

Theatre of Discomfort: Confronting Communal Violence through Monologue in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Hidden Fires*.

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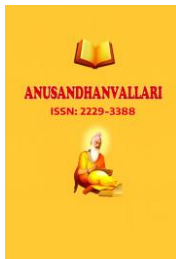
Abstract

The current research offers a textual analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Hidden Fires* (2002), a monologue responding to the Gujarat riots, to investigate how Indian English theatre addresses the politics of communal violence. Although significant scholarship on Indian theatre frequently emphasizes group pieces and established dramatists, the monologue as a subversive form remains inadequately examined. This research examines how Padmanabhan utilizes minimalism, irony, and direct audience engagement via a detailed analysis of the play's linguistic, structural, and rhetorical techniques to create a 'theatre of discomfort' that challenges traditional catharsis. Rooted in postcolonial performance studies and trauma theory, the research illustrates how the text incorporates fragmentation, silence, and disconcerting tonal shifts as aesthetic methods that engage viewers in the ethical and political dimensions of violence. Instead of only acting as passive record, *Hidden Fires* acts as an interventionist text that recontextualizes theatre as a locus of resistance, memory-work, and ethical confrontation. This study enhances the literature on South Asian theatre, spectatorship, and the ethics of depicting violence by emphasizing the monologue's capacity to disrupt dominant narratives of communalism.

Keywords: Manjula Padmanabhan, *Hidden Fires*, Textual Analysis, Indian English Theatre, Monologue, Communal Violence.

1. Introduction

Communal violence has marred the history of postcolonial India, exemplified by the Anti-Sikh riots of 1984 and the devastating Gujarat riots of 2002, resulting in profound societal divisions, disputed recollections, and intricate moral legacies. Literature, cinema, and drama frequently endeavor to confront these traumas;



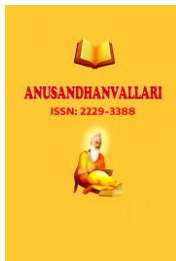
nonetheless, the manner of depicting violence remains highly contentious. A relatively underutilized yet potent technique is the monologue, which facilitates a focused, singular voice, frequently amalgamating elements of witness, confession, and confrontation. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Hidden Fires* (first published in 2002) serves as a monologue, a dramatic exploration of the politics surrounding communal violence, particularly the Gujarat tragedy. Its importance is in its rejection of simple conclusion, instead creating what could be termed a theatre of discomfort, one that compels audiences to engage in ethical inquiry rather than offering comforting catharsis.

Although Indian English theatre has been extensively analysed regarding ensemble plays and group performances, such as Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (1992), which frequently addresses communal discord, there exists a relative paucity of scholarship that thoroughly examines *Hidden Fires* or the monologue as a form of resistance within this framework. The aforementioned text contends that Padmanabhan "examines the validity and accessibility of a definitive resolution to the communal divide," and diverges from traditional Indian drama by employing "explicit theatrical violence to instil fear and indignation in her audience, compelling them to confront the horrific realities that envelop humanity" (Deb). This is a contemporary, genuine critical analysis that serves as a valuable starting point. This article investigates the following research question: How does Padmanabhan utilize linguistic, structural, and rhetorical tactics in *Hidden Fires* to create a theatre of pain that addresses community violence, rather than providing catharsis or reconciliation? The inquiry into how the monologue form, characterized by its simplicity and one voice, functions as a locus for ethical and political conflict is closely related.

