

Identity and Alienation in Modern English and American Theatre: A Comparative Study in Light of Cultural and Postcolonial Criticism

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the themes of identity and alienation in modern English and American theatre through a comparative study of selected texts written during the twentieth century and beyond, within evolving social and cultural contexts. The study focuses on the representations of individuals and groups experiencing identity crises and alienation from themselves, their communities, or their places, whether due to the colonial experience, class and racial conflicts, or the transformations of modernity and postmodernity. The study employs a cultural and postcolonial critical perspective to understand how these theatrical texts generate and re-enact these tensions on stage.

The research utilizes a comparative analytical approach, combining texts from English theatre (Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Caryl Churchill) and American theatre (Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, August Wilson) to explore the similarities in the existential experience of alienation and the differences in theatrical discourse within each cultural context. The research also explores how theatre contributes to questioning fixed conceptions of identity and opens up multiple possibilities for redefining the self in the face of oppression, marginalization, or oblivion.

The research seeks to demonstrate how theatre becomes a tool of cultural resistance and a platform for renegotiating concepts of belonging, difference, and collective memory in a world of accelerating social, political, and cultural transformations.

Keywords: Identity – Alienation – English Theatre – American Theatre – Cultural Criticism – Post colonialism Comparative Studies

INTRODUCTION

Modern English and American theatre has undergone radical transformations in its dramatic structure, aesthetic discourse, and cultural functions, driven by the social, political, and intellectual changes that swept the world during the 20th and 21st centuries. While theatre has retained its role as a space for artistic expression and symbolic representation, its functions have expanded to include questioning individual and collective identities, revealing the mechanisms of marginalization and alienation, and reclaiming collective memory within postcolonial and neoliberal contexts (Hall 395). Based on this perspective, this research seeks to explore representations of identity and alienation in selected texts from modern English and American theatre through a

comparative critical analysis grounded in the tools of cultural criticism and postcolonial theories (Ashcroft et al. 45).

The questions of identity is not surprisingly near the base of most cultural critique today, especially if we consider the growth to renewed prominence in many differing locations and religions-where there was seemingly none-of such a dissension manifests as that between 'self' (and) 'other', 'inside body' and "outside around" hq versus per De;(hall72). Identity is no more the eternal or solid state, but a mutable construction emerged from historical, political and cultural connections. The body is read in postcolonial theory as a space of symbolic struggle between colonizing and colonized forces, its technologies of representation being disavowal and marginalization (Bhabha 95). In modern drama alienation is the subjective and the objective experience of a person that raise a sense of not being connected to society and its participants. As simulation and replica, drama is one of the few artistic practices that provides an exclusive stage to express these existential or identity crises. The essence of the Ruhr drama cannot be described as static, for it also involves foregrounding the production of knowledge, representation of ideology and deconstruction of discourse (Carlson 85). So the stage becomes a battleground of symbolism and representation, as we are once more left to wonder what it actually is to be us, and what kind of power has been made out of itself in us through time. In this evolution of the modern drama marginal groups have been able to find their lost voices in telling stories not as before unheard, or only truncated and disfigured by official or traditional literary discourse (Pavis 110). In the British and US cases these arguments have literal as well a historical, social and political representation differences. The Herero moral crisis of post-imperialism and its attendant colonized materialisation are, at least in British plays, apparent and even implicate theories on national and cultural identity as evolutionarily devised by Tom Stoppard and Caryl Churchill who mutually revised ancient theorems about nationality to suit or reflect recognizing class. At the same time, Black Drama/Minority Drama/Marginalised drama was born in American because of racial matter and class struggle in society. Like Arthur Miller and August Wilson. Playwrights such as Tennessee Williams focused their attention on urban culture. These were not just stories of crises of identity but visions of a new self against and resistant to exclusion and oppression.

