reporting that fails to capture the complexities of the events being documented. By incorporating Palmer's revealing monologue, Smith invites the audience to critically examine the forces that shape journalistic practices and to consider how framing can distort the representation of truth, particularly in a media landscape driven by competition and the pursuit of sensationalism.

The scene featuring Christopher Hitchens, a seasoned journalist renowned for his astute observations and incisive commentary, likewise provides a compelling illustration of how framing techniques function to shape public perception. Reflecting<sup>13</sup> on his reporting of the Gennifer Flowers scandal<sup>14</sup> during the 1992 Clinton campaign, Hitchens articulates an understanding of the complexities inherent in discerning truth amidst media manipulation:

[A]nd I must say from her tapes and her press conference, / however those were  
manipulated by the *Star* or the *Enquirer* or / whatever it was, / It was fairly obvious to  
me / that she had been telling the truth. And probably had been in love with the guy /  
and that therefore it couldn't be / between them, / well she says that and I say the other  
thing / He said / She said / never never actually really occurs. / Because if she's saying  
and it's not true / either I'm a liar / or she really is / a menace. / She'd have to be /  
wicked. / So that means you'd have to trash her, / to impute a bad motive / you can't get  
out of it. (Smith, 2000, pp. 107-108)

Despite acknowledging potential media spin, Hitchens' initial belief in Flowers' honesty highlights the inherent challenge journalists face in attempting to ascertain truth within a media landscape often characterised by distortion and manipulation. However, his subsequent reflection reveals a critical awareness of how the media employs framing to simplify complex narratives by

<sup>13</sup> 'POTUS gets waxed' is a slang term that means 'the President of the United States is assassinated.'

<sup>14</sup> Flowers, a former Arkansas state employee, claimed to have had a 12-year extramarital affair with Clinton while he was the governor of Arkansas.



often sacrificing nuance for sensationalism. As Hitchens observes, this difficulty is often compounded by the prevalent ‘He said / She said’ approach<sup>15</sup> in media coverage, which frequently prioritises opposing claims over a nuanced exploration of complex situations. This tendency towards reductive framing is exemplified in the media’s portrayal of Flowers as ‘menace’ and ‘wicked’ for challenging the dominant narrative surrounding Clinton. Laden with negative connotations, this framing effectively discredits Flowers and protects the image of a rising political figure, namely Clinton. By casting her as a threat, the media silences her voice and reinforces the power imbalance inherent in the situation. This example underscores how framing, operating through subtle linguistic choices and emotionally charged language, can profoundly shape public opinion by determining who is deemed credible, who is vilified and ultimately, whose version of truth prevails in the public sphere.

The pervasive influence of media framing on public perception is further emphasised through the experiences of Anita Hill, whose testimony during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings became a focal point for debates about sexual harassment and power dynamics. Hill vividly describes the media’s manipulative tactics concerning her polygraph test, a tool employed to assess the veracity of her allegations:

First of all, / they used that whole idea of an uh / polygraph test as a threat. / They said well will you take a polygraph test, Ms. Hill? / So we called their bluff / then they accused us of inventing it as though / it was our idea to start with. / Then they said it’s a trick. / It was slick, it was dirty. / And another thing that you might think about, / it was slick it was dirty, / But President Bush in many ways was protected from that dirt. (Smith, 2000, p. 91)

The repetition of ‘it was slick, it was dirty’ reveals Hill’s frustration with the media’s attempts to control and distort the narrative surrounding her testimony. This manipulation extended beyond the polygraph test by permeating broader media coverage that often-favoured sensationalism over substantive engagement. Furthermore, Hill’s pointed observation about President Bush being ‘protected from that dirt’ exposes a deeper bias within the media landscape—a tendency to align with and even shield those in positions of power. This misrepresentation is reflected in Hill’s statement that she felt like an “imposter” due to the “myths that circulate” (Smith, 2000, p. 102). Rather than a careful examination of her allegations, the media’s focus on rumour and speculation generated an environment in which her credibility was perpetually undermined. By prioritising

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<sup>15</sup> A form of reporting that reduces complex situations to opposing claims without seeking deeper truths.

superficial assessments of Hill's demeanour over the substance of her allegations, media coverage ultimately cultivated a climate of disbelief by facilitating the public's dismissal of her as unreliable or vindictive. Through Hill's experience, Smith illuminates how media framing, particularly when imbued with gendered and racial biases, can have a detrimental impact on individuals who challenge power structures, effectively silencing their voices and impeding their pursuit of justice.