This inquiry is important for several reasons. Initially, monologue has been somewhat underrepresented in Indian theatre studies, particularly in the context of communal violence; hence, examining *Hidden Fires* contributes to addressing this deficiency. Secondly, comprehending the portrayal of violence, encompassing both content and aesthetic modes such as silence, fragmentation, and irony, facilitates our comprehension of how theatre addresses trauma, memory, and ethical testimony in a society still influenced by community divisions. In a time when religious and communal identities are increasingly politicized in India, examining how theatre might resist, disrupt, and disturb rather than comfort has significant current importance. In response to these concerns, this study will employ a textual analysis methodology, focusing on close reading, to investigate *Hidden Fires*, emphasizing its linguistic and rhetorical devices (tone, irony, silence, direct address), structural elements (fragmentation, minimal staging, tempo shifts), and its interaction with spectatorship. The analysis will be contextualized within the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial performance studies and trauma theory, elucidating how texts address communal pain and representation in contexts of contested memory.

2. Literature Review

Research on Indian English theatre has extensively explored the political roles of stage practice, specifically how drama engages with nationalism, communalism, and social discord, yet a significant portion of this scholarship prioritizes group works and established writers (e.g., Mahesh Dattani, Habib Tanvir). Recent critical contributions underscore the necessity of focusing on smaller, experimental forms that express political protest through formal innovation. Discussions of post dramatic aesthetics have created valuable opportunities to re-evaluate modern Indian plays that defy Aristotelian closure and depict violence in disruptive manners. Scholarship on Manjula Padmanabhan has predominantly concentrated on her most widely recognized work, *Harvest*, as well as her involvement with bioethics and dystopian themes. Critical attention has only lately focused on her politically significant monologues from the early 2000s, created in the immediate wake of the Gujarat riots. The collection *Hidden Fires* is accessible in many editions and extracts; Padmanabhan's assertion that these monologues were composed "during the time of the Gujarat riots" highlights their testimonial and documentary nature (Padmanabhan, *Hidden Fires and Other Monologues*).



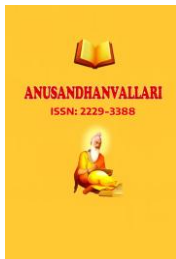
The most pertinent contemporary secondary research is Chitrangada Deb's essay "Locating the Communal Fires in the First Monologue of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Hidden Fires*," which contextualizes Padmanabhan's monologue within a framework of theatrical provocation and ethical disruption. Deb contends that Padmanabhan "examines the validity and accessibility of a definitive resolution to the communal divide," utilizing overt theatrical violence to "intimidate and provoke" audiences into acknowledging persistent horrific realities (Deb). This intervention is valuable as it connects form (monologue, theatrical violence) to political impact (ethical provocation instead of reconciliation), and it is a new, peer-reviewed addition to the field that directly addresses *Hidden Fires*. Theoretical resources elucidate the mechanisms by which violence and trauma are represented on stage. Trauma theory, especially concepts highlighting delay, fragmentation, and the challenge of completely narrativizing traumatic occurrences provides a lexicon for analysing Padmanabhan's disrupted speech patterns and silences. Concurrent performance-theory research on spectatorship and the ethics of witnessing posits that theatre may reshape audience accountability via discomfort and the act of bearing witness, rather than through comforting catharsis (Fitzpatrick; Dolan 18). Collectively, these domains enable us to interpret *Hidden Fires* as trauma-laden testimony designed to evoke ethical discomfort. These academic perspectives are complemented by independent critical outlets, which also engage with Padmanabhan's critique of communal violence. Manjula Padmanabhan's critique of communal violence in *Hidden Fires* is also analysed by independent critical outlets, such as JUDE LIVI's Blog ("Indian Women: Drama").