Comparing these two theatrical contexts reveals that alienation is not merely an isolated individual experience, but rather a social and cultural construct shared by individuals within changing historical conditions (Said 85). Furthermore, identity can only be understood in relation to the forces that seek to shape or undermine it. Herein lies the importance of the postcolonial approach, which aims to expose the power relations inherent in theatrical discourse and reveals how theatre produces conceptions of "self" and "other" through language, image, and performance (Ashcroft et al. 110).

This research is based on the premise that modern English and American theatre not only presents dramatic portrayals of identity crises and alienation, but also contributes to the production of a resistant cultural discourse that re-examines established truths and disrupts prevailing hierarchies (Said 95). To achieve this, the research relies on the analysis of a number of theatrical texts that represent significant examples of these issues, while drawing on the methodologies of cultural criticism, particularly Edward Said's concepts of "representation" and "Orientalism," Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybrid identity," and Guy Atkinson's view of theatre as a space for cultural representation (Bhabha 120).

The research is structured into three main chapters. The first addresses the theoretical and analytical framework of the concepts of identity and alienation, tracing their roots in Western thought and postcolonial theories (Eagleton 65). The second chapter is devoted to analysing selected examples from modern English theatre, focusing on how identity is questioned through playwriting techniques, character development, and dialogue (Luckhurst 88). The third chapter examines the manifestations of these issues in American theatre, particularly within the contexts of racial and class conflict, with an examination of Black and feminist theatre as voices resisting white and patriarchal cultural hegemony (Smith 120).

The importance of this research lies not only in highlighting the identity and alienation dimensions of theatre, but also in contributing to the expansion of comparative studies that transcend national and cultural boundaries, through analysing the intersections of theatre with intellectual, political, and anthropological frameworks (Jameson 85). The research also demonstrates how theatre, as much as it is a performing art, is also a cultural discourse that intersects with concepts of power, resistance, and representation (Taylor 120).

The questioning of identity in modern theatre is not limited to the characters within the texts, but also includes the relationship of the text to its audience, its discourse to its context, and its representation of reality through its own tools (Abrams 65). Therefore, this research seeks to move beyond closed textual readings towards a contextual reading that reveals the mechanisms of dominance and difference, and restores the marginalized and excluded within the theatrical narrative. Every scene, every character, and every silence on stage carries a cultural significance that transcends the aesthetic dimension to encompass political and social dimensions (Styan 92).

Therefore, this research does not merely diagnose the crisis of identity and alienation, but also attempts to offer a critical reading of the tools of theatre in reproducing or resisting these crises (Brook 78). It aspires to contribute to the intersecting debates between theatre, cultural criticism, and postcolonial studies, thereby enhancing our understanding of the role of art in constructing the self, deconstructing grand narratives, and reimagining the relationship between humanity and the world in an era of rapid transformations (Hall 95).

ROOTING THE CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY AND ALIENATION IN MODERN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN THEATRE

Introduction

Identity and alienation are central themes in contemporary humanistic studies, reflecting the deepest conflicts experienced by individuals in the face of the transformations of our time, whether social, political, or cultural (Eagleton 72). Theatre, as a performing art based on direct interaction between actor and audience, represents a unique field for exploring these major human issues, embodying on its stage the internal and existential conflicts that express the crises of our era. Understanding the theoretical framework of these two concepts, and how they are represented in modern theatrical texts, is a vital step in deciphering the complexities of theatrical transformations in England and America, the two cultural contexts whose plays have witnessed intricate reflections of these issues (Luckhurst 95).

First: Identity – A Shifting Concept and Power Relations

Historically, identity has been understood as a fixed essence defining individuals and groups. However, postmodern studies and cultural criticism have offered a new perspective that views identity as an on-going process of formation and negotiation (Hall 85). Stuart Hall emphasizes that identity is not a fixed essence but rather an "on-going project," where factors such as race, culture, religion, and history intertwine in its formation. It is a process that is not static but rather changes with evolving social and political contexts.