Smith's theatrical representation of Anita Hill offers a direct challenge to the media's reductive framing of her narrative during the Clarence Thomas hearings. By presenting Hill's testimony verbatim, unfiltered by journalistic interpretation or biased commentary, Smith grants the audience unmediated access to Hill's own words. This artistic choice underscores the limitations of relying solely on outward appearances or mediated portrayals to assess truthfulness, particularly within a media landscape saturated with images and susceptible to societal biases. Rather than staging an explicit contrast between Hill's public and private personas, Smith's performance, through its meticulous attention to vocal inflexion, cadence and subtle physical gestures, invites a deeper engagement with the emotional weight of Hill's testimony. This approach compels viewers to reconsider the reductive framing prevalent in much of the media coverage surrounding the hearings by prompting a more profound understanding of the personal and societal stakes involved when speaking truth to power. In essence, Smith's performance reclaims Hill's narrative from the distortions of media framing by allowing her voice to resonate with a power and authenticity that the media often sought to suppress.

The characters in the play also frequently express concern regarding the media's agenda-setting function, particularly its tendency to prioritise sensationalised narratives over more pressing societal issues. This tendency resonates with what communication theorists Werner Severin and James Tankard (2014) call the agenda-setting function, where "the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind" shapes our perceptions of what matters (p. 219). Studs Terkel<sup>16</sup>, for instance, laments the media's preoccupation with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal<sup>17</sup> by exclaiming, "We got Lewinsky-ism and Monica-ism! / Instead of 'what the hell we been doing to all these countries and / to the have / nots in this country?'" (Smith, 2000, p. 15). Terkel's critique highlights how media attention is often

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<sup>16</sup> A renowned oral historian.

<sup>17</sup> The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was a political sex scandal that dominated American news in 1998. It involved then-U.S. President Bill Clinton and 22-year-old White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

fixated on political sex scandals by diverting focus from crucial issues such as the impact of American foreign policy on other nations, economic disparities and social injustices within the United States. He alludes to significant political events of 1998, such as the Iraq disarmament crisis<sup>18</sup> and the economic sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan<sup>19</sup>, as examples of issues overshadowed by the media's obsession with scandal.

### **The Global Village and the Medium's Message**

This preoccupation with scandal and the media's power to dictate what the public perceives as important aligns with Marshall McLuhan's concept of the 'global village,' where the pervasive presence of media fosters a distorted sense of intimacy with public figures. McLuhan (1964) posits that media fosters a sense of intimacy with public figures by leading to the assumption that the audience 'knows' these figures and the issues they represent. In the play, Gary Hart articulates this dynamic by posing the question, "Who decides what is moral and immoral?" (Smith, 2000, p. 54). Hart's implication in his question—that the media, driven by its own interests, exerts significant influence in shaping moral perceptions—illuminates the play's critical engagement with media's power to frame public discourse. McLuhan suggests that this distorted sense of intimacy has profound effect on individuals' understanding of morality and ethics.

In *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan contends that "the medium is the message" (p. 7). This famous dictum implies that the form and structure of media technologies themselves shape the audience's perceptions and values even more powerfully than the content they convey. As McLuhan (1964) argues, individuals often prioritise the content of media ('the what') and neglect to consider the medium itself ('the how') and its inherent influence (p. 7). The linear nature of print media, for instance, encourages logical and sequential thinking, while the immersive and multi-sensory experience of television fosters a more emotional and immediate engagement with information. Therefore, the very technology through which information is transmitted fundamentally shapes how the audience perceives and interprets that information. Applying this to *House Arrest*, one might argue that the constant barrage of fragmented news snippets and sensationalised images on television fosters a culture of superficiality and cynicism by making it

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<sup>18</sup> A series of sanctions and weapon inspections by The United Nations and other national organisations aimed at disarming Iraq for its suspected development and deployment of chemical and biological weapons against neighbouring countries. It resulted in the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

<sup>19</sup> The reason for the sanctions on India and Pakistan was the nuclear weapons tests these countries carried out in the late 1990s.

difficult to engage with complex political issues in a nuanced and informed way. In its exploration of media framing and manipulation, the play implicitly echoes McLuhan's assertion that the medium itself exerts a powerful and often invisible influence on its audience's understanding of the world.