Ultimately, comparative literature concerning Indian plays that tackle communal violence, primarily Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions*, serves as a significant contrast. Dattani's work has faced significant criticism about his ensemble dramaturgy, attempts at dialogic resolution, and didactic tendencies; in contrast, the emerging literature on Padmanabhan characterizes the monologue as deliberately non-resolving and combative. This disparity highlights a scholarly gap that the current research addresses: whereas ensemble plays have been effectively historicized in discussions of theatre and communalism, the monologue, as a focused and ethically significant form, remains little examined in the Indian setting.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology to investigate Manjula Padmanabhan's *Hidden Fires* (2002). The monologic structure and its engagement with communal trauma are examined through trauma theory, postcolonial performance studies, and ethics of spectatorship. This approach ensures attention to both form and content, language, silence, structure, and rhetorical devices, not only as literary techniques but also as political and ethical interventions. The analysis involves three main procedures. First, a close reading identifies tonal shifts, rhetorical devices (direct address, repetition, and irony), silences, and temporal progression, showing how speech fragments and pauses evoke trauma rather than resolve it. Second, structural analysis considers minimal staging, absence of ensemble interaction, tempo, and fragmentation, highlighting links between textual disturbances and fractured community relations. Third, spectatorship analysis examines how the monologue morally positions its audience, requiring discomfort, complicity, or acknowledgment, drawing on insights from "The Active Audience: Spectatorship, Social Relations, and the Experience of Cinema in India."

The study uses trauma theory (Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra) to interpret fragmentation, latency, and unspeakability, while postcolonial performance studies contextualize the play within the legacies of Partition, nationalism, and communal identity. Comparative benchmarks include Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* and other Indian theatre responses to communal unrest, to situate Padmanabhan's unique monologic strategy. Recent scholarship on trauma representation (Srilekha B. P. and Harishankar 55) informs the analysis of fractured memory, while Busby's work on applied theatre in Indian settlements (Busby 210) highlights performance as ethical engagement. Though *Hidden Fires* is not community-based, its monologue functions as interventionist



resistance by provoking ethical spectatorship. The research is text-centric and excludes live performance elements such as staging and dialectal variations. Ethically, the study avoids sensationalizing traumatic material, focusing instead on representation and its political implications.

4. Textual Analysis of *Hidden Fires*

4.1 Linguistics and Irony

A central feature of *Hidden Fires* is Padmanabhan's use of irony, functioning as both a rhetorical and political instrument. The play's language oscillates between the banal and the horrifying, making ordinary remarks unnervingly significant when juxtaposed with communal violence. Techniques such as humorous language, understatement, and juxtaposition emphasize the disparity between societal indifference and personal anguish. In one monologue, "Invocation," the naming of ordinary individuals as victims demonstrates tenderness entwined with horror: while names memorialize, they also underline society's failure to prevent death. Padmanabhan contrasts ordinary daily life with acts of violence, incendiary attacks, sexual assault, forced dislocation, producing a stark irony that unsettles the audience. Direct address, using pronouns like "we" or "you," implicates the audience in complicity, exposing denial and indifference. Such rhetoric denies cathartic solace; as Padmanabhan notes, the intention is to lead readers or viewers on a journey they would prefer to avoid (Mittal). Irony thus functions ethically and politically, transforming banal language into a medium that forces acknowledgment of violence and societal failure.

4.2 Minimalism and Fragmentation

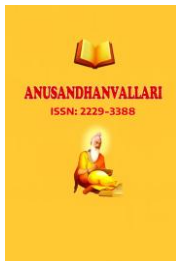
The monologue form inherently demands minimalism: a single speaker, sparse characters, and austere staging. This simplicity intensifies the sense of isolation, positioning the audience near tragedy. The absence of ensemble interaction foregrounds the solitary voice, leaving no mediating distractions and compelling direct engagement with communal suffering. Fragmentation manifests through disjointed memories, abrupt temporal shifts, partial recollections, pauses, and silences. Events are not narratively linear but appear in fragments, reflecting trauma theory's assertion that traumatic experiences are not fully narratable. Silences are charged with the unarticulated: loss, terror, and moral responsibility. The form denies conventional narrative closure; memory interruptions and quiet impede resolution, mirroring the unpredictability and lingering aftermath of communal violence.