In a postcolonial framework, identity is seen as an arena of conflict between dominant and marginalized forces, where the "self" is reshaped in opposition to the "other." Edward Said, in **Orientalism**, explains how the cultural identities of the colonized were produced through discourses governed by relations of domination, creating stereotypical perceptions of the other (Said 92). Homi Bhabha adds the concept of "hybridity," where identity exists in a mediated space between cultures, creating a state of fragmentation and instability.

In modern English theatre, these concepts are manifested in texts featuring characters with complex and contradictory identities, expressing crises of alienation and the search for self. For example, in the works of Harold Pinter, short dialogues, silence, and emptiness are used to create a state of tension and uncertainty, reflecting the fragility of identity. In American theatre, the works of August Wilson reflect the racial and social

tensions that define African American identity, depicting the conflict between cultural heritage and contemporary reality, and between the individual and society.

Second: Alienation – From Philosophy to Theatre

Alienation is a multi-dimensional concept that originated in German philosophy with Hegel and Marx. Marx linked alienation to economic and social relations under capitalism, where the worker is separated from the fruits of their labour and, consequently, from their own humanity (Marx 75). The concept later expanded to include the existential dimension, highlighted by Sartre and Camus, where the individual becomes alienated from themselves and the world, living in an absurd and meaningless realm.

Theatrically, alienation manifests itself in modern theatrical movements, particularly in the "Theatre of the Absurd," which features characters suffering from isolation and a lack of connection, as seen in the works of Samuel Beckett ("Waiting for Godot") and Harold Pinter. Disjointed dialogues, silence, and repetition express a profound experience of inner alienation, where the individual loses touch with reality and others (Esslin 9).

In American theatre, alienation is embodied in multiple dimensions, most notably the disillusionment with the American Dream, as seen in the plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. The characters appear repressed, caught between harsh realities and societal expectations, leading to a state of psychological and social isolation. At the same time, August Wilson's plays embody the alienation experienced by ethnic minorities, where the individual lives in a state of division between their cultural identity and heritage on one hand, and American society on the other.

Third: The Social and Historical Context of English Theatre

English theatre has undergone significant developments influenced by the social and political transformations that swept through the United Kingdom during the 20th century, particularly with the decline of the British Empire and the emergence of a multi-ethnic and multi-identity society (Carlson 78). Therefore, English theatre often reflects the evolving issues of national identity, class crises, and the cultural conflicts facing contemporary society.

Caryl Churchill, for example, uses her plays to explore identity from a feminist perspective within a conservative social context, critiquing patriarchal structures and raising questions about power, memory, and belonging. In *Top Girls*, Churchill explores the identities of British women within a historical context that blends politics, gender, and culture (Pavis 95).

Harold Pinter, through his theatrical style, reflects the individual's sense of alienation and uncertainty, using concise language and expressive silence to depict the loss of meaning and identity, reflecting the crises of personality in the post-war and globalized era.

Fourth: The Social and Historical Context of American Theatre

American theatre has been profoundly influenced by experiences of immigration, racism, and social stratification, resulting in texts that explore crises of identity and alienation in diverse ways (Jameson 88). August Wilson's plays offer a rich narrative of the experiences of African Americans, focusing on the tensions between the past and heritage on the one hand, and daily life and racial discrimination on the other.

In plays such as *Fences*, Wilson reflects the conflict between individual desires and social pressures, where the character is torn between family obligations and self-aspirations, generating a state of psychological and social alienation. Tennessee Williams explores identity crises through broken characters facing loneliness and

vulnerability, as in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where Blanche DuBois's character reflects a destructive state of inner disintegration (Taylor 110).

Arthur Miller highlights the economic and social pressures that lead to identity distortion, as in *Death of a Salesman*, where the protagonist struggles between his aspirations and the realities of life that force him to accept defeat, resulting in a state of psychological and social alienation.

REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ALIENATION IN MODERN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN THEATRE

Modern theatre in England and the United States began in the second half of the twentieth century to highlight feelings of alienation and marginalization as key features reflecting crises of identity and belonging in politically and culturally transforming societies (Eagleton 85). The transition from the colonial to postcolonial era, along with the developments of modernity and postmodernity, contributed to the formation of narrative and theatrical systems that challenged traditional systems and revealed the fragility of established identities.

First: Alienation in English Theatre – The Struggle for Identity and Belonging After the Empire

Following the collapse of the British Empire, English culture faced an existential crisis in the form of redefining national identity. Modern English theatre, particularly since the 1950s, embraced this struggle and expressed it in complex dramatic ways (Luckhurst 92). This crisis is clearly evident in the works of authors such as John Osborne and Harold Pinter, where characters are torn between inherited traditions and the new reality.

In John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), we see how Jimmy Porter embodies a model of class and cultural alienation. In Harold Pinter's works, such as *The Room* (1957) and *The Birthday Party* (1958), alienation is expressed through ambiguous dialogues and enclosed spaces that imprison characters within incomprehensible systems of power.

Second: American Theatre – Black Identity and Racial Alienation

In contrast, modern American theatre reflects various crises of identity and alienation, primarily linked to the racial, social, and political context in the United States (Smith 110). Perhaps the most prominent of these representations is found in post-Civil Rights theatre, where Black playwrights attempt to express the Black experience within a context of on-going discrimination and marginalization.

August Wilson, in his well-known Pittsburgh Cycle series, and especially in the play *Fences* (1985), presents the character of Troy Maxon, who suffers from a double alienation. In the works of Lorraine Hansbury, such as *A Raisin in the Sun*, alienation manifests itself through the disintegration of a Black family under the pressures of poverty and racism.

Third: Post colonialism and Hybrid Identity in English and American Theatre

In light of postcolonial approaches, the concept of identity is reconsidered as a socio-cultural construct shaped by relations of domination and resistance (Ashcroft et al. 95). This allows for an understanding of theatrical forms of alienation as a product of the experience of displacement, diaspora, and symbolic and cultural exile.

In English theatre, writers of immigrant origin present models of culturally hybrid characters, while in American theatre, these tensions appear in the works of Susan Lawrie Parks and Daniel Alexander Jones, where fragmentation and non-linear narrative techniques are used to reveal multiple and shifting identities.

Fourth: Identity as Theatrical Performance – From a Fixed Essence to a Fluid Construction

One of the most profound contributions of modern theatre is its deconstruction of the concept of identity as a fixed essence. Theatre, as a performative art, reproduces identities on stage through the body, language, and movement, making it a vital medium for presenting the changing forms of the self (Butler 88).

Fifth: A Comparative Reading – Divergent Contexts and Similar Existential Anxiety

Despite the cultural and historical differences between English and American theatre, there are unifying dramatic threads related to the crisis of identity and alienation, including: alienation within the self, the loss of language as a point of reference, and the disintegration of the family as a social structure in crisis (Hall 95). However, while alienation in English theatre is often built upon the collapse of the imperial centre, in American theatre it is shaped by the racial and economic marginalization of marginalized groups.

IDENTITY AND ALIENATION IN MODERN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN THEATRE – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN LIGHT OF CULTURAL AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

Introduction

The theme of identity and alienation is one of the most complex and compelling in modern dramatic literature, particularly in the English and American contexts. These social and cultural phenomena reflect the crises experienced by the individual in the face of profound changes in the political, social, and cultural structures (Hall 85). This study examines how identity and alienation manifest in prominent theatrical texts, analysing them within the frameworks of cultural and postcolonial criticism. It explores the forms of psychological, social, and cultural alienation and how they are represented on stage (Bhabha 95).

First: Theoretical Framework: Identity and Alienation in Cultural and Postcolonial Criticism

Cultural and postcolonial criticism proceed from the premise that identity is not a fixed or essential entity, but rather a fluid and interwoven construct shaped by power relations, politics, and culture. Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak stand out as prominent thinkers who have addressed this topic. Bhabha refers to the concept of the "hybrid position" of the self, while Spivak sees cultural discourse as an arena of conflict and negotiation between the dominant and the marginalized (Spivak 102).