### **Conclusion**

Through its intricate exploration of language, power and truth, *House Arrest* transcends the conventional limitations of documentary theatre to offer a profound commentary on the complexities of representation and the pervasive influence of media in shaping public perception. Smith's artistic choices, particularly her commitment to verbatim text and minimalist staging, serve to amplify voices often marginalised or silenced by dominant narratives. The play compels a critical confrontation with the inherent ambiguities of language, the manipulative potential of framing techniques and the collective responsibility to engage critically with the information that permeates contemporary society. Through the careful construction of a fragmented linguistic landscape, Smith resists simplistic explanations and encourages a more nuanced understanding of the characters' lived experiences.

By interweaving personal narratives with broader historical and political contexts, Smith reveals the enduring legacies of power imbalances and social injustices. The juxtaposition of figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Anita Hill and Bill Clinton underscores how the dynamics of race, gender and political manoeuvring transcend specific eras by prompting a deeper consideration of the cyclical nature of history and the persistent challenges inherent in speaking truth to power. The inclusion of such individuals beyond the immediate political sphere like Studs Terkel and Lizzie McDuffie further emphasises this historical continuity. As a renowned oral historian and social commentator, Terkel provides a vital link between past and present by offering reflections on social change, political discourse and the enduring impact of historical events on contemporary society. McDuffie's intimate recollections of her time serving in the Roosevelt White House, a period marked by both national triumphs and social upheaval, illuminate the personal lives affected by political decisions and the ways in which individual experiences are shaped by broader historical forces. Their narratives demonstrate how seemingly distant historical moments retain a potent relevance in navigating the present by underscoring the importance of acknowledging past struggles and triumphs in confronting contemporary concerns.

Through its engagement with concepts like McLuhan's 'global village' and 'the medium is the message,' the play illuminates the pervasive influence of media technologies on societal values and perceptions by rendering visible the often invisible strategies of media manipulation that shape public discourse. The constant bombardment of fragmented news snippets and sensationalised images, which are the characteristics of television news, can be understood as contributing to a culture of superficiality and cynicism thereby hindering rigorous engagement with complex political issues. Through its examination of media framing and manipulation, Smith's work implicitly reinforces McLuhan's assertion that the medium itself wields a potent influence on human understanding. *House Arrest* therefore emerges as a call for heightened media literacy, a more discerning approach to information consumption and an ongoing commitment to pursuing truth within an increasingly complex and mediated world.

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# Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, Postcolonialism and Hybridity in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and August Wilson's *Radio Golf*

Lorraine Hansberry'nin *A Raisin in the Sun* ve August Wilson'un *Radio Golf* Adlı Eserlerinde Avrupa-merkezcilik, Afrika-merkezcilik, Postkolonyalizm ve Melezlik

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a thematic study dealing with a postcolonial critical view of Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and August Wilson's *Radio Golf* (2005). In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beneatha views Western cultures as superior and she ultimately opts for Afrocentrism. The spirit of Beneatha will be analysed with a focus on Frantz Fanon's arguments against 'négritude' and Eurocentrism. Hansberry, through the voice of Mama Lena, calls for a union between the African and the American selves, as well as between the Western and the non-Western cultures. The issue of the oscillation between Eurocentrism and Africanness is shared by August Wilson in his last contemporary play where he exposes different facets and layers of identity. Contemporary black citizens have achieved their American dreams of collecting lucre, but they are still grappling between keeping faithful to their African heritage and cultural repertoire or adopting the Western way of life and distance themselves from their roots. This dilemma is best exemplified through Harmond and his wife Mame Wilks. Unlike Wilks, who imitates the prestigious way of life and looks for appearances and social status, Harmond crosses the boundaries of Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism and he tries to find a space for intercultural communication between the Western and the African cultures. The discussion part will relate the two plays to the recent events surrounding Floyd's murder during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The aim is to examine the critical situation of blacks during crisis and to demonstrate that they are disproportionately targeted. The rationale for choosing a modern African-American text that explores contemporary Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, assimilation, nativism, and decolonization is to show that race is a universal issue. The goal is to suggest hybridity as the best alternative for establishing a more humanitarian society where different races can be interwoven.

