

Reflection of Urban Sensibility in Ramu Ramanathan's Select Plays

Dr. Bharat Ranjeet Deshmukh

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Narayanrao Waghmare Mahavidyalaya, Akhada
Balapur, Hingoli, Maharashtra, India.
deshmukh.bharat39@gmail.com

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Abstract: Theatre has, since antiquity, occupied a central position in the growth of Indian institutions, culture, creativity, and originality. The origins of Indian theatre are commonly traced to the religious ritualism of the Vedic period, and across the medieval era it matured into a sophisticated vehicle for representing the realities of life through dance, music, and poise. Contemporary Indian theatre, in turn, has adopted a distinctly modern idiom, one that foregrounds the transformation of the nation's political landscape and addresses the pressing concerns of urban society. This paper undertakes a critical analysis of urban space in selected plays of Ramakrishnan Ramanathan – popularly known as Ramu Ramanathan – a leading figure among the present generation of writer-directors composing plays in English.

Keywords: Space, City, Urban, Exploration, Culture

Introduction

Theatre remains a vital cultural institution: the study of theatre helps to recover history, understand identity, and interpret culture. Among the many contemporary Indian dramatists who have used their work to interrogate society – Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, and Girish Karnad, to name only a few – Ramanathan occupies a distinctive place. His plays compose a fluid register of moods: joy and sorrow, hope and fear, stillness and unrest, love and longing, humor and pathos. Drama, for him, is a medium through which to voice anguish and to render visible the reality of humiliation. Through a wide gallery of characters, he probes the many facets of a social fabric that he presents as betrayed by the wickedness embedded within society itself. Contemporary Indian theatre – and Indian society more broadly – needs such work to give expression to its inner life.

Ramanathan's Body of Work and the Tradition of Indian English Drama

Ramu Ramanathan is widely regarded as one of the most politically conscious playwrights of his generation; his plays register, with unusual clarity, the times in which they were written (Punjani). His body of work recovers forgotten histories, unremarked events, and people who, despite significant social, political, and cultural contributions, have rarely been heard ("My Plays"). Writing primarily in English, Ramanathan has authored more than thirty plays that represent a wide range of distinctively Indian experiences while remaining attentive to a modern sensibility.

The trajectory of Indian English drama is commonly traced to Michael Madhusudan Dutt, whose satirical play *Is This Called Civilization?* appeared in the nineteenth century and is often cited as an early landmark of the form (Grace). Departing from both classical Sanskrit and European models, contemporary Indian English drama is experimental in its themes and techniques. It is not the offspring of any single tradition; rather, it has carved out its own idiosyncratic place in the history of world drama by reinterpreting history, legend, myth, religion, and folk tradition against the backdrop of current socio-political concerns (Vadithe).

Urban Space and Urban Sensibility in Indian English Drama

Across the centuries, Indian playwrights have transformed and reinvented Indian theatre through their words and imaginations. While the script – as the foundational instrument of theatrical performance – has the capacity to interrupt and redress religious bigotry, class prejudice, and misogyny, only a few playwrights have proved equal to that task. Ramu Ramanathan is among them. Urban space, and an urban sensibility more broadly, occupies a central place in Indian English drama, much as it does in Bengali theatre. It is worth pausing here to distinguish "theatre" from "drama," terms often used interchangeably: theatre is best understood as a multifaceted contract between spectator and performer, while drama refers, more narrowly, to the scripted or written text composed for stage performance.

Cotton 56, Polyester 84: The Mill Lands of Mumbai

Ramanathan's dramatic corpus includes *Cotton 56, Polyester 84; Comrade Kumbhakaran; Shakespeare and She; Collaborators; Curfew; and Shanti, Shanti, It's a War*, among others. *Cotton 56, Polyester 84*, first staged in 2006 under Sunil Shanbag's direction for Theatre Arpana, dramatizes the highly politicized crisis of Mumbai's mill lands and its impact on the city's mill workers (Narayan). Set against the backdrop of Mumbai's shifting socio-political and cultural landscape, the play offers a sustained meditation on urban dispossession.

Ramanathan is a skilled dramatist who builds gripping dramatic frameworks from the extensive research he undertakes for each play. In *Cotton 56, Polyester 84*, the two central characters, Kaka and Bhau Saheb, are drawn from the testimonies of mill workers whom Ramanathan met over the course of his research; he attended labor-court hearings and spoke with trade unionists, activists, and mill-worker families while preparing the text (Narayan). The play uses drama as an instrument to expose the politicized crisis of Mumbai's teeming mill-land locale and its consequences for the city's erstwhile mill workers – a project reflected in the play's subtitle, "The City That Was Mumbai."