In this context, alienation is considered a central condition resulting from a loss of belonging, whether to place, social identity, or psychological identity. This is manifested in dramatic literature through bewildered characters suffering a disconnect between themselves and their surrounding environment.

Second: Identity and Alienation in English Theatre: Between Post-Imperialism and Social Transformations

Following World War II, English theatre underwent radical transformations reflected in its treatment of the themes of identity and alienation (Carlson 88). In John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the crisis of identity and alienation is embodied in the character of Jimmy Porter, who expresses a deep anger towards conservative British class society.

Harold Pinter, in works such as *The Birthday Party* (1958) and **The Dumb Waiter**, uses ambiguity and fragmented dialogue to reflect inner turmoil and a sense of not belonging, thus representing alienation in the modern world (Pavis 95).

Third: Identity and Alienation in American Theatre: The American Dream and the Tragedy of Alienation

American theatre presents a complex space for the struggles of identity and alienation, where the crises of the American Dream, racism, and individualism intertwine (Jameson 92). In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), alienation is embodied in the character of Willie Loman, who is pursued by the American Dream but fails to achieve it.

In August Wilson's *Fences* (1985), alienation is manifested through the character of Troy Maxon, who experiences an internal and external conflict between himself and a racist society (Taylor 110).

Fourth: Post colonialism and Hybrid Identity in English and American Theatre

In light of postcolonial approaches, identity is reconsidered as a socio-cultural construct shaped by relations of domination and resistance (Ashcroft et al. 95). In English theatre, writers of immigrant origin present models of culturally hybrid characters, while in American theatre, these tensions are evident in the works of Susan Lawrie Parks, where fragmentation and non-linear narrative techniques are used to reveal multiple and shifting identities.

Fifth: Identity as Theatrical Performance – From a Fixed Essence to a Fluid Construction

One of the most profound contributions of modern theatre is its deconstruction of the concept of identity as a fixed essence. Theatre, as a performance art, reproduces identities on stage through the body, language, and movement, making it a vital medium for showcasing the shifting forms of the self (Butler 88).

Sixth: Comparative Reading – Divergent Contexts and Similarities in Existential Anxiety

Despite the cultural and historical differences between English and American theatre, there are common dramatic threads related to the crisis of identity and alienation, including: alienation within the self, the loss of language as a point of reference, and the disintegration of the family as a social structure in crisis (Abrams 95). While alienation in English theatre is often based on the collapse of the imperial centre, in American theatre it is shaped by the racial and economic marginalization of marginalized groups.

Seventh: Comparison Between English and American Theatre: Similarities and Differences

English and American plays differ in their artistic methods and themes, yet they share a multifaceted treatment of identity and alienation (Carlson 95). In English theatre, class and national identity emerge as central issues, with a focus on the effects of empire and historical hegemony. English plays are characterized by their use of symbolism and enigmatic language to depict internal conflicts, while American theatre focuses more on psychological and social realism and employs narrative techniques such as fragmentation (Pavis 110).

The differences are also evident in their historical contexts; English theatre deals with the post-imperial crisis and the disintegration of hegemony, while American theatre addresses issues of the American Dream, racism, and identity conflicts in a multi-ethnic society. Nevertheless, both theatres portray alienation as a psychological, social, and political condition, and they focus on the role of the individual in confronting oppressive social systems.

Eighth: Theatre and Identity: Theatrical Tools for Representing Alienation

Theatre, as a performing art, employs various tools to represent issues of identity and alienation, including dialogue, movement, stage space, and lighting (Abrams 88). In English theatre, fragmented dialogue, silence,

and coded language are used to reflect tension and alienation. Stage spaces become constricted, symbolizing psychological and social prisons, as seen in the works of Pinter and Osborne.

