Intracultural theatre in Canada: Rahul Varma's 'Counter Offence' and 'Bhopal'

by

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Abstract:

Canadian theatre has always been an exercise in inter-cultural negotiation, yet in the past few decades, the official multicultural legislation has provided opportunities for more artists belonging to ethnic minorities to consciously diversify our country's theatre practice. Montreal based Indo-Canadian playwright Rahul Varma has been a leading figure in creating intracultural theatre, which seeks to question the discourse of multiculturalism. Along with his company Teesri Duniya Theatre, whose mandate is to produce socially and politically minded theatre that reflects Canada's diversity, Varma has staged plays such as *Counter Offence* and *Bhopal* in order to create counter-discursive spaces where the audience may examine 'benign' forces such as multiculturalism and globalization. These two plays are situation-based dramas where various socio-political issues collide and conflict, allowing the audience to witness multiple points of view and understand the tensions, power dynamics, and inequalities inherent in negotiations between cultures.

Preface:

This thesis is an original work by Rohan Kulkarni. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

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Introduction

Canadian theatre, or as Ric Knowles refers to it, "theatre and performance in the land that is now called Canada," has been historically entrenched in inter-cultural negotiations (Knowles v). From pre-contact performance rituals in indigenous cultures, to the theatre produced by French and British settlers, and into the present, the cultural landscape of Canada has necessitated engagement with and navigation of various sensibilities. But the particular history of theatre in Canada, like our country's political history, has been dominated by Eurocentric ideals and practices. In this sense, my interest in the inter-cultural theatre of Canada is informed not by the performance cultures of French and English majorities but by those on the outside; I consider theatre created by 'persons of colour' or 'visible minorities', or those "who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour and who do not report being Aboriginal" as my general area of research (Statistics Canada 2009). I wish to explore how artists of colour in Canada translate their experiences of marginalization and ethno-racial exclusion into a theatre practice that seeks to upset Eurocentric hegemony and challenge discourses of oppression. This type of theatre is relatively recent in Canada, and continues to expand as more such artists find their voices and express dissent through performance. For the last three decades, the buzzwords of 'interculturalism' and 'multiculturalism' have dominated conversations in many social spheres, and very notably in theatre. This is largely because we live in an ever-globalizing world, where conversations of race, ethnicity, and culture have managed to enter the public domain and problematize the whitewashed version of Canadian identity. Artists of colour encourage a fundamental critique of Canadian

society, asking audiences to acknowledge the narratives of oppression that shape our country.

In this thesis, I focus on the work of South Asian-Canadian playwright Rahul Varma (born 1952). Based in Montreal for over thirty years, Varma has been committed to telling stories of marginalized 'others' in Canada. Along with the company he co-founded in 1981, Teesri Duniya Theatre, Varma engages in a careful critique of Canadian society through his work and challenges the audience to think outside the Eurocentric box. His plays are overtly socio-political and do not shy away from posing difficult questions about ethno-racial encounters and the structures of power that prolong inequality in Canada. Varma employs language and characters to craft situation-based dramas that are designed to reveal the oppressive power dynamics between the Eurocentric majority and the ethnic 'other'. I argue that his plays are intended almost exclusively for a Canadian, and more generally, a Western audience, because they confront us with a social reality that is often omitted from mainstream theatre: the reality that our embrace of 'multiculturalism' and diversity is far more complicated and riddled with inequality than we may be willing to accept. I will examine two of Varma's most important works, *Counter Offence* (1996) and *Bhopal* (2001) to understand his playwriting style, noting the ways in which he confronts the audience with narratives of oppression that evoke critical engagement with the tense social realities of ethnocultural encounters in Canada and between the West and the 'rest'.

At the core of Rahul Varma's work, I assert, is a commitment to *conversation* as a tool of liberating ourselves from the totalizing discourses that shape Canadian identity. My references to 'discourse' in this thesis rely on an understanding of Foucault: I refer to

discourse as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them" (Weedon 108). I am interested in how Varma's plays attack these forms of knowledge, namely the grand narratives of multiculturalism, globalization, and progress. These discursive constructions are an inextricable part of the Canadian social fabric and inform the constitution of our identities as Canadians; by problematizing these constructions, Varma destabilizes them. I consider this a post-Brechtian approach to writing, and shows Varma's interest in exposing the material and social realities of cultural interactions, necessarily riddled with complex negotiations of power. He emphasizes 'realism' in situating both *Counter Offence* and *Bhopal*, that is, though both plays are works of dramatic fiction, they are set in very recognizable socio-political realities. These plays bring the audience in close critical contact with socio-political discourse by presenting a politically charged situation, and constantly ask us to include various perspectives and arguments in our assessment. Varma introduces multiple characters who voice various positions on the situation, ensuring that the audience receives a selection of views to accept, reject, or at least critically consider. These characters are wholly immersed in the dramatic conflict, and Varma organizes their interactions as though presenting a debate for the audience to deliberate on and form opinions thereafter.

The structure of his plays attests to this. Both *Counter Offence* and *Bhopal* are narrated in short scenes, often no longer than a few pages, and each scene consists of a 'debate' between two or more characters regarding the issue at hand. The characters express their socially informed opinions, which are generally at odds with one another, so

that the audience might wonder whom to agree with. These opinions are designed to reflect the structures of power Varma wishes to call attention to, and reveal the oppressive dynamics between majority and minority cultures, be it between white Canadians and Canadians of colour in *Counter Offence,* or between the globalizing forces of the West and the people of India in *Bhopal*. As the scenes progress, more characters are introduced and their debates become increasingly complex, and by the end, the plot is resolved rather uncomfortably. Varma thus exposes the various workings of oppressive societal mechanisms, and then leaves the characters and the audience to grapple with their consequences. This reinforces what I argue is the essential commitment of Varma's work, to attack the discursive realm through language and discussion, or by creating a space for counter-discourse. He crafts a dramatic, socio-culturally charged situation that affects multiple characters representing various levels of societal hegemony, who then conflict and debate their way through to the end. I further argue that Varma emphasizes strong binaries, such as East/West or developed/developing, and essential identities, such as 'black woman' or 'white policeman', as a way to invite critique from the audience. These strict categories reflect socially familiar distinctions which, in the plays, conflict amongst themselves and thus open up in-between spaces where the audience might devise new perspectives on identity, turning the theatrical space into a site of "collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 2). Within the four walls of the theatre, this space is able to exist *outside* the prescriptive narratives of progress in Canada and allows the audience to engage in the political act of challenging established discourse. Rahul Varma is thus a truly formidable figure in Canadian theatre, and uses his platform to counter the totalizing effects of evasive

discourse; he simply boils down its vastness into concrete situations that are immediately accessible to Canadians. Varma's challenge to the viewing public is this: in order to create a truly harmonious Canadian society, we must first have an open dialogue about the material problems of ethno-cultural marginalization instead of hiding behind the ideological constructs of inclusivity and multiculturalism.

In writing this thesis, I address Varma's plays in the context of two major concepts, namely multiculturalism and globalization, which I consider two sides of the same discursive coin. Both are intrinsically Eurocentric, relying on and enabling the oppression of non-white populations, and both are essential to understanding Canadian identity. Varma comments on the power relations these structures uphold through *Counter Offence* and *Bhopal*, and attaches deadly consequences to their continuation. This holds the Canadian audience responsible and provokes us to reassess our complicity in allowing such unequal power dynamics to persist.

I draw from many critical sources in my commentary on Varma's work, but my primary methods are based on a close reading of the plays themselves. I do not engage with a particular theory or theorist consistently, although I do acknowledge a distinct neo-Marxist poststructuralist bent to my writing. My approach, however, is to use various critical opinions to complement and introduce Varma's plays. The most influential opinion has been Indian theatre critic Rustom Bharucha's insistence on problematizing the language of 'intercultural' theatre, and I share his pledge to do away with this term when describing *intra*cultural work such as Varma's. When referring to theatre that simply engages more than one culture, I prefer to use inter-cultural (hyphenated) or cross-cultural because these terms imply an interaction, which is completely different from

intercultural theatre that is mired in a more Pavis-based approach (I will discuss this further in Chapter One).

The most valuable resource in this entire thesis, and arguably the reason I have become so passionately interested in exploring his work, is Varma himself. In 2012, as part of a class project at York University, I visited Montreal and spent the day with Varma, delving into the history of Teesri Duniya Theatre and discussing with him the politics of operating a company that mandated ethnic diversity among the competing English and French cultures of the city. I also learned about his playwriting process, his personal views on inter-cultural exchange, and Varma's inspirations as a theatremaker. Portions of my conversation with Varma have been documented and published, which I use to provide insight on the playwright and his work.

In Chapter One, I engage in a critique of the term 'intercultural' when used in the theatrical context. I then categorize Rahul Varma's plays, based on Bharucha's definition, as intracultural. Having established this working definition, I take on the concept of multiculturalism in the Canadian context, elaborating on its evasive tendencies and highlighting how it has historically stunted the growth of diverse and politically charged ethnocultural storytelling. This becomes clear in the development of South Asian theatre in Canada, which only recently, and in great part because of Varma's work, is beginning to address the everyday experiences of marginalization of South Asians in Canada. Finally, I provide background on Rahul Varma and Teesri Duniya Theatre, including their origins and the kind of intracultural work they have been producing for decades in the unique theatrical climate of Montreal, in constant opposition to the totalizing propensities of multicultural discourse.

Chapter Two is a close reading of *Counter Offence*, a play that deals with a racially charged situation and engages important debates about white supremacy, police brutality, and perceptions of domestic violence committed by persons of colour. I examine some of the main characters, each holding a different perspective on the play's events, and comment on Varma's debate-style post-Brechtian approach to make Canadian audiences critical of the issues presented. I argue that *Counter Offence* is Varma's coming-of-age as a playwright, and serves as a direct challenge to the narrative of multiculturalism by bringing forth the divisive nature of inter-ethnic politics.

Chapter Three begins with a commentary on globalization and the unequal dynamic between the West and East, which is the central theme of *Bhopal*. I present details about the industrial disaster itself (which claimed over 3000 lives in 1984), and then delve into a close reading of the play to examine Varma's use of language that reflects the oppressive relationships inherent within capitalism and globalization. I examine two of *Bhopal*'s primary characters to show how Varma employs them to serve as mouthpieces for globalized discourse, and ultimately the power that they are able to exert over events in this play.

I recognize, above all, that this thesis is a pioneer project, and thus my primary aim is to situate Rahul Varma as an important and relevant playwright in Canadian theatre. The themes that he grapples with are diverse, but ultimately boil down to one purpose, which is to make his audience recognize the destructive capability of Western-led Eurocentric hegemony in language and systems of power. Varma has been a leading figure in South Asian Canadian theatre for the last three decades, and has significantly challenged multicultural discourse. In its place, he promotes the discourse of difference,

so that we may use the theatre as a space to stop glossing over inter-cultural conflict and actually begin to address the politics of cultural diversity.