**Keywords:** Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, Americanness, The Myth of Négritude, 'Black Lives Matter'

## ÖZ

Bu makale, Lorraine Hansberry'nin *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) ve August Wilson'un *Radio Golf* (2005) adlı eserlerindeki Avrupa-merkezcilik (*Eurocentrism*) ve Afrika-merkezcilik (*Afrocentrism*) üzerine postkolonyal eleştirel bakış açısını ele alan tematik bir çalışmadır. *A Raisin in the Sun*'da Beneatha, Batı kültürlerini üstün görür ve sonunda Afrika-merkezciliği tercih eder. Beneatha'nın tutumu, Frantz Fanon'un 'zencilik' ('*négritude*') ve Avrupa-merkezciliğe karşı argümanlarına odaklanılarak analiz edilecektir. Avrupa-merkezcilik ve Afrikalılık arasındaki salınım meselesi, August Wilson tarafından kimliğin farklı yönlerini ve katmanlarını ortaya koyduğu son çağdaş oyununda ele alınmaktadır. Bu ikilem, en iyi Harmond ve eşi Mame Wilks'te örneklendirilebilir. Prestijli yaşam tarzını taklit eden, gösteriş ve sosyal statü peşinde olan Wilks'in aksine Harmond, Avrupa-merkezciliğin ve Afrika-merkezciliğin sınırlarını aşar ve Batı ile Afrika kültürleri arasında kültürlerarası iletişim için bir alan bulmaya çalışır. Tartışma bölümü, iki oyunu Covid-19 Salgını sırasında Floyd'un öldürülmesiyle ilgili son olaylarla ilişkilendirecektir. Amaç, siyahilerin kriz sırasındaki kritik durumunu incelemek ve orantısız bir şekilde hedef alındıklarını göstermektir. Çağdaş Avrupa-merkezciliği, Afrika-merkezciliği, asimilasyonu, yerliliği (*nativism*) ve sömürgeleştirilmeyi (*decolonization*) inceleyen modern bir Afrikalı-Amerikalı bir metin seçmenin gerekçesi, ırkın evrensel bir sorun olduğunu göstermektir. Amaç, farklı ırkların iç içe geçebileceği, daha insancıl bir toplum oluşturmak için en iyi alternatif olarak melezliği önermektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Avrupa-merkezcilik, Afrika-merkezcilik, Amerikalılık, Négritude Miti, 'Siyahilerin Hayatı Önemlidir'.

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## Introduction

African-American individuals have gone through a long path of segregation and continuous calls for equality. Racism has led to the divided inner house of some African-American citizens who vacillate between accepting their origins or embracing the American way of life. For instance, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Wilson's *Radio Golf* (2005) revolve around the African-American characters' oscillation between Americanness and Eurocentrism. This research is meant to investigate identity crisis in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and August Wilson's *Radio Golf* and to delve into the intricacies of the African-American self. The main problem for some black characters lies in imitating the White American Dream of achieving material success. This paper gives insights about generation gap, the intellectual development of the new black generation, namely Beneatha Younger and her peers and the struggles black protagonists face (namely Harmond Wilks) for the pursuit of their dreams. The goal of this research is to analyze the long history of slavery and the way the mainstream culture affects African community in 'the land of opportunities.' The paper aims at finding out the obstacles black characters face and perceiving the elements hindering their dreams of prosperity, social mobility and justice. The final objective is not to focus on the Youngers or the Wilks families, but to understand the long quest for African-American belonging.

Longing for belonging will be analyzed using an eclectic approach: textual analysis, thematic concerns and postcolonial hints will be deployed to map out identity crisis in the plays under examination. Identity crisis stems from the oscillation between Americanness and Africanness. Indeed, black characters in the plays under study are torn between following the American way of life or keeping faithful to their roots. Self-loathing disappears when black characters understand that négritude is a myth and that they are supposed to merge within American social fabric without forgetting about their national culture. The innovative aspect of the paper lies in linking the dramatic texts under study to the current events of 'Black Lives Matter.' The ultimate goal is to show that racism exceeds the dramatic text as it is still continuous; blacks are still stereotyped as being 'uncivilized,' and 'criminals', especially during Covid-19 pandemic. Linking the thematic approach, the postcolonial reading and the George Floyd's murder is meant to show the realistic side of the plays under examination and the way they touch upon African activists and citizens.



## **Eurocentrism: Theoretical Framework**

Before beginning the textual analysis of the plays under study, it is important to define Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. From a postcolonial perspective, Eurocentrism is defined as “a by-product of European colonialism and it is a by-product of the myth of European supremacy that was invented to justify and legitimize colonialism” (Prasad, 2018, p. 303). Eurocentrism places European culture at the center and marginalizes other cultures like African culture. It is perceived that the mission of European imperialism was to tame, to change, and to civilize the ‘uncivilized’. In this respect, British political theorist Leonard Woolf legitimizes European invasion of African lands, stating that “the African was a savage with all vices of savagery. Not satisfied with perpetual and unavoidable sufferings that providence inflicts upon their own and their neighbours’ lives as miserable as possible” (Woolf, 2018, p. 54). In other words, European colonialism is intended to rescue Africans from barbarity and backwardness and to invite them to become more developed. This biased view is not accepted within a postcolonial framework, which “does not view Eurocentrism as an ideology or a mode of representation, but sees it as the very basis of domination in the colonial and modern imperial contexts” (Chatterjee, 2011, p. 324). This domination has capitalist purposes, aiming to exploit African raw materials and mineral wealth.

