

New Postcolonial Dialects: An Intercultural Comparison of Indian and Nigerian English Plays

Vengadasalam, Sarbani Sen

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Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam's *New Postcolonial Dialects: An Intercultural Comparison of Indian and Nigerian English Plays* is an engaging chronicle of the British rule in India and Nigeria. Whilst few other historians have trodden this ground before, Vengadasalam's ingenuity lies in the breadth of her visualization, which extends to the investigation of how Indian and Nigerian English plays while being situated in national traditions reframed their own cultural environment in transnational terms. Such a range allows her to draw comparisons and contrasts across theatres and nations in a unique manner. Any serious learner of the issue will require reading this book.

Vengadasalam presents an intercultural context to the literary inquiry in the Indian and Nigerian culture before and after the struggle for Independence. Vengadasalam argues that the intercultural use of dramatic forms by both Indian and Nigerian dramatists is not unintentional but depicts a tenacity to introduce an innovative form for modern Indian and Nigerian theatre. Vengadasalam substantiates her argument by giving examples from the plays by two Indian dramatists, Rabindranath Tagore and Badal Sircar and one Nigerian dramatist, Wole Soyinka. Vengadasalam reveals how the dramatists make the traditional folk forms of Indian and Nigerian drama modern in their presentation so that the local and traditional themes become appropriate and effective for a contemporary audience. She indicates that for the Indian plays, both Tagore and Sircar made use of stories from Indian mythology whereas Soyinka relied more on Yoruba mythology. She reveals in her book that traditional and mythological stories were employed by the Indian and

Nigerian dramatists to raise current issues such as that of postcolonial identity for their contemporary audience.

Vengadasalam takes a challenge to decide why theories of the continent cannot be applied to intercultural literature and, instead, frames her book across the world of possibilities released by this interrogation and supports her arguments by bringing in various major critical approaches such as postmodernism, post-structuralism, and Orientalism. She discusses various experiences grouped under the Commonwealth canopy and how as a result, different critical patterns emerged. Vengadasalam shows how the issue of interculturalism gains momentum when the play is tested in relation to the respective indigenous culture. She further discusses the role of aesthetic as a support for her argument on the significance of postcoloniality as a literary construct. She further highlights that just as the West's attempt to 'subsume the personality and uniqueness of the "colonized subject" to Western master-narratives in an attempt to homogenize cultural production was wrong, so was its attempt to exoticize the other in an attempt to push away what it felt threatened by'.

Vengadasalam develops an intercultural approach drawn from critical theory. She evaluates the texts of the plays focusing on the binary model of the 'orient' and the 'other' introduced by Edward Said. In keeping with her argument, she sees the child whose experiences are being narrated and the adult narrating as a child as a metaphor for the cultural gap and the play of power between the colonizer and the colonized. Throughout her analysis, Vengadasalam studies the shift of 'English' as the language of Britain and her royalty to 'english', a native dialect and a carrier of authentic intercultural experiences of the ex-colonies. In this framework, her analysis of the text becomes thought provoking as she highlights the

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usefulness of interculturalism as a literary tool because it expands itself in order to highlight a work's particularities and significances even while studying it against another. Vengadasalam suggests that the characters perceived in the select Indian and Nigerian plays as alienated, subjugated, oppressed, and deprived are representatives of a colonized nation that is struggling to either attain or regain its identity, and the textual references become the strength of her book. On the other hand, she discusses two Indian dramatists, Tagore and Sircar, but only one Nigerian dramatist, Wole Soyinka, to address the issue of interculturalism but the imbalance in the choice and presentation of dramatists leave the exploration undeveloped. Although Vengadasalam explores the plays in detail but the reader, being unfamiliar with the texts, finds it difficult to understand the discussion, as she does not provide short synopsis or introduction to the plays as an evidence for how she justifies her critique on the select plays.

Vengadasalam presents many reasons for considering interculturalism an authentic approach to studying Indian and Nigerian theatre. She quotes many critics not as a starting point for critical debate but to support her arguments that arts, specifically drama, does not obey the laws of political boundaries and it is the rapport with audience that is considered important. For this she endorses the Indian and Nigerian dramatists' approach of using any theatrical device they considered appropriate

whether indigenous or colonial. Her choice of quotations is, therefore, selective as it revolves around her central argument.

Vengadasalam's focus is helpful in emphasizing one of the main issues of a postcolonial study in terms of struggle of the dramatists to present the colonized concerns to the world by incorporating colonial theatrical and cultural practices with their mythological and folk forms. Yet she does not deliver sufficient evidence for how these traditional forms in relation to the modern ones are used by the dramatists to treat modern themes suited to their urban audience, therefore, implications of the issue merit further analysis. The book's weakness is the perplexing absence of any of British rule's constructive cultural impacts and no allusion to any key British advocate of Indian and Nigerian art, if there was any. While we know that Soyinka and Tagore had deep reverence and regard for many aspects of British influence on Nigeria and India, it however stays unnoted by Vengadasalam.

Reading the book expands knowledge of how biculturalism in the make-up and rearing of Tagore and Soyinka empowered them both to evolve a style of intercultural theatre that acted as an interface for the cultural interactions that colonialism engendered in their nations. The book is a significant, highly readable description of the Indian and Nigerian colonial and postcolonial experiences, which is a lesson in how literary and historical studies can enhance each other.