Chapter One: The Intracultural Theatre of Rahul Varma

Intercultural or Intracultural?

Attempting to define the term 'intercultural' is a complex task. Naturally, there does not appear to be one universal understanding of what it means to be intercultural or to produce intercultural theatre and performance. Similar, though much less so, is the case with 'intracultural' and 'cross-cultural'. Cross-cultural is the most clear in its composition, mostly because it addresses all performance characterized by "the conjunction of specific cultural resources at the level of narrative content, performance aesthetics, production processes, and/or reception by an interpretive community", and always "entails a process of encounter and negotiation between different cultural sensibilities" (Lo and Gilbert 31). This definition allows cross-cultural to become an umbrella term for all such cultural exchanges, including intra and intercultural theatre.

It is useful here to point out that words like 'intercultural', 'intracultural', and 'cross-cultural' have almost exclusively been claimed by performance literature. Rustom Bharucha in *The Politics of Cultural Practice* (2000) notes the public and critical disinterest in using these terms more broadly in the democratization of political narratives, and argues that they have been largely overshadowed by the use of 'multicultural', a term that discourages the exposition of conflict and enables unifying rhetoric (*Cultural Practice* 3). He aims to bring 'intercultural' into public discourse so that it may be used to evaluate political and social events, and serve as a nuance to multiculturalism, but I argue that he has been unsuccessful. We continue to associate the

former term with performance analysis. Thus in all discussions of the intercultural, intracultural, and cross-cultural that follow, even when unaccompanied by the suffix 'theatre', these terms will be linked to performance. Multicultural, on the other hand, will refer to both official state policy and its manifestation in the theatrical process. This distinction is necessary, especially when engaging in a critique of the relation between multicultural policy and theatre.

A purely semantic analysis suggests that the word 'intercultural' is a relation or dialogue between two or more cultures. The nature of such an interaction, however, remains ambiguous. When there is an exchange (of dialogue, practices, or identities) between cultures, is it peaceful and productive or violent and confrontational? Is it expository and discursive or evasive and silencing? Is power exchanged, asserted, or relinquished? Can interculturalism be a simultaneous combination of all these intents and outcomes? What effect might it create on the viewing public, and what narratives can interculturalism serve to propagate or challenge? These are some of the considerations when constituting a framework for assessing both the meaning and value of interculturalism.

Before arriving at a definition, then, I consider the implications of 'culture' itself. Culture is inherently collective—it stems from a sense of community among members who demonstrate shared characteristics, whether those are physical, ethnic, gendered, intellectual, consumerist, etc. In his introductory chapter to *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (1992), French theatre scholar Patrice Pavis calls upon Camille Camilleri to define culture as "a kind of bent, of foreseeable determinations, which our representations, feelings, modes of conduct, in general all the aspects of our psyche and

even of biological organism, take on under the influence of the group" (qtd. in *Crossroads* 9). Similarly,

> A culture is a system of symbols by which man confers significance upon his own experience. Symbol systems, man-created, shared, conventional, ordered, and indeed learned, provide human beings with a meaningful framework for orienting themselves to one another, to the world around them and to themselves. (Geertz 1973, qtd. in *Crossroads* 9)

There is a more-or-less conscious understanding of what cultures one relates to and that comprise one's individual identity. Culture, then, is a set of values and characteristics that defines a particular group of people, and that they may in turn self-identify with. It is quite concrete, in the sense of possessing traits that make a culture recognizable, but it is not static or monolithic by any means. Culture is always in the process of being constructed, altered, and reconstituted by those who belong to it (and, as often is also the case, by those outside it). And very often these dynamic shifts are brought about by interaction between cultures: *inter*-culturalism.

In the context of theatre and performance, the term intercultural is generally used to denote ethnocultural encounters, that is, when cultures built around combinations of ethnic, religious, national, and racial identities interact. The notion of minority and majority cultures is inherent to interculturalism, where the majority is often introduced to a minority, and the process behind such an endeavour becomes equally important to its outcome. This cultural bifurcation is both necessary and potentially problematic, but without it a framework of intercultural exchange is difficult to formulate. Pavis' hourglass model of intercultural performance is an example of such essentialism, where

the notion of a unified "source culture", complete with determinate characteristics, is absorbed by the artist for further processing until it reaches the "target culture" (*Crossroads* 5). In order to create dialogue between cultures, each must bring an individual identity or set of characteristics, which can then be negotiated through performance.

This is especially the case with ethnocultural groups. While they do evolve in relation to one another, the basis of difference is clearly etched in absolute categories such as race, ethnicity, place of birth, sense of nationality, and religion. In Canada, for example, people belong to various communities: Chinese, French Canadian, Sikh, etc. When these minorities perform their cultures, they do so against the backdrop of a majority Canadian culture, which is white, genealogically British or French, and entrenched in a Eurocentric worldview. The process of interculturalism is ongoing, from the moment the decision to perform is made all through the performance itself, and beyond.

The problem, however, is that the term intercultural has been captured and reproduced in a certain context by authors such as Schechner and Pavis. The above definitions of interculturalism, except for the final case where minorities create theatre, are to be understood in the sense of an appropriative cultural exchange, that is, when theatre makers (generally Western) adopt performance styles, design, and texts from cultures other than their own and incorporate them into the final product. It is "a particular kind of Euro-American theatrical practice involving interactions and borrowings across cultures" and involves a transfer from an unknown or foreign culture to one's own (Bharucha *Cultural Practice* 2). The result of such an interaction is the

audience experiences the outsider through a homegrown lens, and can employ their own worldview to understand the outsider's stories and performance styles. British theatre director Peter Brook's ambitious ventures such as *The Mahabharata* (1985) and *The Ik* (1975) are partly responsible for framing the definition of intercultural performance, and they are used as examples by Pavis to demonstrate the interaction between source culture and target culture, as well as the artist's efforts to serve as mediator and translator for such a project. Staging an extensive epic poem written in Sanskrit from Hindu mythology to an international audience in a French-language production, which was the case with *The Mahabharata*, was no doubt a colossal exercise in intercultural communication for Brook. Yet this exercise exposes the primary drawback in propagating the definition of 'intercultural': the source culture is neither audience nor authority, it is a mere resource that can be mined as desired. The mode of exchange between cultures is inherently unequal and does not serve to enrich both; in fact, it allows for an exploitative relationship where only the target culture benefits. The hourglass assumes an equality of access and cultural permeability, which is incorrect because there is a hierarchy of privilege firmly in place to ensure that the flow of culture occurs only in one direction (Lo and Gilbert 42).

While useful for the purposes of evaluating the theatre of Brook, Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson, and others, the term intercultural problematically reinforces distinctions such as 'us and them' and serves to concretize a simultaneous fear and fascination of the Other. It also prioritizes nationhood-based cultures and engages in a severely reductive form of essentialism, where the audience may formulate their imaginary of the source culture based solely on the parts that have filtered through into the final performance.

Eurocentrism is also at the core of intercultural exchange, which creates a distinct set of expectations for future representations of 'outsider' cultures, or stereotypes, and ultimately limits the possibilities of performative exploration. There is little merit, then, in using the intercultural framework to assess performance that does not fall within the scope of this hegemonic model of cultural exchange. In the Canadian context, the hourglass-style of interculturalism has endured quite strongly, and "critical discussion of performance across cultures has been relatively late" (Knowles v). This late arrival of more critical interculturalism is the reason I argue against its use. While many books and articles have been published under the heading of intercultural theatre in Canada, I maintain that we have not yet emerged from the culturally appropriative history of interculturalism in theatre. Authors such as Ric Knowles seek to reformulate and politicize the definitions of interculturalism, but the discourse is still reliant on a grandiose and internationalist vision of culture, which is inextricably tied to imperial nation-states and their hegemony. It does not adequately address the increasing cultural diversity within Canada. There is very little language available to discuss performance that is not merely appropriative of foreign cultures, but rather wishes to address cultural conflict and foreignness within the physical boundaries of one state.

To this end, instead of choosing to re-construct or further problematize the definition of intercultural, it is more favourable to adopt and define a different term to describe performance that politicizes the interactions between cultures, especially those that occupy a common space i.e. the nation-state. *Intra*cultural is more suited to elaborating on the process of negotiating cultural performance practices because the term assumes a diverse source culture and does not flatten difference for the sake of exporting

a caricature version of cultural identity. Once again, in a purely semantic approach, 'intra' already suggests within-ness as a defining feature. Intracultural performance thus highlights "the differences that exist within the boundaries of a particular region in what is assumed to be a homogenized culture" and provides a framework where this multiplicity can interact and differences can be confronted (Bharucha, *Cultural Practice* 9). There is a conscious understanding that various cultures can occupy a mutual space, which can serve as the common ground for them to engage in political dialogue. In the context of Canada and its identity as a site of cultural performance, the notion of an intracultural practice is relevant and helps give new meaning to artists who negotiate the disparity between dominant and non-dominant cultures.

In order to gain a more complex outlook on the evolution of intracultural theatre in Canada, we must examine the primary force that dominates the cultural and artistic landscape—the phenomenon of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is not only the most pervasive nationalist discourse that has been propagated for the past thirty years, it also defines much of the artistic practice in this country, so that artists are constantly made to engage with this 'mandate' in their work. It is present on the level of government funding, individual process, and audience reception. What follows is a discussion on the implications of multiculturalism, the discourse of collective difference or unity in diversity, and how this is responsible for constructing a national imaginary where various cultures are awarded with the privilege of being 'Canadian'.

In Canada, multiculturalism became officially entrenched in the federal legislation beginning 1982 with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, although it had been

a popular concept throughout the earlier decade with Pierre Trudeau's support and the introduction of multicultural policy in 1971 (Henry 234). Conversations about multiculturalism in Canada were, however, quite late given its history of immigrant influx. Following an economic boom in the 1960's, Canada had to promote an intake of foreign populations to feed the burgeoning industrial and agricultural sectors, as a result of which people from around the world arrived and called Canada their new home. Before this time, immigration policies were rather restrictive and often did not hide their racial bias when it came to welcoming migrant populations from East, South East, and South Asia (Knowles and Mündel viii). The need for cheap labour, however, led to a visible relaxation in immigration policies and soon Canada's urban and industrial centres were being populated by first generation immigrants. It took almost two decades for the federal government to recognize the contribution of ethnic minorities and immigrants in shaping the future of Canada, and multiculturalism was finally named an integral part of Canadian identity. Such a commitment to multiculturalism came along with continued relaxation of immigration laws and a promotion of diversity as central to Canadian nationalism. There was now a conscious attempt to identify Canada as a place where people from different cultures and nation-states could come together and use their economic skills to develop the economy as a whole. The motivation for this newfound multicultural vigour was notably economic, yet it was accomplished in a way that aligned with Canada's liberal socio-political beliefs: diversity, inclusion, and multiethnic harmony became buzzwords for domestic and foreign policy in the 1980's. This soon transformed into a matter of national pride and became an intrinsic part of Canadian cultural identity. In a global context, Canada's multiculturalism became a model for

countries like South Africa on how to 'manage diversity', and others like Australia emulated our policies directly (Henry 232).