Eurocentrism has been extended as it has included the whole Western world and “it reads Western global victory as the victory of humanity itself” (Tibebu, 2011, p. XX). The victory of the Eurocentric ideology and Western culture lies in imposing its lifestyle and creating unequal cultural polarities. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon criticizes Eurocentrism and declares that cultural polarities and racism are cultural by-products. Fanon (1986) writes:

I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos – and the white man, however intelligent he may be, is incapable of understanding Louis Armstrong or songs from the Congo. I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth. (p. 27)

He declares that white superiority is a myth and his skin color does not determine his inner self. He deploys negation ‘I am black, not because of a curse’ to demonstrate that black skin is not a curse, but the negative image is created by imperial forces to enhance imperialism and cultural polarity. This cultural polarity is criticized by some African-American playwrights, like Hansberry and Wilson who reject assimilation and to criticize extreme Afrocentrism.

### **Eurocentrism in *A Raisin in the Sun***

Eurocentrism has generated in some African-American characters feelings of self-loathing, as they are ashamed of their roots and they do not accept the African style. For example, George pokes fun at Beneatha when she wears a traditional dress, implicitly believing that African clothing is associated with backwardness. Beneatha strongly criticizes George's denigration of his origins and invites him to find out cultural richness and African glory. She addresses him saying, "you are looking at what a well-dressed Nigerian woman wears. (...) Enough of this assimilationist junk!" (Hansberry, 1995, p. 60). Beneatha defines assimilation as 'junk' because it blights the African self and leads to the denial of native roots. Beneatha challenges George's views of Africa as a sterile continent and convinces him of the rich cultural heritage. George's limited view about Africa is the outcome of Eurocentrism, which instilled feelings about European supremacy and African inferiority in the African mind. Eurocentrism is further examined through ostracization of black citizens and their confinement to segregated ghettos. In this respect, the white American citizen, Linder, puts pressure on Mama Lena and her family, trying to convince them not to move to the white neighborhood. His attitude reflects the exclusion of blacks and the supremacy of authoritarian whites who want to remain in the center and humiliate other races. He argues: "For the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities" (Hansberry, 1995, p. 102). He plays on the sentimental chords of Mama Lena by informing her that happiness consists of being confined in black neighborhoods, and that moving to the white neighborhood is a source of misery because it leads to the torment of blacks. Linder's biased attitude recalls the postcolonial discourse of power and the inequality between Western and African cultures. This biased attitude is a fine example of Eurocentrism and the exclusion of the racially different other. Eurocentrism is thus "the intellectual rationalization of Western modernity. It is the self-consciousness of capital accumulation in the land of its origins Western Europe" (Tibebu, 2011, p. XX). Eurocentrism in *A Raisin*<sup>1</sup> is made clear through the geographical exclusion of African-American characters and the consideration of the European whites as superior. This geographical separation leads to the absence of intercultural communication, demonstrating that Eurocentrism fosters cultural clashes.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Raisin in the Sun* will henceforth be referred to as *A Raisin*.

