

# **Territorially Based Concepts of Culture and their Effects on the Making and Reception of Theatrical Performances**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to critically analyze and reflect upon the territorially based concepts of culture and their effects on the making and reception of theatrical performances. While it draws upon the concepts of stereotyping, selective perception routes it to the idea of the global village that is coming into force today. It looks at performances like Tim Supple's adaptation of "The Midsummer Night's Dream", Peter Brook's "Mahabharata" and my own performance "Milestones" as an independent project while in London. As the paper progresses it questions whether it is worth revolving around territorially based concepts of culture, especially in the making and reception of theatrical performances; or since, "every contact leaves a trace", our are cultures not already assimilated with one another along the way, and is it that which theatrical performances rooted in cultures aim at exploring.*

## **Introduction**

"One's own origin is both real and imagined" (Phelan, 1993)

As stated by Peggy Phelan in the above sentence, the genesis of our identity lies in what is real and what is imagined as real. It revolves around concepts; culture, being a significant one. Culture is a complex interplay of numerous factors that determine characteristics that help identify and differentiate one society of people from another. Time and again, cultural identities of people have stemmed from their territorially based origins, as seen in anthropological studies. With reference to theatrical performances, it is the effects of this tendency to define

identities, by associating specific cultures to specific territories that this paper aims at, to critically analyze and reflect upon. Among these, stereotyping and selective perception will be in focus. Further, while examining the global village concept coming into force today, the paper hopes to question whether it is worth at all defining identities by associating specific cultures to specific territories alone. References shall be made to Tim Supple's production of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, the reception of Peter Brook's 1985 production of *The Mahabharata*, and my own performance piece *Milestones*. For ease of comprehension, all three are associated with the Indian subcontinent. For the purpose of this paper, I shall start by defining what theatrical performances are.

If performances are representations, theatre, as a part of its wider spectrum is a representation of aspects of life and culture. Recently, its role has become more pronounced in rethinking about culture and identity. As Ric Knowles (2010) points out: "...culture - the fluid, day-to-day, lived realities of specific peoples in specific places and at specific times - exists only in so far as it is enacted..." (p. 1). What Knowles wants to say is that culture is but fluid in nature, consisting of everyday realities that are people, place and time specific. Their existence, he says, is dependent upon their performance. What then affects the making of that performance is the question that needs to be answered.

### **“Stereotyping” Cultures in the Making of Theatre**

In the practice of theatre-making, the tendency to fall back on the tradition of associating cultures, on their territorial origins, is often seen in clichés that are used. In mass media studies, it is often referred to as stereotyping. Stereotyping is an oversimplified definition of a person or a group of persons by associating common characteristics to all of them or providing a generalized version of their territories of origin. A perfect example of this is Tim Supple's creation of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, in 2008. Popularly known as the *Indian Dream*, it represents and caters to only a section of Indians, questioning the generalized use of the term Indian.

To begin with, claimed to be a multi-lingual Indian production, there are only seven different languages, used. India has more than just seven official languages and a variety of other regionally based dialects. The

movements and gestures are influenced by two physical dance forms, *Bharatnatyam* and *Kathakali* and one martial art form, *Kalarippayattu*. All three originated in the Southern States of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. With more than three physical art-forms prevalent in the whole country, it focuses only on the ones present in the Southern tip of India. As per the play, in terms of social structure, the characterization is divided into the royals, the upper-class and the mechanicals. Claimed to be synonymous with the caste system of India, as mentioned by Tim Supple's team, they rule out the fact that there are regions within India where no known caste-system has ever existed. The tribes of the North-eastern region are a good example of this. Also the character of Hermia, reflected in Tim Supple's creation of *A Midsummer-Nights Dream*, having to listen to her father while choosing her husband, is compared to the patriarchal system of Indian society. But there are communities within India that practice the matrilineal system. The generalized term *The Indian Dream* is therefore stereotyping. How can it be the Indian dream if it does not even represent more than half of India?

My performance piece *Milestones*, explored this idea of stereotyping. It was a performance piece that centered around places and identities formed due to the journeys we undertake in life, staged in London as an independent project. We were three of us devising and performing the piece, and each one of us hailed from three different countries. In our social interactions, the interesting but often very bizarre ideas that people had about our countries of origin, influenced our piece. We built on stereotyped stories associated with our said cultures, stating facts and lies about it. Towards the end, we informed the audience of the interplay of the real and the imagined real. The audience had to draw conclusions. What was important was driving home the fact that there is more to it than meets the eye, with territorially based concepts of culture. With cultures having gone through a major metamorphosis in today's fast shrinking world, sticking to stereotypes is an obsolete idea in defining identity. We become what we are for where we have been! Our identities are shaped by the journeys we make and the places we visit. Our cultural identities cannot be pinned onto certain locations only. But does selective perception not have a role to play even in determining what is stereotyped and what is not?