The impact of multiculturalism was felt by arts organizations across the country. Suddenly, there was funding available for ethnic and cultural minorities to engage in artistic self-expression. This was a favourable development for those minorities who had until now been preoccupied with settling in to their status as Canadians, both economically and socially. They were now able to perform and express their identities. However, the primary audience for such artistic expression was within their respective communities, and the performances often relied on nostalgia for origins and a reaffirmation of cultural values (Dharwadker *Diaspora* 305). There was little effort made to depict the struggles of adjustment, address job market inequalities, or even comment on their interaction with various other communities and cultures. This served to strengthen one's own culture, but scarcely acknowledged the politics of inhabiting a common space or the realities of inter-ethnic and cross-cultural tensions. Herein lies the problem with multiculturalism—by promoting a model of 'unity in diversity' and funding the celebration of distinct cultural identities, the government is able harness the goodwill of minorities while simultaneously depoliticizing their relationships with dominant groups. Further, minorities are atomized and conveniently excluded from 'mainstream' Canadian society and culture, yet are made to feel grateful for the opportunity to practice and express their traditions.

Perhaps the most noteworthy incongruity in Canada's multicultural approach to the arts is how arts practices outside English and French cultures were not even considered 'professional' until the last decade of the 20th century. They received funding

from the Multiculturalism Directorate rather than from arts councils, which encouraged the festival-like and nostalgic theatre practices noted among minority cultures in Canada (Knowles v). Only in 1991 and onwards did arts councils recognize non-western performance cultures as professional; they were no longer treated as "merely static 'ethnic' folklore, to be 'preserved' rather than nurtured" (Knowles vi). I argue that this commitment to cultural preservation rather than active negotiation is at the heart of multicultural policy in Canada. The narrative of multiculturalism is grand enough to create individual spaces for each minority community to develop their cultural identities without allowing them to engage in a critique of their socio-economic conditions with respect to other Canadians.

While the term multicultural necessitates plurality, it does not indicate the kind of factionalist mentality that it inevitably produces. Communities are satisfied to avoid confronting each other's differences under the guise of mutual respect, and the very concept of cultural or inter-ethnic conflict becomes undesirable in a civilized multicultural society. Even in artistic expression, the focus is on community building within one's own societal faction, not in promoting creative dialogue between various cultures. In effect, the performance practices among the minorities were celebratory and revived the music, dance, and theatre popular 'back home' as a tool for maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity through folklore. While this form of artistic expression is important, the problem arises when it serves to alienate the members of a community from their social realties of living and struggling in the political landscape of Canada; performance that relies on nostalgia and self-affirmation does not adequately reflect the politics of occupying a space that is historically charged with ethno-cultural conflict and

inequalities, and it certainly does not promote dialogue across cultures. Multiculturalism as a policy is designed to keep ethnic and cultural minorities from becoming critical of their place in Canadian society, and it invokes the rhetoric of 'unity in diversity' to disapprove of any voices that do engage in such critique. Artists belonging to visible minorities were thus pigeonholed into creating only a certain kind of art, that is, one that aligned with Canada's multicultural policy. If they wished to receive funding government bodies, they would have to continue propagating the 'mosaic of cultures' narrative (Yhap 20). This meant that most performance in Canada during the initial decades of multiculturalism was not intracultural, and remained confined within each community's own audience.

This is not to say that attempts at and successful instances of intracultural theatre did not exist in Canada. In fact, the minority artists responsible for creating intracultural theatre were quite engaged with the dialogue of cross-cultural tensions and the need to illuminate the inherent flaws of our official discourse on multiculturalism (Dharwadker *Diaspora* 309). They recognized that intracultural performance is able to challenge the divisive potential of such grand narratives, and that it can openly address the depoliticization of minorities promoted by multicultural policy. Further, they declared the experience of ethnocultural minorities in Canada as one of marginalization and oppression, an admission that instantly shatters the illusion of unity in the Canadian mosaic. Access to economic opportunity and societal inclusion are not equal, and could not be glossed over by providing funding for cultural expression and self-affirmation. It was a conversation to be had not only between dominant and minority groups, but among minority groups themselves, who faced oppression in similar ways but scarcely shared

these common experiences. The very idea of dialogue between oppressed cultures would be a challenge to multiculturalism, which sought to create a unified (and false) sense of Canadian identity through the mere act of leaving each other's cultures alone. The increased atomization of cultures under the pretext of promoting diversity had legitimized the drive to avoid confrontation and instead submit to a Canadian nationalism that required an apolitical stance on cross-cultural interactions. Intracultural performance took issue with this problematic pre-requisite for Canadian national identity, and acted to "challenge the generalized tenets of citizenship that ostensibly connect all social actors to the idea of 'the nation', in and through their assumed 'diversities'" (Bharucha *Cultural Practice* 9); they were interested in exposing the hegemonies at work in describing, validating, and regulating the definitions and tone of cultural negotiations in Canada. By presenting a more complex picture of oppressive cultural dynamics, intracultural performance can create a space where the public is faced with their social realities and must acknowledge the evasive nature of the multicultural project.

South Asian Diaspora Theatre in Canada

The theatre emerging from Canada's South Asian community has been rich and diverse, but has historically been a practice in affirming cultural identity, which is in keeping with the multicultural artistic vision. These performances would be staged at community venues such as temples or school gymnasiums, and were primarily in local languages, the most common being Hindi and Punjabi (Singh V). As a general trend in North America, these plays were rarely political or critical, and relied on perpetuating a unified sense of Indian-ness by borrowing heavily from popular culture, especially

Bollywood. This theatre rests on an essentialist, nostalgic and totalizing conception of Indian identity, and is quite problematic because it does not include the multiplicity of voices that constitute India, and also systematically isolates those minorities who are already oppressed in the homeland (Dharwadker *Diaspora* 308). Since the plays are not presented in a Canadian context, they fail to create a space for critical dialogue, and the audience may not get a chance to reflect on their own lives in Canada. The performances remain bathed in nostalgia, invoked through traditional music and dance. Even in productions that do address socio-cultural issues, the tendency is to place the motherland India as the site of transformation. They are either presented with the constructed ideal of India to identify with and feel joy, or shown the problems that exist in Indian society to evoke concern, but from a distance (323).

Only in the past decade have South Asian artists made their presence really felt through powerful performances at nationally recognized venues. The likes of Ravi Jain, Anusree Roy, Pamela Sinha, and Anita Majumdar have staged strong intracultural plays to sold-out houses across Canada, with diverse audience attendance and an overwhelmingly positive response from mainstream theatre culture. The themes addressed in these plays, broadly speaking, illuminate the societal otherness of South Asians in Canada and invite the audience to focus on their perceptions of Indian/South Asian culture. In fact, the very process of intracultural diaspora performance in Canada is politically engaged, because live performance grapples with material problems of racism, finances, and difficulties of staging in a very active way. This struggle of being Indian in a 'foreign' land and telling original stories of the diaspora experience can contribute to more challenging conversations about race, culture, and Canadian identity. The theatre of

diasporic specificity allows the South Asian community to debunk imagined constructions of the homeland, and brings to the forefront matters that are important here and now, such as the realities of immigrant experience, societal otherness in Canada, and the struggles of adjusting to life in a new environment. It strives to find common ground not only among a variety of Indian sub-cultures, but also with the dominant culture and other minority communities in Canada. This is a notable achievement for South Asian theatre in Canada in the past decade—we have begun to diversify both our choice of narratives and of venue, so that artists are now socially engaged with their present realities and seek to share their experiences not only with members of our own community, but increasingly with other cultures who occupy the same Canadian space. They are able to create a dialogue about racism, patriarchy, and the challenges of assimilation. These plays are not nostalgic, and their aim is not merely to celebrate being different, it is also to show how identity negotiation is an ongoing and politically significant process for people belonging to the South Asian minority. This profoundly intracultural mode of performance is gaining traction in Canadian theatre and signals a future generation of artists who are less concerned with propagating the rhetoric of multiculturalism and more eager to engage in critical cross-cultural conversations.

Rahul Varma and Teesri Duniya Theatre

The recent increase in South Asian theatre artists has been an encouraging trend, however this group was preceded by the likes of Rahul Varma, "one of the first Indo-Canadian artists to craft English-language work that challenged the status quo by focusing on issues such as immigration, racism, global terrorism, and corporate

malfeasance" (Singh vi). Varma and his company Teesri Duniya Theatre have been active for over three decades and continue to produce work that is diverse, complex, and pushes the boundaries of cultural dialogue. Varma wrote and produced theatre designed to confront cultural tensions and politicize his audience in a period when multicultural policy was trying to create symbolic harmony among Canada's diverse populations. Thus, I regard Varma as one of the pioneers of intracultural theatre in Canada. Varma was born in India in 1952, and graduated from college in Lucknow. He grew up on the Indian countryside, where he had several opportunities to watch local theatre (Kulkarni 1). Varma's background in theatre performance was limited, but he was fascinated by the work he saw. And while most of it was typically celebrational, that is, festival based or embedded in Hindu mythology, some of it was otherwise very political. These performances took place mostly in rural settings with anti-feudal themes that shed light on unequal relationships between various ethnic, cultural and class-based groups in India. They commented on the centuries old landowner or *zamindari* system that left most farmers in dire poverty and benefited only the landowners. The practice of *zamindari* was exacerbated during the British occupation of India, and as a result continues to oppress the rural population to this day**.** Varma was inspired by the socially conscious nature of this work and its singular political messages, and when he moved to the city, he joined performance troupes and became interested in making a career out of theatre.