4.3 Audience Engagement and Discomfort

Direct address is a primary device for audience engagement. The speaker's use of "you" or "we" positions the audience as witnesses and moral participants, compelling reflection on complicity and ethical responsibility. Padmanabhan disrupts comfort zones through rhetorical irony, depiction of violence, and the identification of victims. There is no narrative or moral resolution; the audience experiences persistent ethical unease. This discomfort is intentional: it fosters reflection on witnessing, responsibility, and the obligations of spectatorship. By denying cathartic closure, Padmanabhan ensures that the audience does not leave reassured but remains unsettled, engaging with ambiguity, guilt, and unresolved questions. Discomfort here is an ethical strategy, central to the play's political and moral objectives.

4.4 Trauma and Memory Reconstruction

Applying trauma theory (Caruth; LaCapra), *Hidden Fires* depicts violence as inherently unspeakable, with memory delayed, fragmented, and incomplete. The play engages in memory-work, identifying victims and recounting events while exposing the limits of narration. LaCapra's concept of "working through" trauma, rather than achieving closure, resonates: the monologues act as both testimony and rupture, emphasizing remembering



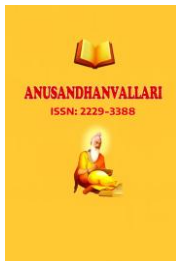
over reconciliation. The play's unresolved structure, silences, omissions, and fragmented speech, illustrates trauma's inexpressibility. Individual grief is interwoven with communal suffering; recalling ordinary victims situates personal anguish within collective injustice. This approach challenges narratives that sanitize or obscure violence and sustains the imperative of remembrance. By resisting closure, Padmanabhan foregrounds persistent ethical and political questions, ensuring that the "hidden fires" of communal trauma remain visible, unsettling, and morally urgent. Through irony, minimalism, fragmentation, direct address, and memory-work, *Hidden Fires* transforms the monologue into a theatre of discomfort: a mode that refuses conventional catharsis, implicates spectators ethically, and confronts societal indifference. The play demonstrates that singular, pared-down voices can powerfully engage with political violence, amplifying trauma's ethical and representational complexity within South Asian theatre.

5. Comparative Context

The placement of *Hidden Fires* within the context of Indian theatre regarding communal violence highlights its distinctiveness as a monologue. Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (1993) addresses analogous issues through an ensemble cast, as several views depict intergenerational conflicts and the delicate compromises of community identities. Padmanabhan, however, intentionally confines the narrative to a sole speaker, enhancing isolation and highlighting the suppression of minority perspectives. Dattani promotes discussion across divisions, but Padmanabhan presents the lack of such discourse, compelling viewers to engage in a more immediate and disconcerting encounter. A comparable distinction arises between Habib Tanvir's people's theatre and Safdar Hashmi's activist street performances, both of which underscored collective engagement, vernacular expressions, and popular mobilization. Their work emphasized theatre as a community-oriented, dialogic activity aimed at empowering underrepresented voices via collective action. In contrast, Padmanabhan abstains from populist approaches. Her use of English and her succinct monologue redirect opposition inward, establishing a dramatic minimalism that defies straightforward integration into state narratives or joyful collectivism. Consequently, although Dattani, Tanvir, and Hashmi represent ensemble-based or collective forms of resistance, Padmanabhan proposes a counterstrategy: the individual voice serving as both evidence and accusation. Her speech rejects catharsis and precludes collective connection on stage, instead highlighting separation, stillness, and the ethical responsibility imposed on the audience. Ultimately, comparative literature concerning Indian plays that tackle communal violence, particularly Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (Parmar), serves as a significant contrast in addressing the complexities of ensemble versus monologic forms. In this regard, *Hidden Fires* illustrates how Indian English theatre may utilize minimalism and discomfort not as constraints, but as political interventions separate from ensemble or communal traditions.

