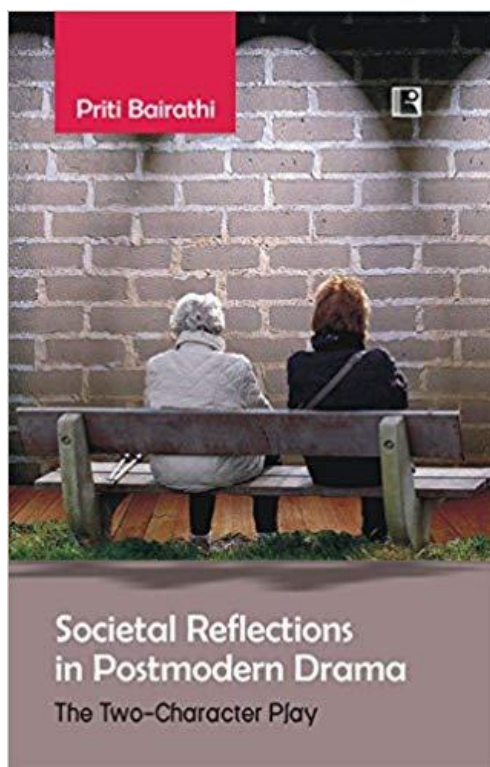


Priti Bairathi, *Societal Reflections in Postmodern Drama: The Two-Character Play*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2018. 172 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0971-2.



The nineteen sixties brought major changes in the way American Theatre conceptualised objectivity and representation, ushering in an era of experimentalism that continues today. *Societal Reflections in Postmodern Drama*, a welcome addition to the repertoire of Indian books on American theatre, focuses on plays involving only two characters, as these are symptomatic of the political and socio-cultural forces that were shaping America during the Vietnam War. Existing aesthetic models of realism, local colour plays or social criticism that had long served theatre until then were felt to be inadequate. Priti Bairathi's work looks into the work of four major playwrights – Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, David Mamet and Marsha Norman – and their two-character plays from the late fifties to the early eighties exploring major changes in dramatic art that matched the narrative innovations of Joyce and Kafka. Theatre during this era sought to understand the place of the alienated individual in a rapidly modernising

capitalist world-order through a complete break with the mimetic tradition. On the wake of existentialism, man's relationship with his surroundings was increasingly perceived to be hopeless and full of tragic possibilities. Arthur Seiner's *The Radical Theatre Notebook* documents the ferment created by this new wave of experimentation brought about by collaborating theatre groups such as Open Theatre and the La Mama Theatre Group. The postmodern perspective was securely established in American theatre by the nineteen seventies, and the so-called "objective" realistic conventions are invoked on stage only to be subverted and deconstructed. In her introduction, Bairathi proposes that the two-character plays were a major stratagem to achieve this postmodern reality, supporting her thesis with a close reading of the texts and subtexts of major two-character plays in the following four chapters.

Chapter One is interestingly titled as "Setting the Stage" as it works as an introduction as well as initiates discussion about the significance of the trend-setting spatial metaphors used by these playwrights. Bairathi mentions a long list of important works including Carol Rosen's *Plays of Impasse* (1983) and *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*, edited by Philip C. Collin and Colby H. Kullman (1996), which offer an insight into the innovations of stage setting in the four decades from the nineteen sixties. The modern man's existential crisis needed a new dramatic language, which was achieved to a great extent by the intense interactions of two characters and innovative stage designs that would help explore their internal worlds, their anguish, hysteria and violence. The two-character interactions, interspersed by moments of loneliness and long soliloquies are indeed the postmodern American playwright's answer to Joyce and Kafka: fractured plots, fragmented dialogues and anti-mimetic stage planning set off a shift from expressionistic modernism of Tennessee Williams to a postmodern synthetic realism of David Mamet. The chapter has an excellent discussion on the claustrophobic stage setting of post-sixties theatre which works as a cultural metaphor. The victimised condition and social outcaste status of the characters are signified by the no-exit setting such as prison cells, windowless rooms, cramped flats, coffins, as well as stage props such as wheel chairs, abnormally oversized sunflowers, a spool recorder or a set of collectible items that in some way or other accentuate the confined status of the characters – who are not only the prisoners of the present but of past too, finding solace in nostalgia. Space, therefore, is not a mere backdrop in these plays but a channel of communication.