Soon after developing an interest in performance, Varma had the opportunity to immigrate to Canada. He moved to Canada in 1976 and settled in Montreal in 1977, where he has been based ever since. He co-founded Teesri Duniya Theatre (meaning Third World) in 1981, with a current mandate to create theatre of significance to the

multiracial and multiethnic communities in Canada. Varma's early plays were written in Hindi, which can be classified as the consolidation phase of South Asian theatre in Canada (Dharwadker *Diaspora* 309). This consolidation phase was marked by collective creation and the need to develop a sense of community within the South Asian diaspora. Some of the first plays Varma wrote were *Bhanumati Ka Pitara* and *Ghar Ghar Ki Kahani*, and by watching these productions, South Asians in Montreal were able to come together and recognize their common heritage and culture. For Varma, this phase was very important in finding his voice as a playwright, and more importantly, as a new Canadian. It was also a time when he was networking with other South Asian artists to explore performance possibilities. Throughout this time, however, Varma and his company did not follow the typical pattern of producing merely celebratory or nostalgic plays. In fact, their work also tried to incorporate the everyday realities of the South Asian immigrant experience, depicting both economic and social struggles brought on by navigating a new environment. In this sense, even at the very beginning of his career, Varma was already countering the pattern of narrative content in South Asian Canadian theatre.

After a few years of producing Hindi-language plays such as *Julus* (1981), *Gadha* (1984), and *Thank You Mr. Glad* (1983), Teesri Duniya and Varma's work developed into propagandist plays written in English, calling attention to the systemic oppressions faced by immigrants, and Canadian hostility towards them. Varma's transition to writing in English was an important event in the development of his voice, and a conscious attempt to expand the scope of his work from a purely Indian audience to a more diverse composition. (Kulkarni 2). This work was aware about engaging with socio-political

issues, and bore the character of the propagandist theatre that had inspired Varma as a young man in India. Through the new English-language plays, Varma was able to move beyond "doing ethnocentric work about the community where [he] come[s] from" and demonstrate his commitment to, as he states: "maintaining the cultural integrity of [his] people through the arts but also connect it to other cultures and build a relationship with others" (2). Having now lived in Canada for a few years and experienced the hardships of being a racialized Other in the context of 'multiculturalism', he was in a position to write about the inequalities that immigrants and minority populations had to contend with on a daily basis. This quick evolution signified a pressing need to expose the racial tensions of a self-proclaimed multicultural system, and to engage in conversations about how this system inherently propagated various forms of oppression. Now Varma became interested in dramatizing the conflict between cultures that the official discourse of multiculturalism seemed keen on glossing over. I argue that this was the primary motivation behind Varma switching to English, the language of his adulthood, in his new plays. It was a political tool to ensure that people other than South Asians would come to see Teesri Duniya's work, especially those belonging to the white majority – people who were not often confronted with having to consider minority issues at the time. Further, it would allow those of ethnocultural minorities to access each other's experiences, which bore many similarities in areas such as integration into Canadian society, lack of equal access to jobs, etc. with the goal of promoting dialogue between these minorities and raising larger questions about how the system treated those who were 'different'. By presenting various stories that took direct aim at Canada's supposed interethnic and intercultural harmony, with a focus on oppressive relationships between dominant and

minority cultures, Varma was able to invite critical commentary from a diverse audience and ask difficult questions about their own role in these narratives.

Teesri Duniya Theatre

As stated above, Teesri Duniya, meaning 'Third World' in Hindustani, was co-founded in 1981 by Varma with the mandate of producing plays of cultural significance to the South Asian community in Montreal. It was one of the very few professional theatre companies in Canada producing culturally specific work, and this was certainly the case in Montreal (Black Theatre Workshop had been active since 1972). The reason they chose the name 'Teesri Duniya' was because it represented the feelings of Otherness that Varma and his co-founder already felt the need to comment on. Varma explains:

> The word (Teesri Duniya) sounded a little different from the conventional words used for Indian companies, which were very exoticised. The names used at the time were all about the celebration and colour of India. This name defied that. Also, we were the third option to how the theatre community is organized here. In Montreal we have these two worlds, English and French, and our company's name was a statement that we were the third voice, the voice no one had heard. (Kulkarni 1)

The name remains a defining element of Teesri Duniya's identity, and highlights Varma's desire to use language as an opportunity to engage in dialogue about difference. While the company, having been in operation for over 30 years, has become well known in the Montreal arts community, any time their name is mentioned to a non-Hindi speaking person it requires explanation. It promotes curiosity about what the company's mandate might be, and poses an inherent challenge to cultural assimilation. Varma acknowledges that in many instances, the name has been an obstacle and there is always

potential for a discussion about changing it to English to make it more accessible. He maintains, however, that presenting people with a different sounding name is a way to make them "adjust to new ways of speaking and living" (2). This ensures continued visibility and a defiance of integrating into the dominant forms of storytelling in Canadian theatre.

The evolution of Teesri Duniya from a South Asian theatre company to its present status as a site of diverse and political storytelling has been hand in hand with Rahul Varma's growth as a playwright. When Teesri Duniya began producing exclusively English-language plays (written mostly by Varma), they were quickly recognized by the Montreal theatre community as a new voice in the dialogue on multiculturalism. All of their productions were notably political and engaged with the two dominant cultures in Montreal, the English and French. The perspectives were varied, and plays such as *Job Stealer* (1987) and *Equal Wages* (1989) took on serious issues of employment discrimination against minority populations with the aim to "build solidarity among minorities" (Teesri Duniya Website), while *No Man's Land* (1992) commented on the Islamophobia brought on by Quebec separatism. The tone of these earlier productions was decidedly activist, and they tended to take a one-sided approach based on the message Varma was trying to communicate. He wanted people from the English and French majorities to see these plays and hear the minorities' outlook on complex social issues. In the case of *Job Stealer,* many important political figures attended and were appreciative of Varma's directness, including then MP Robert Layton who promised to "take the message of this play to Ottawa" (Kulkarni 5).

In a radically different context, Varma's play *Land Where The Trees Talk* (1990) was staged to comment on the systemic dispossession of Aboriginal populations in Canada as a result of hydroelectric development projects sanctioned by the government. This play was a cultural leap for Teesri Duniya and served as a way to include more narratives of oppression. Soon, they began to invite diverse artists to collaborate on projects in order to create more consciously intracultural theatre that would address a variety of issues, not only ones emerging from the South Asian community. Throughout the 1990's and 2000's, Teesri Duniya involved various communities in its storytelling—Middle Eastern, Latino, First Nations, Filipino, Armenian, and co-produced *Counter Offence* with Black Theatre Workshop. Some of the well-known Canadian artists who have worked closely with the company include Nina Aquino, Guillermo Verdecchia, Wajdi Mouawad, Kevin Loring, and Anusree Roy among others.

At present, Teesri Duniya continues to strive towards its mandate of "producing, developing, and presenting socially and politically relevant theatre, based on the cultural experiences of diverse communities" with a strong commitment to "multiethnic (as opposed to colour-blind) casting" (Teesri Duniya website). Colour-blind casting seeks to include persons of colour in predominantly white storytelling, which effectively vacates the actor of their ethnicity and thus becomes an exercise in assimilation. Multiethnic casting, on the other hand, is a conscious attempt to cast actors in roles where they may perform their ethnicity. Teesri Duniya's mandate thus positions itself in sharp contrast to the discourse of multiculturalism, and attempts to redefine this term by not merely producing and reinforcing cultural representations, but ensuring that cultural encounters and negotiation drive both the writing and the production process. Teesri Duniya is also

not interested in the 'quota filling' and tokenistic mentality of multiculturalism that is behind endeavours such as colour-blind casting; they promote the writing of ethnically diverse characters that will then be played by diverse actors accordingly.

Montreal: Theatrical Cosmopolitanism

A discussion of Teesri Duniya and Rahul Varma is incomplete without placing them in their theatrical environment—the diverse and complex microcosm of Montreal, Quebec. Indeed, their work is relevant to broad discussions of Canadian nationalism and the discourse of multiculturalism, and as such applies to urban Canada at large, but the particular challenges presented by Montreal warrant further exploration. Their presence in Quebec itself is a challenge, given that they must operate within a French-language environment and produce theatre in English. Quebec's language law, the Charter of the French Language or Bill 101, is an attempt at preserving the province's linguistic history and ensuring that French remains an intrinsic part of the Quebecois identity (McWhinney 418). It also allows Quebec to affirm its refusal to assimilate into English-speaking Canadian culture, and as such is a potent expression of Canada's multiculturalism. In a massive metropolis as Montreal, however, this affirmation of Francophone culture becomes complicated when it must interact with the significant linguistic minorities who reside there. While the Francophone population is still the majority, the Anglophones are a sizeable minority and serve as a constant reminder of Montreal and Quebec's location in an English-speaking country of English colonial heritage. It also exposes the tensions of Montreal's own history with the British, and the identity negotiation that is part of Montrealers' daily lives. Translation and confrontation are inextricable from the character

of cosmopolitan Montreal; its inhabitants must contend with living in a French social matrix that is simultaneously infiltrated and complemented by English (Simon 16). Further complicating this intersection of linguistic cultures in Montreal is its status as an important port city in Canada, with a long history of immigrants' first entry and its contact with diverse cultures.

Montreal continues to attract immigrants from all over the world, belonging to different ethnicities, religions, and linguistic traditions. As a result of the 1960's relaxation of immigration laws, the city saw an upsurge in newcomers. It was especially favoured by immigrants from previous French colonies (Chiswick and Miller 122). Even so, many new immigrants spoke mostly English, or spoke neither official Canadian language (123). This meant an upsurge in English-speaking culture and a new challenge to French dominance, which was felt across Quebec and arguably spurred lawmakers to pass Bill 101. Prior to this, Quebec had no official language, yet now newcomers were being faced with a provincial model that required them to accept the Francophone reality of Quebec. Still, the diversity of languages spoken in Montreal grew and artistic expression became an exercise in straddling various cultures.

Montreal is the most 'Anglicized' city in Quebec, and is often known to provide the best of both worlds, English and French. Even the demographic make-up of the city attests to predominantly Anglophone and Francophone quarters, with other pockets belonging to smaller cultural communities. With such diverse composition, Montreal holds a unique place in Canada as a multicultural metropolis nestled in a province dominated by Francophone culture and sensibilities. The backdrop of linguistic assimilation, however, exposes tensions in the city as those not fluent in French may face

impediments to jobs and social opportunities. This carries over into the performing arts, where Francophone theatres receive the bulk of provincial funding and the 'rest' scramble for available resources (Kulkarni 7). Even in this scramble, the Anglophone theatres such as The Centaur are further up on the hierarchy than a multicultural company like Teesri Duniya. The problem is not exclusive to Quebec, in fact, the Canada Council for the Arts continues to inadequately fund ethnically mandated companies, often attributing them with amateur status (Off 11). This situation becomes exacerbated in Quebec, however, because Teesri Duniya, being neither Francophone nor Anglophone, must compete for both provincial and federal Arts Council funding. Teesri Duniya tells culturally diverse stories in English, which means it is already catering only to the English-speakers and excludes the Francophone audience. While their plays may thematically engage with both dominant cultures, English and French, their audiences can only be English speakers. To their credit, however, several of Rahul Varma's plays have been translated into French, such as *Counter Offence* and *Bhopal*, and have been staged at Francophone venues in the city to packed houses.