The play's ethos is anchored in an elaborately designed three-dimensional fresco that forms its backdrop. The threatening skyline depicted in this mural dwarfs the very spaces that were once the city's salvation. The stage itself is left largely bare, save for a rusted street light and a circular seating arrangement that marks the *vachnalaya*, the communal reading space where the mill workers once gathered (Tiwari).

Shakespeare and She, Comrade Kumbhakaran, and the Urban Everyday

Shakespeare and She operates on multiple levels; it signals, above all, Ramanathan's abiding attachment to Mumbai, a city he implicitly likens to Shakespeare's sixteenth-century London. In the play, four women seek answers and comfort from one another. A line from the play – "Living is a dying art form" – converges with Shakespearean echoes to produce a work that is at once modern, minimalist, bold, and unconventional; it stands among Ramanathan's finest achievements.

In *Comrade Kumbhakaran*, a group of performers emerges from the shadowy recesses of the stage to inhabit a world that is simultaneously ancient and contemporary, impoverished and dreamlike, poetic and beautiful. The play's titular figure is part devil, part good; by unsettling the boundary between the real and the unreal, the personal and the political, the historical and the contemporary, Ramanathan constructs an expansive and unruly dramatic journey – one that resonates powerfully with present concerns. Its intensity derives from its eloquent, hyper-real imagery, through which the play illuminates marginalized communities and their traditions.

Ramanathan's urbanized social vision extends to *Mahadevbhai*, which centers on Mahatma Gandhi's secretary and transports audiences into the era of the Satyagraha and the freedom struggle. *Kashmir*, by contrast, offers a metaphorical rendering of a region manacled within barbed wire and instrumentalized by politicians and militants

alike. The play's unseen narrator appears to know this landscape intimately, along with the people who possess the "little something" that others lack – testimony, perhaps, to Ramanathan's debt to a lineage of master storytellers. That narrating voice is at once personal and political, simple and complex, real and fictional, wise and yet grounded in everyday common sense.

Collaborators, meanwhile, combines dark humor with a quietly furious anger that threatens to explode the conventions of genteel society, ethical conduct, and social order. The predicament of twenty-first-century urban India, the play suggests, is nothing less than a ticking time bomb – one that beats silently in the hearts of characters such as Kranti, the play's protagonist, who confronts a society caught between the rigors of collectivism, poverty, social disparity, indifference, and the scarcity of genuine justice.

Research, Method, and the Politics of the Everyday

Every one of Ramanathan's plays responds, in some measure, to the era in which it was written; he has consistently written about matters that demand attention, and most of his work carries a reflective, socially engaged charge. As Ramanathan has himself observed, "we have been taught about heroes in history, but we never get the sense of voices that are second in command and the voices in the shadows that have evaporated" (qtd. in Punjani).

Among his favored forms are the one-act plays composed for youth festivals across Maharashtra – a tradition Marathi theatre has long sustained. As Ramanathan has explained, short plays of this kind were first performed in front of chawls, mill gates, and improvised spaces in the late 1930s; because performance conditions were constrained, "the content had to be potent and loaded with politics" (qtd. in Narayan). Much of his oeuvre archives Mumbai's often-splintered history: *Cotton 56*, *Polyester 84*, for instance, examines the condition of mill workers whose livelihoods were displaced by the city's rapid modernization (Tiwari). For many younger theatre practitioners, and particularly for playwrights, Ramanathan's work has cleared a path toward a more rigorous engagement with history; the playwright and actor Irawati Karnik has observed that Ramanathan possesses an unusually intimate knowledge of Mumbai's past, including institutions such as the Kamgar Rangabhoomi (qtd. in Narayan). A strong social conscience runs through his work, even as Ramanathan has, over the years, learned to detach himself from a play once it is published; most of his output remains deeply reflective of the present condition of a globalized world.

Conclusion

Ramu Ramanathan's gaze renders urban sensibility and urban life with unusual precision, allowing him to explore human experience from a genuinely comprehensive vantage point. Several of his plays are structured around disorientation, unintelligibility, and inaccessibility, exploring themes of imprisonment, constraint, and the paralysis that limits a character's ability to move freely through space. In doing so, his characters generate what may be described, following Edward Soja's influential formulation, as a "third space" – a hybrid realm that is neither wholly real nor wholly

imagined, but a lived synthesis of the two ("Third Space Theory"). Ramanathan's plays, finally, offer a sustained and precise examination of the complex psychological states in which his characters live, caught between an imagined world and the unforgiving realities of the city that produced them.

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