The second chapter begins with the two-character psychological dramas by Tennessee Williams. Bairathi considers *The Two-Character Play* (1975) as a culmination of a long line of plays including *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). Williams is captivated by the relationship of a brother and sister who fail to have meaningful social relationships or successful careers. Bairathi attempts a study of Williams's work

with a special focus on *The Two-Character Play* as well as *Glass Menagerie* and other thematically related plays such as *This Property is Condemned*. Williams's fractured plots and theatrical spaces, his use of symbols and lyrical language, and the ensuing overlaps of reality and memory, home and the world, private and public get special mention in this chapter. This smudging of margins and surreal melting of spaces is not only painfully lyrical but also dramatic, leaving a statement on the predicament of the contemporary American life. Williams's plays have a typical Mississippi melancholy mood that haunts the rain-drenched marshlands and lonely streetcar graveyards. Mellow stage lights and haunting background score prepare the backdrop for the siblings who routinely fail in their jobs and their social lives; they suffer from boredom, loneliness, insecurity and a profound anguish. Interestingly, "home" is not where happiness is, for the economic reality of the outside world has infringed upon it, and happy memories only help to turn the present into a prison house. Incomplete interiors on the stage, with enactments of old, faded and warm memories the siblings share in these plays ultimately create a no-exit situation, a "theatre of entrapment" (Bairathi 58), as Bairathi borrows a term from Sartre.

Chapter Three approaches the theatrical methods of Edward Albee, who worked in the nineteen sixties and connects the theatrical modes of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams with those of David Mamet's third reality. Albee surpasses Williams's surrealism with structural and thematic devices belonging to the theatre of absurd, thus discarding the traditional notion of plot, character and realistic representation. Bairathi does an excellent job of bringing out Albee's theatrical techniques to detail the hollowness of contemporary American existence. The chapter focuses on his two-character plays *The Zoo Story* and *Counting the Ways* to show the impossibility of communication between individuals. Jerry, a social outcast in *The Zoo Story*, forces Peter, a complacent middle-class man to involve in a dialogue with him, and becomes violent in order to make Peter acknowledge his existence. A park, an open area becomes a claustrophobic space for contention and terror. Bairathi also examines *Counting the Ways* which is distinctly Beckettian in exploring the growing silence and distance between He and She, husband and wife. A split bed, counting a dandelion's petals and lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet, "how do I love thee?" poignantly reveals the universal loneliness and loss of communication that is symptomatic of the contemporary spiritual crisis.

The fourth chapter takes up the plays of David Mamet, who not only uses the two-character setup in many of his plays but also brings up, in the tradition of Williams and Albee, fragmented plots, a synthetic realism to problematise objectivity, subverting dominant discourses such as the American Dream. Bairathi puts special focus on *The Duck Variations* and *A Life in the Theatre*, exploring Mamet's criticism of the American ethos of success and survival. As Mamet observed in *Writing in Restaurants*, "I believe all societies function

according to the rules of natural selection” (Bairathi 93). His characters live in a culture which celebrates the ethos of the nature where ducks routinely get hunted down by herons which in turn destroy themselves out of exhaustion; they reach out towards each other in an effort to make true contact, but find that momentary contact to be illusory. As Emil enigmatically remarks in *The Duck Variations*, “you can’t live alone forever. You can’t live forever anyway. But you can’t live alone. Nothing that lives can live alone” (Bairathi 100), Bairathi points at another inheritance of Mamet: the language of his plays belongs to the tradition of Pinter, Albee and Beckett. She closely reads Mamet’s plays to see how fragmented speech as well as silence, pauses and non-verbal responses communicate the unspeakable experiences – fear, trauma, wistfulness and death.

The last two-character play Bairathi discusses in the next chapter, Marsha Norman’s *Night, Mother*, is probably the most challenging one for the playwright. It is a hard job to attract the audience’s unwavering attention to the play set in a narrow kitchen, where Thelma and Jessie, a mother-daughter duo continuously talks until the latter makes her final exit to end her life. Jessie is a misfit like Williams’s Laura, who failed to perform the roles of worker, wife or mother, but is not as fragile; she makes a bold decision of committing suicide. Her decision is not an admission of defeat or an effort to escape; it is a rejection of her cultural ethos and an assertion of her freedom. Bairathi excavates the dialogues to show how Jessie is averse to “keeping herself busy” by solving puzzles or keeping a dog. Just like Amanda, the mother-bird of Tennessee Williams, Thelma tries to dissuade Jessie and bring her under her wings, but inwardly knows that her efforts are futile. The play ends with the sound of a gunshot from behind a closed door; Bairathi explicates this as Jessie’s rejection of cultural norms, and a final reclamation of her epileptic body on which she often lost control.

The two-character play, a unique artistic technique frequently adopted by American playwrights since the nineteen sixties, deserves further exploration. Bairathi’s book, published after her untimely death, would help researchers to further explore the issue.

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