It is worth emphasizing here that Montreal's cultural landscape informs Varma's playwriting and his understanding of inter-cultural relations. As an Indian in Montreal, he must contend with not one, but two dominant cultures. By virtue of his ethnicity, Varma is already an outsider, and must further struggle to navigate the cultural landscape of Montreal as a non-French speaker and a non-native English speaker. This becomes apparent in his work, and Varma demonstrates strong arguments to counter the oppressive tendencies of both French and English cultures, and to implicate these audiences in the narratives of oppression. Recognizing this "lesser market value when

working outside the dominant culture" as "part of the system", Varma's plays seek to draw the two dominant cultures of Montreal, and arguably Canada, into a critique of their own position in the propagation of inequality (Kulkarni 7).

Having explored some of the background in Canadian theatre that Rahul Varma writes in (and against), I will now examine two of his most influential plays. *Counter Offence* (1996) is his most direct commentary on the culture of Montreal and the tense conversations surrounding race and ethnicity in this city. It also serves as a reflection of the Canadian mosaic and reveals the racist underpinnings of the criminal justice system. In the following chapter, I consider the ways in which Varma creates a theatrical space for critical discussion with this play, and how his use of diverse politically motivated characters informs a deconstruction of Canada's seemingly harmonious multicultural ideal.

Chapter Two: Multicultural 'Harmony' in *Counter Offence*

The issue of police brutality and the racism towards young men of colour in the criminal justice system is very pertinent today. In North America, we have seen several unjust shootings of ethnic men, including the recent killing of Sammy Yatim on a Toronto streetcar. This and many other incidents in densely populated urban centres of Canada have created a climate of distrust between certain ethnic groups and law enforcement officials (Roberts and Doob 469). While discrimination in the justice system is not new, given the treatment of Aboriginal Canadians for decades before the current high profile cases, it has come to light now in the context of increasing immigrant populations (481).

In the introduction to his 1996 play *Counter Offence*, Rahul Varma states that "there is pride to be had in fighting for a just cause, especially when the cause is ending racism or violence against women. But what if one has chosen to pit one genuine cause against another?" (i) This is the question he seeks to answer in writing the play. Varma creates a situation where ethnic minorities are caught in a heated public debate, and a crime of gender becomes an investigation into a crime of race.

The setting for *Counter Offence* is the trial of Sergeant Guy Galliard, a white police officer in Montreal, charged with the murder of a young Iranian man by the name of Shapoor Farhadi. The narrative weaves in and out of flashbacks, where various characters surrounding the incident illuminate their positions leading up to Shapoor's murder. Shapoor is found dead in a YMCA hostel room and is discovered by Galliard. Soon after, Shapoor's wife Shazia runs into the room and is horrified at the scene. But the audience is not made privy to the killer's identity, and Varma saves this detail for the

very end of the play. In the meantime, through flashbacks and confrontations between the characters, he builds dramatic tension and presents more than one possible culprit in Shapoor's murder. Further, he implicates each character in the conflict, ensuring that the audience hears various perspectives before the killer's identity is revealed.

Counter Offence tells the story of Shazia, the daughter of Indian immigrants living in Montreal. Shazia decides to marry an Iranian international student by the name of Shapoor, and their marriage soon takes on a dramatic turn when Shapoor exhibits his violent tendencies. He is under pressure from his family in Iran to start a carpet export business out of Montreal, which he does not want to operate because it would involve a lot of underhand dealings and illegal activities. He cannot, however, disobey his parents and is therefore stuck with an expensive set of carpets lying undeclared and unclaimed at the Montreal harbour. The pressure to start the business while also in a new marriage makes Shapoor's actions highly unpredictable and he begins to react violently towards Shazia. The violence happens in varying degrees, but after a few instances, Shazia reports her husband's behaviour and he comes under investigation by the police. Guy Galliard, the head of the domestic violence unit, is in charge of the case. Unfortunately, he is unable to keep Shapoor under arrest due to the lack of more evidence, since Shazia did not exhibit signs of physical abuse. Galliard, who was raised in a household where he witnessed domestic violence, is dedicated to his job and cannot stand the thought of Shapoor becoming violent again. He therefore roughs up the young man and verbally abuses him, making reference to Shapoor's ethnicity and place of birth, before his release. Galliard's fellow officer Gilles Prougault, who is the head of the police brotherhood, warns him against such outbursts of anger. Prougault sees that Shapoor

might become violent again, but does not condone Galliard's rough behaviour towards him.

Galliard's treatment of Shapoor becomes ultimately more important than the domestic violence itself, when a member of the race tribunal (a public interest group mandated to promote racial equality), Mr. Moolchand, arrives at the police station and accuses Galliard, and the criminal justice system at large, of being racist towards Shapoor. He takes responsibility for Shapoor and promises to combat the supposed racial injustice from the police department. With the political and social influence exercised by the race tribunal, Mr. Moolchand is able to intimidate the police officers and let them know the consequences of further targeting Shapoor.

By Shazia's side are Galliard, her parents, and a black woman who runs a centre for battered women named Clarinda Keith. They advise Shazia to cut ties with her husband, but she hesitates because it would likely result in his deportation. Clarinda, who has a zero-tolerance approach to domestic abuse, tries to convince Shazia to stand her ground and not interact with her husband despite his release. Shazia, however, eventually meets with Shapoor and he assaults her again. This time, he is locked up. But Moolchand, who fervently defends Shapoor's actions as driven by familial pressure and racial abuse, secures his release. Moolchand also sensationalizes the police's treatment of Shapoor and attracts enough media attention to warrant Galliard's removal from the domestic unit. He uses the platform of racial misconduct to promote his agenda of hiring more police officers of colour, and of ending police brutality towards ethnic populations in general. Increasingly frustrated by Moolchand's meddling and the public inquiries being faced by the police department, Prougault hatches a plan with Galliard to ensure Shapoor's quiet

exit from Canada. Shapoor, who is eager to get away from Shazia for fear of hurting her again, agrees to leave. Everyone is shocked at his sudden exit, especially Moolchand, who was beginning to gain immense public support for his cause. In a few months, however, Shapoor is revealed to be back in Montreal and staying at the YMCA. He contacts Shazia and asks her for forgiveness. Before Shazia has a chance to see him, Shapoor is shot dead in his room. In the final scene of *Counter Offence*, Varma discloses the identity of the murderer: infuriated at Shapoor's return and the likelihood of Moolchand restarting his public campaign against the police, Prougault takes justice into his own hands and kills the young Iranian at the centre of the play's conflict.

He uses rhetoric and claims that the police were unfairly detaining the young man simply because of the colour of his skin and the assumed backwardness of his values, because he was from Iran. Moolchand points out that if it were a white man being accused of domestic violence, they would have tried to settle the matter between the couple and followed a different course of action altogether, but because of Shapoor's colour, religion, and place of birth, the police is automatically more suspicious of him and they take advantage of Shapoor's fear of deportation. This changes the subject of *Counter Offence* from being about an incident of domestic violence to a larger conversation about systemic racism in Canada, and subsequently about the perception of ethnic otherness in Canadian society. Varma considers the implications of gendered violence in an ethnic context, and the kind of treatment such crimes receive when they happen in the majority culture. *Counter Offence* shows that when a man of colour is involved in a case of domestic violence, his ethnicity and assumed backward cultural values are immediately blamed. A white offender in a similar case would not, of course,

invite any blame on 'white' culture as a whole, but Shapoor's ethnic and religious otherness are looked upon by the police as causal factors in his treatment of Shazia. In highlighting this incongruity, Varma brings up the inherent biases held by the criminal justice system and society at large when it comes to assessing crimes committed by persons of colour. At the same time, Varma points to the complexity of dealing with criminals of colour, especially in a situation of domestic violence. He pits two forms of oppression against one another, namely patriarchy and racism, and explores the precarious nature of how a system that is embedded in both patriarchy and racism must navigate justice. In *Counter Offence*, the police are faced with a harsh dilemma: as an institution predominantly comprised of white males, what should they prioritize, the protection of women from violence or the protection of ethnic men from undue criminal investigation? Varma significantly ups the ante by concentrating this dilemma into one incident, and creates characters that respond in various and very conflicting ways to the questions at hand. In the end, these questions remain unanswered and become more entangled in controversy, so that the audience never truly knows which side the play lands on.

Police brutality and racism of the criminal justice system are currently sensational and fervently discussed topics in popular media. North America has earned a particular reputation regarding its police autonomy and blatant mistreatment of ethnic minorities. This includes Canada, where in the last several years several incidents have occurred involving the shootings or profiling of ethnic youth by police. Each city has its designated rough neighbourhoods, where significant police presence results in mistrust, arrests, and public confrontations between young people of colour and the police. In fact,

a survey conducted by the Commission on System Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System showed that in 1995, residents believed police engaged in racial profiling and treated minorities more harshly than the white public (Doob and Roberts 486). This perception is very important, and is often sensationalized by the media, meaning that officers may be on higher guard regarding how they are viewed. The lens of racism is now an established method of assessing police interactions with minorities.

In the play, Mr. Moolchand Misra is described as an "anti-racist activist". He is a member of the race tribunal and is very concerned with the culture of police brutality and the systemic racism of Canada's criminal justice process. Given the recent incidents in Montreal where young ethnic men were targeted and often became the victims of brutal assault from white police officers, Moolchand is conscious of the ways in which the system is not only biased but also violent against persons of colour. His commitment throughout the play is to hold the police accountable at every step of their process, while he remains vigilant about their conduct when handling the case involving Shazia and Shapoor. From the moment Shapoor involves Moolchand in the case, he arrives with considerable authority into the situation and asserts his influence in front of the police officers. Moolchand is unafraid of the white officers and does not let their actions go unquestioned. He is a conduit of the race tribunal and drives the issue of Shapoor's ethnicity to the spotlight with every chance he gets. Further, Moolchand has the support of the media behind him, since police brutality and unfair treatment of ethnic persons are hot button subjects and receive considerable media coverage. As expected, the police officers are wary of him for good reason; negative press would immediately bring controversy to the police department and they must therefore be very sensitive in their

handling of Shapoor's case. Moolchand uses this to his advantage and constantly intervenes in the police department's actions, by reminding them that the public is watching them closely. Given the recent background of brutality against ethnic youth, head of the police brotherhood Prougault and arresting officer Galliard are on their guard, negotiating their distaste for Moolchand's involvement with the fear of coming under fire from the media.