In American theatre, however, texts rely on character dissection through internal monologues, repetition, and temporal manipulation to reveal the psychological conflict between dreams and reality. Some plays utilize physical theatre techniques and music to enhance the sense of alienation and psychological fragmentation, transforming the stage into a space that reflects the characters' internal divisions (Styan 95).

Conclusion

This study confirms that identity and alienation in modern English and American theatre are not separate phenomena, but rather are closely intertwined with their historical and social context (Brook 92). Through the use of diverse theatrical techniques, the texts express the individual's suffering in the face of changing forces and reflect their psychological and social struggles.

A critical approach based on cultural and postcolonial criticism enables an understanding of identity as a dynamic and contested construct, while theatre provides a vibrant space for questioning the self and the other, thus offering new opportunities to reshape identities in a globalized and changing world (Hall 110).

Therefore, theatre remains an effective platform for exploring the concepts of identity and alienation, not only as artistic texts, but also as mechanisms of resistance and negotiation that contribute to developing a deeper awareness of the self and society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research, entitled "Identity and Alienation in Modern English and American Theatre: A Comparative Study in Light of Cultural Criticism and Post colonialism," can be said to have demonstrated that modern theatre in both England and the United States has served as a dynamic platform for reinterpreting, questioning, and deconstructing the concepts of identity, belonging, and alienation within complex social and historical contexts. Through reading theatrical texts and analysing characters and events, it becomes clear that playwrights actively engaged in posing questions related to the self and the other, centre and periphery, and belonging and exclusion.

The preceding chapters have established that approaching the topic of identity and alienation is incomplete without invoking the two theoretical frameworks that form the core of this research: cultural criticism and post colonialism. These two fields have enabled the framing of theatrical analysis within a holistic vision that transcends purely aesthetic reading, delving into the political, social, and psychological dimensions that frame the human experience in modern theatrical texts.

In English theatre, as seen in the works of Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Sarah Keane, the crisis of identity manifests itself within a post-imperial context. The characters stand between a fading imperial legacy and a nascent multi-identity society. American theatre, in contrast, has internalized the identity crisis within the context of a legacy of racism and cultural globalization, as seen in the works of Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansbury, and August Wilson, where the question of identity intersects with race, class, gender, and religion.

While alienation in English theatre stems from a post-imperial national identity crisis, in American theatre it is embodied in the contradictions of modern society itself and in the structural violence inherent in cultural and economic institutions. Both contexts share the understanding that theatre constitutes a space for symbolic resistance, where characters re-examine their identity status and search for alternatives to belonging and meaning.

From this perspective, postcolonial and cultural criticism converge in characterizing these theatrical cases, emphasizing that identity is not fixed but rather a cultural construct subject to conflict and renegotiation. This was evident in the dramatic structure of many plays that relied on deconstructing traditional narratives and fragmenting characters, reflecting a postmodern philosophy of representing the self and the world.

Furthermore, as a living, collective art form, theatre possesses a transformative energy stemming from its interaction with the audience. Representing identity and alienation on stage is not merely a depiction of a situation, but a communicative act that creates new possibilities for understanding, empathy, and perhaps even for changing reality itself. Herein lies the social and political function of theatre, especially when it employs its artistic tools to critique the cultural and authoritarian structures that produce alienation and contribute to the exclusion of marginalized individuals.

It is essential to emphasize the importance of contextual awareness in reading theatrical texts. Each text was approached within its cultural and social environment, lending the study its comparative character. This opens the door for further expansion in the future, whether through studying new theatrical experiences belonging to evolving cultural spaces, or by rereading well-known texts in light of more intersectional theories such as intersectional theory or Eco criticism.

In conclusion, we can say that identity and alienation remain among the most prominent themes of modern theatre, forming an intricate structure of tensions and interactions that give theatre its human depth and transformative power. Theatre is not merely a mirror of society; it is also a critical voice that challenges established beliefs and redefines the self in a changing and challenging world.

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