### **Selective Perception and the Rashomon Phenomenon**

It is a common tendency that from the many things that we come across in life, we selectively perceive or take note of only the ones associated with important references to us. We are constantly shunning away and soaking in only those bits of information that most suit us. This is called selective perception. A couple of factors like knowledge, experience, social environment and personality determine these choices. In mass communication studies it is referred to as the 'Rashomon Phenomenon'. *Rashomon* was a classic film made by renowned filmmaker Akira Kurosowa. The film, where everyone is involved with what happens in the grove, offers a different description of it. Each of their individual accounts justifies the behavior of the one narrating it. It involves a crime and everyone pleads not guilty. The Rashomon phenomenon does not end there. Critics of this piece of artwork have over time come up with different perspectives to the film. It has been interpreted by semioticians, psychoanalytic theorists, Marxists, feminists, sociologists, ethical theorists, myth/ritual/symbol critics and aesthetic critics. What we have therefore is a number of interpretations and perspectives of what the film has to offer. Thus, it is a classic reference to the theory of selective perception. Stereotyping or breaking a stereotype and its reception in how identity is affected, becomes a matter of perception. Before proceeding further with an example, it is important to establish the meaning of the global village.

The term global village was coined by Marshall McLuhan. He predicted that the accelerated modes of transport and electronic communication are going to erase boundaries and reduce the world into one complete whole - a global village (McLuhan, 1964). The process referred to is known as globalization. We see his prediction come true in the rapidly increasing form of multiple alliances taking place around the world today. An example from the cultural perspective is, the London 2012 Festival as part of the 2012 Olympics celebrations that witnessed a number of international theatrical collaborations. Thus, in the light of this fast shrinking world of the global village, anthropologists are beginning to comprehend the necessity to no longer associate cultures as representative of separate spatial entities. With people constantly moving in and out of places, a million cultures are colliding with one another, shaping and re-shaping the culture of a place. Positioned at the centre of

this interchangeability, one culture transforming into another, let us refer back to our example of selective perception - the reception of Peter Brook's stage adaptation of *The Mahabharata*, an ancient Indian epic.

### **Peter Brook's Mahabharata**

Staged in 1985, it included performers from nineteen nations. Once staged, it fell under great scrutiny. While Patrice Pavis, Erica Fisher-Lichte and David Williams supported Peter Brooks (1987), the likes of Rustom Bharucha (1993), Una Chaudhuri, Gautam Dasgupta, Biodun Jeyifo, Jaqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert critiqued his work greatly. It is interesting to note that the ones who supported Brook's work were mostly of a western origin, while those who critiqued, mostly did so from a non-western point of view. He is appreciated by his supporters, among other reasons, most specifically for his attempt at establishing inter-culturalism. His critics, however, see it as a perfect example of the West versus the rest syndrome, which is very often feared to prevail in collaborative theatre performances of the oriental and the occidental. Among them, Bharucha lashes out vigorously, almost condemning his attempt at inter-culturalism. However, the reading of Brook's autobiographical account, *The Shifting Point*, sheds light on the fact that establishing a western influence on his work was never the intention. In fact, he idealistically shuns cultural differences. Thus, it is a case of selective perception. Now, almost two decades later, placing his work of art in the context of its time, I would further highlight some key reasons that might have influenced the criticism that it faced.

The 80's was the time when the global village concept was shaping up rapidly. There was a sudden splurge of cross-border transactions happening. As with every novel phenomenon that occurs, a million fears arose. While on the one hand, all nations could engage in a level playing ground, on the other, the fear that a few more influential countries, mostly of the Western world, would take over the rest, loomed high. As Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (2008) say:

But the cultural and economic power of the West, it is arguable, retains its dominance in the form of those processes of globalization which have been delineated by some critics as characteristic of developments within late capitalism... (p. 252).

According to them, in the process of globalization, the West still dominates over the scene, signifying late capitalism, as pointed out by some critics; the reason being their cultural and economic leadership. A western adaptation of an eastern religious epic, at such a sensitive period, was bound to face criticism.