Noble as his intentions may seem, Moolchand is quite the opportunist in his approach to the Shapoor case. Varma writes him as a shrewd, politically minded individual who only cares about dragging the issue of race into every conversation in the play. Very rarely does Moolchand show empathy towards any of the characters, and he is more interested in antagonizing the police than actually seeing Shapoor brought to justice for assaulting Shazia. He openly distrusts the police and speaks in a confrontational manner with them, and treats Galliard and Prougault not as individuals but as a unit of white police officers, none of who are worthy of his respect. At the beginning of scene four, Varma establishes this antagonistic relationship between Moolchand and the police:

> *The police station. PROUGAULT is busy completing a file. MOOLCHAND enters, and waits for PROUGAULT to acknowledge him.*
>
> PROUGAULT Can I help you?
>
> MOOLCHAND If you don't mind helping a coloured man? (Varma *Counter Offence 10)*

This is an unprovoked response from Moolchand, and he establishes an air of distrust by using racial rhetoric from the very outset. I understand Moolchand's suspicion of police authority, which is likely grounded in his experience of the dominant culture's moralistic character that fears and thus disciplines the non-white Other (Gordon 59). As the scene progresses, he continues to bring up the fact that Prougault is white and Shapoor is an

'other', and how that might look suspicious to the public. Prougault seems genuinely taken aback by this confrontational behaviour, and does not engage Moolchand in further conversation about race. When Shapoor enters, Moolchand chides him for slapping Shazia and lets him know that landing up in jail was his own fault. Moolchand openly condemns the act of domestic violence and makes it known that he cannot help Shapoor due to the nature of his actions. However, when Shapoor begins to cry out of desperation, Moolchand very quickly changes track and asks him pointedly if the arresting officer had assaulted him or behaved roughly in any way (Varma *Counter Offence* 14). Shapoor, who is surprised by the question, does not know what to say but Moolchand whispers, "Did he make the crime you committed the fault of your race or your culture?" and further offering, "Did the cop treat you in the same way he would have treated, …say, … a white person?" (15). It becomes clear that Shapoor had barely considered the words of officer Galliard to be problematic, but Moolchand, by injecting the rhetoric of racial injustice, shapes the incident into a matter of police brutality. Even when Shapoor admits to his volatility, telling Moolchand that he should, in fact, be locked up, Moolchand encourages him to blame the police officer:

> Do you know what that fucking cop did to you? Do you think the officer really cares for your wife? Look, my neighbour, a white guy, got drunk and made pulp out of his wife before passing out. The cop tells her, "Call us when he wakes up." Why didn't the cop arrest him? ... That cop had nothing to gain by arresting one of his own tribesmen. It is only when they find someone "different" they get all dutiful. (25)

Moolchand crafts the narrative of inequality and oppression by relying on the history of similar incidents. Shapoor seems aware enough to understand that his own actions were responsible for his arrest, but Moolchand absolves him of the crime by recasting the

incident into one of unfair arrest. This language is Varma's way of challenging the audience's opinions; is it true that Galliard arrested and was harsh with Shapoor because he is a man of colour? Is this how white officers behave as a rule, and how does that reflect the attitudes of Canadian society at large? These are questions of perception mixed with facts, and are therefore contentious.

Even though Shapoor's case does not fit the mold of police brutality, in that he was not physically assaulted or shot without cause, Moolchand ensures that Shapoor is released on the grounds of unfair treatment. He intimidates the police with his rhetoric and threatens them with the potential of this case turning into a full-fledged inquiry into police behaviour. Further, he encourages Shapoor to feel victimized by the police and presents Canadian authorities as singularly interested in either his arrest or deportation. There is no attempt to reconcile the police's intent with their behaviour; Moolchand's agenda is to deepen the divide and distrust between minorities and the justice system, as a way of holding the latter accountable to the public. He nearly ignores the guilt of his client Shapoor and diverts the audience's attention with compelling arguments against police brutality. Moolchand thus successfully takes the spotlight away from the issue of domestic violence and redirects it to the problem of institutional racism.

On the other hand, Moolchand raises a few important concerns in *Counter Offence* that challenge the systemic racism against non-whites in Canada. He sees the Shapoor case as an opportunity to create dialogue about police brutality, and speaks out against the police's treatment of minorities. I subsequently view this as Varma's opportunity to engage an intracultural discussion within his audience; Moolchand's character pits ethnic minorities against the predominantly white police system and speaks

directly to the audience about the politics of inhabiting a common space. Moolchand then appeals to the audience's assumed commitment to multicultural harmony and equal representation. His primary suggestion is to add persons of colour to the police force in greater numbers, so that they might help change the culture of oppression in the justice system. Moolchand contends that police officers belonging to various minority cultures would have more empathy towards people like Shapoor and would not be as quick to aggression with their coloured suspects. He also cites the multicultural and multiethnic vision of Canada as a reason for having more police officers of colour. In a speech, he talks about equal opportunity and representation for all Canadians, quoting the Auditor General of Canada's statistics to prove that employment access for minorities was still very limited (Varma *Counter Offence* 37).

While racism and police brutality are valid targets of public activism, Moolchand's blatant opportunistic approach is designed to expose his questionable ethics. Varma creates the character of Moolchand to hold the white police officers in the play accountable, but his excessive and divisive politics are a way for Varma to implicate the audience in the cultural confrontations of the play. Canadian multiculturalism would promote the undoing of oppressive racial hierarchies, which arguably Moolchand is most interested in. Yet the discomfort arises when this character seems to ignore the evidence and embellishes the oppressive relationship between the white police officers and Shapoor. He aggressively pits the justice system against ethnic minorities in a way that is ultimately not productive or conducive to dialogue; in fact, Moolchand's rhetoric is solely responsible for creating animosity between the officers and Shapoor. His identity politics ultimately backfire when it is revealed that the dismissal of Galliard and acquittal

of Shapoor builds such hatred in Prougault that he shoots the young Iranian in an attempt to finally bring justice against a wife beater.

At the very end of the play, Moolchand makes his return to the topic of systemic racism and in his final speech, lays out the subjective experience of being a person of colour in Canada. He cites his personal journey as an immigrant, having been removed from a teaching position he was fully qualified for simply because of his foreign accent. Moolchand invites the audience to understand his motivations behind being such an ardent advocate of racial equality in Canada, and Varma perhaps tries to redeem this character for the audience in an attempt to engage their critical perspectives further. Moolchand explains his position on the Shapoor case:

> We still need more coloured police on the force. Let's not forget, the man shouldn't have hit his wife, and I didn't know the answer to his problem! But that didn't give a police officer the right to bully him racially. It is as simple as that. I still don't feel safe in their company. If my car stops at a red light and I see a cop car, I want him to notice that I have broken *no* law because I know the cops are in the habit of prejudging us as law violators. (69)

Here, he once again condemns the crime itself, but brings the focus back to the issue of police brutality. Shapoor was indeed a criminal, but Moolchand relies on conjecture and suggests that the police would not have treated him roughly if he had been white. The statement that follows is, however, at the heart of *Counter Offence*'s narrative on race: inequality exists at the level of perception itself, and that is where it must be remedied. If the 'system' or Canadian culture at large prejudges minorities and persons of colour as being less trustworthy, less educated, more backward, then they have a greater likelihood of treating them unequally. In order to combat the history of racial inequality and colonialism in Canada, the change has to begin at the level of everyday interactions, and

minorities must feel safe and assured that at least those trusted with their safety, namely the police and the justice system, have their best interests in mind. For Moolchand, the only way this could happen is if more persons of colour are added to the police force. On a larger scale, he is arguing for more equal opportunity across society for minorities.

After all that has happened in *Counter Offence*, Moolchand's character is ambiguous at best. Rahul Varma challenges the audience to weigh Moolchand's motivations and to decide whether or not he is justified in defending Shapoor so aggressively. Moolchand is established as a character that is interested in improving inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relationships in Canada, so that ultimately everyone may live freely and equally; by critiquing the system so persistently, he hopes to change it. Moolchand is also sure to declare his Canadian patriotism, commenting that he is harsh on the justice system not because he is ungrateful, but because he would like his children to grow up in a Canada where they could feel completely safe regardless of the colour of their skin (Varma *Counter Offence* 1).

Varma writes the character of Clarinda Keith, a social worker who runs a centre for battered women, to create an intersectional understanding of oppression in *Counter Offence*. She also serves as a strong oppositional voice to Moolchand's divisive racial politics, and her position on the matter is instantly more legitimate because she is a black woman. Clarinda becomes sergeant Galliard's most ardent defender, and goes head-to-head with Moolchand in court to prove that the officer was justified in his treatment of Shapoor. She is not intimidated by Moolchand's racial rhetoric, maintaining that as a social worker she is committed to the protection of women's rights and thus her primary concern in this situation was Shazia's safety, not Shapoor's ethnicity. Clarinda has a very

clear approach—her policy on domestic violence is one of zero tolerance, and she therefore advises Shazia to sever all ties with her husband, even if that means his deportation. All would have gone according to plan if it weren't for Moolchand's intervention in the matter, and Shazia would have been able to continue living without fear of being harassed or beaten. This angers Clarinda and she comes to Galliard's defense, believing him to be an honest officer who was doing his duty to protect a woman from her violent partner. She also does not appreciate an incident of domestic violence being ignored and overshadowed by a sensationalized story about race; as a black woman, she knows racism first-hand, but she does not see Shapoor's arrest as anything but a consequence of his abusive actions. Clarinda presents a counter stance to Moolchand's opportunism and asks the audience to dismiss his claims of racism in Shapoor's case. When Galliard defends himself, the audience might remain suspicious of him, but when Clarinda endorses him, this adds a layer of complexity to the audience's perception of the issue at hand. In a situation wrought with so many inter-cultural conflicts and negotiations, should a black woman be defending a white man's actions? This is the playwright's challenge to the audience in writing Clarinda's character.

The most compelling scene that Varma writes in *Counter Offence* is an argument and confrontation between Clarinda and Moolchand. The audience is presented with two very different viewpoints on the case, but both come from articulate minority voices. This allows for a multiplicity of 'ethnic' experiences in Canada, and helps to debunk the perception that all minorities are somehow the same, or that they hold consistent ideas about racism. In their dramatic face-off, Moolchand and Clarinda reveal very different approaches and priorities in the case of Shazia and Shapoor, which creates a very tense

grey area for the audience's critical opinions to navigate. Regardless of which side they may land on, Varma certainly complicates our understanding of the situation and once again presents positions that counter one another (hence the title *Counter Offence*), in order to generate a more diverse narrative about the realities of race and ethnicity in Canada.