### **Eurocentrism in *Radio Golf***

The ideology of Eurocentrism is also present in contemporary African-American plays. Despite the passage of time, Wilson's relatively more recent play exposes the same issues of apartheid, white dominance, the centrality of the mainstream culture and the continuous oppression of non-Western cultures. Eurocentrism in *Radio Golf* can be analyzed through the character of Roosevelt and his assimilationist attitudes. Roosevelt believes in the superiority of the European style and is ashamed of his African roots. He informs the audience: "It's not my fault if your daddy's in jail, your mama's on drugs, your little sister's pregnant, and the kids don't have any food because the welfare cut off the money. Roosevelt Hicks ain't holding nobody back" (Wilson, 1988, p. 77). Roosevelt is obviously going through self-estrangement and denies his origins. He is ashamed of his African relatives because of their delinquency, irresponsibility and extreme poverty. This self-minimization is the outcome of Eurocentrism, which presupposes the denigration of Africans and the dominance of Western styles. Roosevelt is influenced by Eurocentrism and adopts a capitalist view by following Smith's instructions and he betrays his origins. Indeed, "Roosevelt uses his unethical autonomy to re-center white dominance by giving his white business partner, Bernie Smith control over the redevelopment plan that initially belonged to Harmond" (Radcliffe, 2019, p. 4). He is obviously betraying his roots, supporting the capitalist plan of Smith and stealing Harmond's business plan for financial gain. Harmond dreams of reconstructing the African home of his Ancestors. Roosevelt finds legitimate excuses when he informs the audience that his mission lies in "protecting the company's financing structure by going through with the plan to raze the home that was purchased illegally" (Wilson, 1988, p. 79). His statement reveals his greedy nature and his indifference toward destroying the African-American home. He is easily manipulated by Smith and he is with a capitalist mindset which motivates him to give priorities to personal gains. He is influenced by Eurocentrism and he even imitates white characters even in their personal preferences. His influence is evident in his interest in golf which is often considered to be a white practice. In fact, "Wilson chooses golf – a professional sport once inaccessible to blacks to examine the erosion of African-American cultural values in the pursuit of success as defined by the dominant white society" (Booker, 2007, p. 3). The presence of Tiger Woods' poster in the office of Roosevelt indicates that he is "frequentering the golf course where he rubs shoulders with the white business elite" (Cengage, 2016, p.57). Roosevelt is keen on imitating the white way of life because he has 'a white-black complex' and internally believes that the white race is superior.

According to Fanon (1986), “if there is an inferiority complex, it is the double process: primarily economic, subsequently the internalization or better the epidermalisation of this inferiority” (pp. 10-11). Roosevelt is among the African-American characters who are ashamed of their low economic backgrounds and of their skin color. This opportunist character is heavily criticized by his black peers for being influenced by Eurocentrism, for developing feelings of self-hatred and for betraying his origins. Sterling rebukes Roosevelt with the following speech:

You a Negro. White people will get confused and call you a nigger, but they don't know like I know. I know the truth of it. I'm a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God's creation. Niggers got style. Negroes got blind-eyetist. A dog knows it's a dog. A cat knows it's a cat. But a Negro don't know he's a Negro. He thinks he's a white man. It's Negroes like you who hold us back. (Wilson, 1988, p. 107)

The use of animal imagery indicates that Sterling dehumanizes Roosevelt for his tendencies to align with white society and he accuses him of perpetuating Eurocentrism at the expense of his human dignity, his identity and his original roots. Sterling argues that being influenced by Eurocentrism is a sign of backwardness because it creates psychological complexes and it prevents black individuals from moving forward or being aware of their uniqueness.

This part has explored the role of Eurocentrism in fostering self-loathing and convincing Roosevelt about his inferiority. Both Roosevelt and George from *A Raisin* share materialistic spirit; they imitate the white styles and ways of life, are ashamed of their origins, and have a passionate desire for being identified as white citizens. This tendency toward whiteness is caused by Eurocentrism and the illusory belief in white supremacy. Both George and Roosevelt are criticized in the play by the believers in Afrocentrism, such as Beneatha and Harmond. The next part will shift from Eurocentrism to Afrocentrism and will criticize the notion of centrality because it blocks continuity and cultural dialogue.

### **Afrocentrism: Definition**

Like Eurocentrism, which is based on the centrality of Western culture, Afrocentrism places African culture at the center and idealizes Africa:

Afrocentric, Africentric or African centered are interchangeable terms representing the concept which categorizes a quality of thought and practice which is rooted in the cultural image and interest of African people and which represents and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of African people as the center of analyses. (Bangura, 2019, p. 2)

Put differently, Afrocentrism glorifies African culture and emphasizes the role of the African

citizen in building history and in reconstructing Western civilization. In this way,

Afrocentrism which means African centred-ness, does not violently confront any person or people, but is a resolute attempt to put the records right. It is about placing African people within their own historical framework. It is a demand that the contributions of Africans in all areas of civilization be reflected in world history. (Onyemuni, 2005, p. 21)

Afrocentrism pays tribute to the African individual, his hard work and participation in the development of Western culture. However, Afrocentrism can be criticized for its extremism, the retreat into the shell of the self and the refusal of the culturally different other. Fanon (1986) declares that Africanness and Eurocentrism are two faces of the same coin. He believes that “The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accord” (p. 60). In other words, Afrocentrism is based on extremism as it deals with nationalism and an ignorance of mainstream culture and Eurocentrism is based on homogeneity as it focuses on the exclusion of minorities and racial groups. Beneatha and Harmond share the same experience of oscillating between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. The next part will examine Afrocentrism in the plays under study.