At this juncture, it is important to refer to the country whose ancient epic, *The Mahabharata*, was staged by Brook. In the mid 1980's, India was still reeling under the pangs of post-colonialism. Though it had emerged as an independent nation state since 1947, it was still picking up the pieces and putting together the making of a developing nation. Patriotic themes were still flying high and grievances towards the West were still hidden undercover. Besides, India is a secular country, but one that is very sensitive about the issue of religion. For example, the latter half of the 80's also witnessed the banning of the Indo-Anglian writer, Salman Rushdie's, book *The Satanic Verses*, due to its irreverent depiction of the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps, it was too early for Brook to introduce his adaptation to an Indian epic that, too, one associated with religion.

Besides, socio-economically speaking, India had still not opened its gates to international trade and foreign direct investment. The liberalization of its economy happened only with the new economic policy that came into being in 1991. It marked the return of multinational corporations, including global media and setting up of business process outsourcing (BPO). Also, more professionals seemed to be migrating from the country to the West. It was feared that it might be the dumping ground of questionable technology and products, while usurping its knowledge resources. Added to it, the sudden onslaught of satellite television meant the ushering in of overseas programming, particularly from the West, i.e., America, hitting the Indian media scene with great force. It was feared that while rising economically, what was being ushered in was a western imperialism that would have far reaching effects on the cultural scene. A sudden return to clinging on to what Indian culture was all about emerged, with social guardians diving headlong to researching on how to help take society back to its cultural roots.

But the die was cast. Change has been inevitable in human society. The global village was only bringing back features of our nomadic existence. While food-gathering fuelled the need for mobility, compelling humans to adapt to where they went, information gathering spurred their need to cross territorial boundaries and accelerate changes in their socio-cultural life. And the influence is reciprocal. The travelers influence the hosts and the hosts influenced the travelers. As John Hartley (2002) very aptly says, in this global world, multiple cultures are coexisting and encouraging new cultures to emerge. He says: “Meanwhile, no-one can afford not to play” (p. 99). What he means is that instead of only key players in the game of change, with the rest sitting back and watching, all get a level playing ground, influencing and being influenced in the process. Now, with a decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century gone, the benefits of this interchangeability have increased double-fold and been recognized, while a more broad-minded perspective to deal with the negative impacts are being addressed. Though still retained in pockets, where identity politics prevail, the fears have subsided considerably. Now, Brook’s *The Mahabharata*, might have acquired a different reception the world over, at least with certain niche audiences if not all.

### **The Making of “Milestones”**

Recounting the process of making my performance piece, *Milestones*, and going through the journal that I kept at the time, what seemed evident is that we were positioned right at the core of identity politics. Under its dictates, identity is defined by shared characteristics based on culture rather than biology. That said, creating art for art’s sake was next to impossible. We had to be intelligent players, casting aside aspersions that people in general or even we were inclined to have towards the territories we were representing. In doing so, I knew that we were plagued by selective perception ourselves. On the one hand, I had to be careful about representation of our said cultures. While ethics demanded that I provide an unbiased representation, unstamped with prejudice, the artiste in me was working beyond those boundaries. However, lurking in the picture was the fear that I did not become an agent influencing all who came in contact with my work negatively.

Thus, though the ethics of representation loomed large, the very mobile life that I was leading found its way to my artistic expression. When one is in transit most of the time, all that matters is always establishing something that has a sense of home in it. That sense of home does not revolve around static concepts of culture. It is tagged to metaphors whether real or imagined, that we are at home with. As Tim Etchells (2009), the director of theatre company *Forced Entertainment* also mentions: “In all our theatrical explorations of the city, perhaps it is no surprise that time after time we mark some part of the stage space as private space, as home” (p. 79). He states that as they explored the city with their theatrical performances, it was not surprising that time and again, there was always a part of the stage etched out to be home. That idea of home is multi-faceted, very often not really linked to territorially based concepts of culture alone.

### **Conclusion**

Cities, as geographical territories, are silent spectators of people who pass in and out of their boundaries. They watch a million lives dash against each other. Every contact made adds a new facet in the making of people and their lives. They bear witness to the fluidity of the term culture today, as they see cultures dissolve in one another, shaping and moulding new cultures along the way. There is a whole lot of splicing and piecing together that happens. In this whole hotchpotch of cultural existence, we are always bound to discover a new sense of self. In our performance, while linking ourselves to our homelands, our stories ultimately converged with a common point of reference - London. We were blending in our past experiences in other cities with other people, with that of the very cosmopolitan maddening crowds of London. And by the end of it all, our sense of self was already tinted by new shades of culture. Thus while acknowledging the effects of stereotyping and selective perception, we must however not be governed by them in defining cultural identities. Our sense of self will always be real and imagined but in this global village set-up of today, where everything is transitory, it can never again be rooted to specific territorial origins alone.



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