In scene seven, Moolchand arrives at Clarinda's office to ask for her help in preventing Shapoor's deportation. He insists that Shapoor is "a good man with so much potential. I know right now that he can't control his rage, but he needs our help. He can't get help if he is thrown out. What I am saying is—us, the East Indians, the Africans, the Chinese—you know—people like you and me—If we are to survive, we must be united." (Varma *Counter Offence* 28). He appeals to Clarinda's position as a fellow minority, and solidifies the us/them binary, noting that not only are all minorities the same class of people, but have a responsibility towards each other in combatting systemic racism. This viewpoint arises from the commonality of experiencing racism, so that while Clarinda and Moolchand may support different causes, they both know what it is like to be discriminated against by Canadian society. Clarinda refuses to engage with this offer, however, and maintains that "nobody's culture equals torture" and the reason for Shapoor's current situation was his violent act, not his cultural background (28). She also emphasizes the double standard of Moolchand's appeal—he has been passionately defending Shapoor because he is "one of us", but ignoring Shazia who is East Indian. Moolchand is willing put a fellow minority in harms way for the sake of making a statement against racism. He tries to justify this to Clarinda by repeatedly saying that Shapoor is innocent and merely confused, and that deportation was not the peaceful

solution he would hope for in this situation. He also considers it Shazia's responsibility to forgive her husband and allow him a chance for retribution. Clarinda points out the problematic and patriarchal nature of such a request, where the woman is expected to forgive and forget, perhaps at the expense of her own safety. This causes Moolchand to become more accusatory, claiming that Shazia "provokes the hell out of" her husband (29). If Clarinda had any empathy for Moolchand's request, it disappears after this statement, as she sees the victim-blaming mentality that he promotes.

Finally, Moolchand pulls out his final weapon, an inquiry into Galliard's behaviour, with the claim that his treatment of Shapoor was racially motivated assault. Clarinda is in disbelief because she knows Galliard to be an upstanding officer without whose help Shazia would have been worse off. She also accuses Moolchand of changing the subject, noting that racism was not even remotely the issue at hand, to which he replies, "Right here in Montreal eight coloured men have been shot dead by the officers and you want to tell me the officers aren't racist?" (30). Clarinda remains defiant and says that while systemic racism is a problem, Galliard is not a racist. In fact, she would serve as an expert witness at the inquiry in his favour. This infuriates Moolchand, and he berates Clarinda, "Bravo! Bravo. A black woman, turned activist, turned expert, turned witness for a racist cop! I hate to say it, but there is something wrong with a person who doesn't stand by her own community… it's sad that you are doing this country's dirty work" (30-31). This is a complete shift from the beginning of the scene, where Moolchand was hoping for some sort of agreement with Clarinda based on their mutual "otherness", but now he blatantly accuses her of perpetuating racism in Canada, and even becoming an embarrassment to minorities by the doing the bidding of white authorities.

From an audience's perspective, this attitude is very important to examine because it politicizes inter-cultural conflict, and argues that white culture is fundamentally at odds with all minorities in Canada and their differences are irreconcilable, meaning that the only way forward is if minorities band together and dissent against their oppressors. While Clarinda seems to argue that one cannot read racism into all inter-cultural encounters, Moolchand thinks the opposite and claims racism to be at the heart of Canadian society. Both characters are strong and established as figures of authority in the play, so it becomes necessary for the audience to weigh the legitimacy of their views. Further, given that they are characters of colour and know the experience of racism in Canada, why are their priorities so different and what might that say about the plurality of multicultural discourse in society? Is it beneficial for minorities to argue amongst themselves about the realities of racism, or is this a mere mechanism to create division between them so the racist system can carry on without being significantly threatened? Moolchand certainly seems to think so, while Clarinda argues for a more pluralistic and case-by-case approach when examining racism. She further disagrees with essentialism that Moolchand dwells on, and considers it problematic to reduce all persons to the colour of their skin or the otherness of their culture. Such an attitude, in addition to creating animosity towards the dominant culture, also serves to erase intersectional concerns including entrenched societal violence against women.

At the heart of *Counter Offence*'s intraculturalism is this intersectionality, and Varma creates a dialogue between competing oppressions to make the audience aware of their tense coexistence against the majority culture. The most poignant representation of this conflict is in the character of Shazia. Not only is she a victim of abuse, she is also a

Muslim woman of South Asian background. Perhaps intentionally, Shazia's voice appears to be the feeblest in *Counter Offence*. While the characters around her are very strong and opinionated, she is often led from scene-to-scene by them and only expresses her predicament a few times. I argue that this is Varma's attempt at highlighting her oppression: as an abused woman of colour in Canada. Shazia's voice is scarcely heard on its own all the while she must rely on more empowered figures (most notably Galliard, a white man) to fight for her cause. Shazia also becomes an easy target for Moolchand's divisive rhetoric, when he tries to tarnish her reputation in order to make Shapoor look better in the eyes of the public. In fact, Shazia truthfully has the most power in the play because she can divorce her husband and have him deported, bringing a decisive end to his abuse. But, as a result of her social reality, namely the reputation she must uphold as an honorable woman in her community, Shazia is unable to exercise this power effectively.

There is a crucial exchange between Shazia and Shapoor, however, which allows Shazia to express her understanding of predicament. This is an opportunity for the audience to see that she is not merely a docile victim, but that she is self-aware about the limitations placed on her empowerment by society. In scene ten, Shazia faces off with Shapoor and explains to him why he must be deported. She berates him for involving Moolchand in their dispute, since Moolchand has attacked her integrity publicly and caused her to look like "a barhopping slut who has no respect for family values" (42). Shazia stands firm in her resolve to question her husband's motives behind asking to delay the divorce, and insists that she does not want to sponsor his parents' immigration to Canada. Despite Shazia's firmness, however, the scene ends badly for her as Shapoor

loses his temper yet again and assaults her. This moment of empowerment followed by a terrible reversal is a way for Varma to highlight Shazia's oppression. By juxtaposing her intellectual empowerment as a woman of colour with the harsh violence that follows, the audience may be shocked into developing a fresh understanding of the intersections between gendered and racial inequalities. In the theatre, this may allow audiences to critically cross-examine their perceptions of gender and minority cultures not as separate entities, but as objects of simultaneous subjugation by the dominant culture in Canada. The intraculturalism brought on by intersectionality in *Counter Offence* opens up a critical space for audiences to analyze the experiences of women of colour in our society.

Representing Canada's 'dominant culture' in *Counter Offence* is Sergeant Guy Galliard, the archetypal police hardworking police officer who takes his job very seriously. He arrests Shapoor the moment Shazia launches her complaint and ensures that he is kept in lockup for as long as possible. When Shapoor tries to argue his way out of lockup, Galliard reacts harshly and talks down to him, threatening the use of force. He also sarcastically insults the young man, asking him if he wanted to go back home to "a a i r a n" (Varma *Counter Offence* 3). When Shapoor expresses how insulted he feels by the sergeant's behaviour, Galliard further reprimands him. Throughout the play, this attitude presents itself time and again to make the audience wonder whether or not his treatment of Shapoor is indeed racially motivated. The fact that he is a white officer dealing with an ethnic man in a rough way, especially when Shapoor appears very repentant and almost in tears, begs the question: would Galliard have treated a white offender in the same way, or does his suspicion of the young Iranian have more to do with preconceptions about his culture, religion, and essential otherness? In a conversation

with Prougault, Galliard reveals his hatred of Shapoor, comparing men like him to pimps and child molesters (3). He even ignores the lack of evidence to lay assault charges, against Prougault's recommendation, who advised that Shapoor be charged merely with disorderly conduct given that Shazia had no physical signs of abuse. In the next scene, Galliard is very supportive of Shazia and confirms her husband will not be let out. We see that he clearly lands on the side of the abused, and that Shazia's safety is his primary concern. Galliard is thus established as protector of women's rights and a dutiful officer, albeit a little rough in his speech and questionable in his implementation of the law.

In an attempt to further assert Galliard's dedication to his profession, Varma crafts a speech where Galliard addresses the judge at the trial for Shapoor's murder. The fact that he is the primary accused in this case provides Galliard an opportunity to speak to his motivations and convince the judge of his good character. In doing so, Galliard asks the audience not to write him off as a racist white man. He explains the background of domestic violence in his family, which fuels his desire to punish men like Shapoor:

> I remember when my dad got mad, my mom got beat up. He kicked the door, ripped the phone out of the wall, threw food and pulled big handfuls of her hair. My dad was 6 feet, 300 pounds. When he got started, my brother ran to pull the curtains and I hid behind the door with my hands over my ears and my eyes closed. My mother died and everybody believed it was in her sleep. *(Pause)* So when I see someone beat his woman, part of me says, send him to hell. Is that racist Judge? (34)

Here, Galliard sheds light on his past and invites the audience to look at men like Shapoor from his perspective. He admits his flaw, but provides an explanation for his behaviour. Galliard states earlier in the play, "I am not a racist—I treat all wife beaters equally," and reasserts this position of colour-blind justice through his speech. If the

audience is convinced by Galliard's argument, Varma quickly ensures that we reconsider our position, by revealing another layer to the police officer's character. Just as Galliard finishes his speech, the scene transitions into a flashback where he uses some very dubious language surrounding the Shapoor case.

When Moolchand is successful in creating an inquiry into Galliard's behaviour, charging him with racial misconduct, Galliard becomes extremely defensive and begins to reveal his hidden biases against persons of colour and minorities. In scene nine, Prougault informs Galliard of the charges against him and says he had tried to warn Galliard that such behaviour could get him into trouble (34). Galliard is unwilling to accept any blame, saying that all cops use foul language in their everyday interactions with criminals. He instead focuses on how this story had been sensationalized by the media with help from Moolchand. He also resorts to name-calling, referring to Moolchand as "Currichand" and to Shapoor as "that Iranian bastard" (35). Galliard goes on to say that "maybe it'd be better if I just killed the guy instead of calling him an Iranian" (36) and makes more comments about how cultural minorities blame all their woes on white people. This paints a very different picture of Galliard than what we have seen thus far. Galliard uses language that is very insensitive to diversity and multiculturalism, and displays his privileged position in Canadian society as a white male who has the added advantage of being an enforcer of the law. It certainly casts a new perspective on his character, and his blasé attitude towards issues of race is troubling because one would expect more sophistication and nuance from a man who implements the charter of rights. Until now, Galliard was a dedicated police officer who was rough around the edges, but after revealing the resentment he harbours towards Moolchand and

Shapoor, and perhaps ethnic populations in general, it is less clear whether or not his behaviour was racially motivated. Varma adds this complexity to our perception of Galliard arguably because he wants to counterbalance the aggressive opportunism of Moolchand, so that the audience does not absolve Galliard of his questionable actions in Shapoor's case. The playwright also reminds the audience that despite Galliard's sense of duty and dedication to protecting women, he is ultimately a product of his white privilege and belongs to a culture that systemically oppresses people of colour.