### **Afrocentrism in *A Raisin*:**

Afrocentrism in *A Raisin* can be analyzed through the character of Beneatha and Asagai. Beneatha is impressed by the intellectual side of Asagai and learns from him many new ideas about African culture. He makes her aware of the role of the African citizens in shaping Western history and in participating in the development of civilization. For example, Beneatha learns that the image of Tarzan should not be viewed as a negative symbol of savagery and barbarity, but is rather connected to the origins and the development of civilization. Beneatha informs the audience: “It’s just that people ask such crazy things. All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan” (Hansberry, 1995, p. 41). Beneatha is implicitly giving prominence to the richness of African culture and revising stereotypes about African people. She argues that African achievements should not be reduced to the primitiveness of Tarzan; instead, they should be linked to African glory and civilization. Beneatha’s belief in African glory emerges when she puts on Nigerian traditional clothes and Asagai praises her: “This is not so much a profile of a Hollywood queen as perhaps a queen of the Nile” (Hansberry, 1995, p. 46). The image of royalty indicates Beneatha’s self-pride and her interest in reviving African traditions and customs. She represents the new black generation which is a category creating a meeting zone between American and African selves.

She is a black doctor who believes in globalization and the cohabitation between African and American cultures. Like Beneatha who achieves her dream of becoming a doctor in a white-dominated society, bridging the gap between Americanness and Africanness and preserving her identity, Harmond aspires to revive his demolished black neighborhood. Harmond's tragic flaw is his Afrocentric ideology and his refusal to accept the implications of the mainstream culture. In this sense, he is different from Beneatha who opts for hybridity.

### **Afrocentric in *Radio Golf***

Afrocentric in *Radio Golf* can be analyzed through the characterization of Harmond and his connection to the African roots. Harmond holds positive views of the African individual, who is endowed with moral goodness and who respects law. Harmond is opposed to capitalist corruption and is ready to sacrifice his career, to defy Eurocentrism and to concretize the African-American dream of racial equality. When Mame warns Harmond saying, "if you do that you're throwing everything away. All your hard work. Your career. Your reputation" (Wilson, 1988, p. 105), he answers eagerly: 'All I'm trying to do is save Bedford Hills Redevelopment. You got to have rule of law. Otherwise, it would be chaos. Nobody wants to live in chaos' (p. 105). His answer demonstrates his dedication to preserving African glory and adhering to the American ideals of justice, democracy, and equality. Harmond's belief in the American dream of racial integration emerges when he calls for a tribute to African-American figures like Sarah Degree, the first nurse in the American neighborhood. His wife interrupts him, saying, "Model Cities Health Center has been around for twenty-two years. The organization has some history in the neighbourhood. Nobody knows who Sarah Degree was. I understand the sentiment, but it's not practical to throw all that history away" (Wilson, 1988, p. 10). Mame criticizes her husband's focus on the African center and his ignorance of American history. She implicitly delivers the message about the necessity of creating a smooth link between the African and the American selves. However, Harmond is dedicated to revise history and to better represent African-American icons like Sarah. Harmond amplifies the voice of repressed African-American citizens and criticizes American history for misrepresenting African icons and for ignoring the role of African women like Sarah in boosting American health services because of their philanthropic aims and hard work. The role of Africans in establishing American civilization and improving the quality of American life is also discussed by Beneatha who shares with Harmond the same ideology of Afrocentrism and the same message about criticizing American history for misrepresenting African efforts. Beneatha uses education as

a subversive tool for imposing her African-American identity and Harmond uses his position as a mayor to revise stereotypes about blacks as ‘criminals’ and downtrodden citizens. Harmond imposes his culture and he reveals that

...being the first black mayor of Pittsburgh would “make” history—and, most important for this discussion, his place in Wilson’s ten-play cycle. In so doing, it makes clear that the cycle is the story of the place history created for displaced people, people who, from the second they were sold on their home soil by their own chiefs to traders and captains. (Alan, 2018, p. 140)

Harmond is thus portrayed as an African militant as he carries out the dream of his ancestors and insists on defying the mainstream culture and the capitalist forces which grab his rights of ownership.