6. Theatre of Discomfort: Theoretical Perspectives

The monologue in *Hidden Fires* demonstrates a theatre of discomfort, a performance style that contrasts with Aristotelian catharsis. In contrast to traditional dramatic structures that provide emotional catharsis and narrative resolution, Padmanabhan's work disturbs audiences through disjointed memories, silences, ironic direct address, and ambiguous moral outcomes, compelling active ethical involvement instead of passive empathy (Mittal). Hans-Thiess Lehmann's framework of post dramatic theatre elucidates these characteristics: "Contemporary performance frequently prioritizes presence, time, fragmentation, and the plurality of semiotic forms rather than linear narrative or mimesis" (Lehmann 45). *Hidden Fires* utilizes tonal shifts, sudden recalls, and silences to undermine narrative coherence, compelling viewers to confront the realities of community violence and the constraints of theatrical depiction. These techniques necessitate that viewers engage with ambiguity,



contradiction, and moral discomfort, consistent with Lehmann's assertion that post dramatic spectators are co-participants in the construction of meaning rather than passive observers (Lehmann 53).

Padmanabhan's monologue exemplifies ethical spectatorship as articulated by Jill Dolan, who underscores the transformational capacity of pain in performance (Dolan 78). The text's disjointed, sardonic, and hostile tone obstructs emotional release, fostering contemplation on complicity, inactivity, and ethical accountability. In contrast to ensemble or folk-based forms like Habib Tanvir's people's theatre, Safdar Hashmi's street activism, or Dattani's *Final Solutions*, which depend on diverse voices or public engagement, Padmanabhan illustrates that a singular, minimalist voice in English can function as a powerful political intervention. Her work involves audiences in the moral aspects of memory, trauma, and collective identity, navigating a transitional space between the local and global, and enhancing the ability of South Asian theatre to stimulate contemplation, resistance, and ongoing ethical observation. *Hidden Fires* consolidates a post dramatic, trauma-inflected style that broadens the vocabulary of Indian English theatre and emphasizes the political and ethical significance of discomfort.

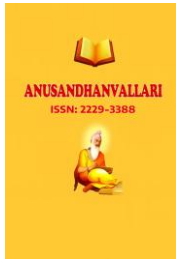
7. Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Hidden Fires* illustrates how the monologue, sometimes marginalized in theatre studies, may serve as a potent medium for political critique and ethical conflict. This study illustrates that through irony, fragmentation, stillness, and direct audience participation, the play creates a "theatre of discomfort" that challenges the conventional structure of Aristotelian catharsis. Instead of providing audiences with the solace of resolution or the certainty of moral clarity, Padmanabhan disturbs them, necessitating an engagement with their own role in systems of violence and community indifference. By framing the monologue as a subversive dramatic form, *Hidden Fires* expands the parameters of South Asian theater debate. In contrast to ensemble-based works like Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* or the collectivist principles of Habib Tanvir and Safdar Hashmi, Padmanabhan's monologue highlights the isolation and fragmentation inherent to the experience of trauma. This unique voice serves as both a metaphor for the oppressed victims of violence and a condemnation of the wider culture that facilitates such oppression. The play illustrates that a lack of diverse viewpoints does not signify aesthetic constraint; rather, it serves as a conscious creative approach to emphasize ethical duty.

Hidden Fires' significance is in its recontextualization of violence, presenting it without sensationalism or simplistic resolution. Utilizing the essential perspectives of trauma studies and post dramatic theory, the piece illustrates that discomfort, rather than catharsis, may represent a more ethically pressing reaction to violence in modern theatre. Padmanabhan situates Indian English theatre within global discourses of performance and pain, while maintaining a particularly South Asian urgency influenced by the political realities of communalism. The play encourages researchers and practitioners to re-evaluate the significance of minimalist forms in Indian theatre, especially during periods of crisis. Through a disquieting and interventionist monologue, Padmanabhan contends that the purpose of theatre is to provoke rather than to comfort, and to confront rather than to reconcile. Future studies may investigate how other modern playwrights may employ analogous techniques of minimalism, fragmentation, and ethical unease to confront the rising community conflicts of contemporary society.

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