Harmond does not surrender to the capitalist forces and is dedicated to achieve his dreams by fixing the law and through his belief in the American dream and having positive hopes about achievements and progress. He says,

Bedford Hills acquired 1839 illegally. It bought it from me but I didn’t own it. I bought the house before it went to auction. That’s against the law. That’s corruption. I’m going down to the courthouse and file an injunction to stop the demolition. (Wilson, 1988, p. 105)

Harmond explicitly criticizes Eurocentrism and the capitalist system, which is meant to serve the interests of the elite. He calls for racial equality and for embracing views that are more egalitarian. He believes that a black citizen can achieve their dreams in ‘the land of opportunities’ and he sticks to the African-American dream of equality. He believes that Afrocentrism can thrive in an American context where justice is supposed to reign supreme. His view recalls Fanon’s ideas about the myth of *négritude* and his arguments about the possibility of achievement and prosperity for blacks. In his *Toward the African Revolution*, Fanon (1988) writes: “The truth is that there is nothing, a priori, to warrant the assumption that such a thing as a Negro people exists. When someone talks to me about Negro People, I try to understand what is meant” (p. 40). Fanon argues that *négritude* is a myth created by imperial powers for the sake of dominance. He implicitly attacks imperial forces for creating racial stereotypes and widening the chasm between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. In the same context. Harmond believes that blacks and whites are equal, and they are expected to be protected by law. Even when he faces capitalist corruption, Harmond insists that the law can be fixed to better represent blacks:

If it don’t take all the quarters you fix it. Anybody with common sense will agree to that.

What they don't agree on is how to fix it. Some people say you got to tear it down to fix it. Some people say you got to build it up to fix it. Some people say they don't know how to fix it. Some people say they don't want to be bothered with fixing it. (Wilson, 1988, p. 93)

The recurrent use of the verb 'to fix' suggests revision of Eurocentrism and a call for a democratic representation of black individuals.

Harmond's enthusiasm, nationalism and his attachment to the African roots remind us of President Obama and the dilemma between preserving African roots and achieving the American dream in a white-dominated atmosphere. Both Harmond and President Obama share the same question: "whether one can remain committed to a liberal paradigm of black empowerment and at the same time achieve economic or political success within the more conservative, white dominated American mainstream" (Alan, 2018, p. 9). Like President Obama, who embodies the achievement of the American dream and the success of racial justice, Harmond represents the black enthusiasm for creating equality between the mainstream and native cultures.

## **Discussion**

In the context of globalization and in the era of 'Black Lives Matter', racial groups are not well represented. Racism remains today a major concern. Many American citizens do not have the same healthcare chances and they do not have access to basic rights. The tragic death of George Floyd has shown that racial injustice is still going on. This incident has proved that socio-economic injustice is reigning supreme. Blacks are stereotyped as being prisoners, criminals, thieves and through other negative social connotations. Floyd was taken as a cheater and he was arrested in a merciless way just because he is an African-American citizen. He was not given the chance of social redemption in a society where blacks are downtrodden. The American policeman did not understand that Floyd's "last stint in prison had been so traumatizing that he was terrified of what might happen if he got caught up in it anew" (Samuels and Olorunnipa, 2022, p. 50). The topic of African-American identity is of utmost interest regarding the continuous debate about the suffering of blacks in the era of 'Black Lives Matter', in the period of Covid-19 pandemic and in the post pandemic period. Racism remains one of the social pandemics pervading the American society.

## **Conclusion**

The present research merges postcolonial hints with thematic concerns and it offers new insights about Americanness and Africanness. It allows for a comprehensive exploration of binary



oppositions between mainstream and local cultures, enabling an understanding about the importance of hybridity in determining the African-American identity. Bridging the gap between Americanness and Africanness is the key for African integration within the American social fabric. Interdisciplinarity between Africanness and Eurocentrism fosters a multicultural climate where different cultures can be mixed together. The two plays under study share a universal message about the necessity of respecting the culturally different other and accepting cultural multiplicity, especially in the context of globalization. Another message is related to proving that identity should not be limited to skin color, banishing stereotypes inflicted upon blacks and giving tribute to intellectual capabilities of African-American individuals. Hansberry and Wilson share the mission of changing negative views about blacks and calling for a humane consideration of colored people. Fanon (1986) asserts that “What matters is not to know the world but to change it” (p. 17). Hansberry and Wilson aim to change the world by implicitly calling human rights activists to fight against racism, criticize cultural homogeneity and recreate a more egalitarian society where social equality reigns supreme.

**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız.

**Çıkar Çatışması:** Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

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