Prougault is the greatest anomaly in *Counter Offence* because he does not necessarily have a dire investment in the narrative but ultimately becomes the most important character in the play. He is the one who murders Shapoor when the young man returns from Iran to reconcile with his wife. Throughout the play, Prougault is only peripherally involved in the action and his role is limited to observing Galliard's behaviour and being on the receiving end of Moolchand's smear campaign. He even reprimands Galliard's rough behaviour and use of racially insensitive language. But as the plot unfolds and Moolchand gets further with his inquiries and manages to keep Shapoor from justice despite his increasingly abusive behaviour, Prougault begins to see the injustice of the situation. He feels ashamed that the police department is being slandered by the media and officers cannot be free to do their job for fear of judgment as 'racist'. He flares at Shapoor, "You beat your wife, didn't you? Is that fair? You assaulted a woman and I have to treat you better than the Prime Minister?" (66). The inquiry also reflects badly on Prougault's position as head of the Police brotherhood, adding to his animosity towards Shapoor and Moolchand. In fact, in order to ensure his reelection and to silence the entire case, Prougault becomes the one to arrange Shapoor's quiet exit out

of Canada. He colludes with Galliard and uses illegal methods to send Shapoor to India, so that the inquiry would fail and all the charges of racism against their department would be dropped. Galliard even warns Prougault against this action, but he is convinced that the situation is already unjust enough, and the only practical way to end the inquiry and stop Moolchand's interference is to make Shapoor disappear. From being the more upstanding police officer, Prougault is now a 'dirty cop' and the unending accusations of racism have pushed him over the edge. He simply wants the police force to feel free in doing their duty to the citizens and not mindful of surveillance from people like Moolchand, who was out to sensationalize any action by the police as racist. Does his ultimate action in the play confirm Prougault's racism? Or can his desperation and defense of the criminal justice system be the object of empathy? Varma leaves the audience to ponder these difficult questions among several others raised throughout.

Having engaged in an analysis of the characters in *Counter Offence*, it is clear that Rahul Varma seeks to pose some very uncomfortable questions to the audience. There are no easy answers when considering issues such as police brutality and racism, and indeed, what happens when one just cause (anti-racism) takes the spotlight away from another (tackling domestic violence). Varma cleverly constructs a situation where multiple societal conflicts collide, and in doing so the audience is able to see a much more complex version of the Canadian multicultural mosaic than is generally accepted. This play opens up a dialogue about the true nature of inter-cultural interactions. They are not always peaceful or friendly, and rather can become a site of extreme and violent differences. *Counter Offence* thus becomes a profoundly intracultural play: the characters represent their various socio-culturally motivated viewpoints and interact/conflict against

the backdrop of a racially-charged incident, which mirrors the tensions that abound when different cultures inhabit the mutual space of Canada.

Chapter Three: *Bhopal* and Globalization: Who Benefits?

While *Counter Offence* tackles the social realities of conflict between cultures in Canadian society, Rahul Varma's most influential play to date, *Bhopal* (2001), goes further and implicates the audience in global networks of unequal inter-cultural exchanges. *Bhopal* demonstrates Varma's evolution as a playwright and is an ambitious exercise in intraculturalism; he removes the plot from Canadian society to another part of the world without letting the audience become distanced from the intracultural implications of the play. Varma grounds the play in an incident from history, the 1984 gas disaster in Bhopal, India, which claimed thousands of lives and affected the health of generations to come. This incident serves as a chilling reminder that in today's globalized world where Western values (including freedom, equality, and human rights) are becoming increasingly accepted, the oppression of non-Western peoples continues uninhibitedly. Varma's dramatization of the incident emphasizes this oppression, and exposes the nature of unequal exchange between the West and the 'rest'. When presented to a Canadian audience, *Bhopal* does more than reenact the events of that night in a populous slum of central India. By showcasing the complex interactions and negotiations that took place leading up to and following the event, Varma brings neocolonial relationships between the 'West' and its Indian dependents to the forefront. The gas disaster serves as the setting for various characters, with their unique positionalities, to express their diverse views and complicate our understanding of the event itself. The play features characters of different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds: a slum-dwelling Indian woman, a French Canadian female doctor, a non-resident Indian businessman, an Indian politician, and more. Each is represented in a way that allows the

play to ask important questions about the nature of cultural and economic exchange between India and neocolonial western powers.

Despite its setting outside the boundaries of Canada and indeed the West, *Bhopal* is a profoundly intracultural play in its storytelling because it "identifies a creative dialogue between various cultural traditions simultaneously co-existing within a single geographical locale," which in this case is the city of Bhopal (Meerzon 84). The culture of Western-led globalized development interacts and conflicts with local Indian culture and the process of negotiations between the two forms the central action of *Bhopal.* Varma's unique positionality as an immigrant Indo-Canadian staging this play for a Canadian audience adds a layer of cultural reflexivity, which allows him to place the local and global in the same performative space and generate a new understanding of cross-cultural exchange (Bharucha *'The Onion'* 116). He asks his audience to grapple with the politics of cultural interactions in Bhopal, and then to consider their own contribution to the culture of globalization that ultimately led to the disastrous events of 1984. *Bhopal* is an essential exercise in intracultural theatre practice.

What follows is a discussion primarily about the potency of language as an instrument for neocolonialism, Varma's recognition of this fact, and his clever use of characters and language in *Bhopal* to unravel the nuances of power in neocolonial encounters. This play presents a Canadian audience with some harsh truths about the ways in which they might be complicit with a regime of power that relies on the ruthless exploitation of people in the third world.

The night of December 2nd, 1984 was one that changed the lives of thousands in the crowded city of Bhopal, central India. The American owned Union Carbide pesticide

plant, heralded as the sign of progress in Bhopal, became the site of disaster after a lethal gas leak killed over eight thousand people in its immediate surroundings. Several thousands died in the following weeks as the poisonous clouds drifted through the city and contaminants remained in the water supply (Sarangi 47). The exact death toll has never been arrived upon, given the magnitude and variety of effects triggered by the leak, but Bhopal has accurately been termed the "largest peacetime gas chamber in history" (Varma *Introduction* iii). The survivors of the disaster were perhaps even worse off, with over 120,000 people suffering from severe ailments caused directly by exposure to the gas. Most died slowly and painfully over the next few years. The impact continues to be felt today, and Bhopal has been in a constant state of reconstruction. The generation of survivors has passed on genetic defects to its successors, meaning the tragedy of 1984 lives on in the population. Reduced vision, cancer, and respiratory, neurological and gynaecological disorders are commonly observed (Verdecchia v). Exactly thirty-one years since the disaster, there has been little relief and rehabilitation for the people affected, and the city of Bhopal continues to feel the aftershocks of the poisonous gas leak. There is no time in the foreseeable future that the city will be completely healed from this incredibly unfortunate and completely preventable disaster.

In a rather stinging criticism of the events of 1984, Ward Morehouse asserts the following:

> Bhopal was not an accident. It was a disaster waiting to happen. It is also a textbook case of corporate failure to meet even the most minimal standards of proper social performance… Outright killing of people is a crime everywhere in the world, and in any "civilized" social order human safety must take precedence over conventional criteria of economic performance… But exactly the reverse occurred in Bhopal. (Morehouse 479)

It is curious, however, that this event is seldom viewed as a direct consequence of criminal negligence on the part of a multinational corporation. Instead, it is treated as a tragedy, which vacates the event of a perpetrator and dilutes bureaucratic responsibility in creating conditions for the mishap to occur. The overwhelming media rhetoric from the time, and in the years since, focuses on how Bhopal was a one-off, unfortunate incident, and allows the larger questions of culpability and treatment of third world lives to fade into the background. The intensely tragic nature of this event was emphasized, with hyperbolic headlines such as "This has been our Hiroshima" and the repeated speculation of death tolls (Fishlock, *The Times*, 1984). Many media outlets lauded Union Carbide's financial pledges to the victims of Bhopal, and one article even describes chairman Warren Anderson as "an unassuming, outgoing and warm person who has been a company man nearly all his working life" (Ali and Morris 1984). The negligence on the part of Union Carbide was only mildly investigated, which can be attributed in part to the well-established narratives of Western-led progress already perpetuated in India at the time. To demonize a Western corporation could perhaps create an environment of hostility towards all foreign investors, a scenario that a developing country could simply not afford to recover from. Thus Union Carbide and its leaders never faced criminal charges, and went back to the United States after settling with the Indian government for meagre compensation to the affected families. The American corporation wrapped up its operations soon after, never to return to India. The loss of business was the only disastrous outcome for Union Carbide and its investors (Jasanoff 346). Carbide was briefly tried in the Indian legal system, but never stood trial in the United States; the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India even said, "It is my opinion that these cases

must be pursued in the United States… It is the only hope these unfortunate people have" (qtd. in Prince 577). On the other end, Judge Keenan of the New York District Court (rather ironically, I note) invoked the concern for American imperialism, and maintained that India was more than capable of meting out justice for the victims of Bhopal through its own legal system (Prince 577). Between a shifting of responsibility from one country to another, the affected citizens of Bhopal were left behind and Union Carbide suffered minimal consequences. Why did the Indian government and the international community fail to hold Union Carbide responsible for its criminal negligence? And why were they allowed to employ a toxic production method that poisoned Bhopal and its residents well before the gas leak occurred? The answer lies in the deeply entrenched binary of East/West and the inherently unequal balance of power it perpetuates. Arising from a history of colonialism by territorial domination, this binary now asserts its influence by primarily economic and cultural methods. The incident in Bhopal provides a stark reminder that the politics of global capitalism can strongly undermine the discourse and practice of democracy, and that ultimately, some lives hold more value than others.

Bhopal tackles this issue and holds the very logic of globalization accountable for the fateful events of Bhopal. Varma dramatizes the days leading up to December 2nd in the microcosm of the Union Carbide slum (the area around the plant, occupied by squatters and illegal homes), and comments on the deliberate negligence from both the multinational corporation and the local government in forecasting this disaster. The signs environmental degradation and poisoning were evident months ahead of the gas leak, and were conveniently ignored as peripheral clutter in the enlightened path towards economic development. Bhopal was the globalized converging point of East and West, a place

where both could find symbiotic growth and forge the way for future equality. Not long after the plant had been set up, however, were changes in the local population becoming very apparent. Industrial waste polluted the only water supply, and they began to show signs of illness and deformity, especially among newborn babies. Cattle and other household animals began to die in significant numbers, so that the locals lost vital sources of income and slid further into poverty. When they brought their concerns to the leaders, they were paid paltry sums to compensate for losses and asked to continue working towards a brighter future. The national excitement around economic development and globalization ensured that even the most oppressed in the population were able to overlook their suffering.

Bhopal questions this air of enthusiasm and the discourse of progress, revealing the workings of a neoliberal system that relied on the reestablishment of economic colonialism. The people of Bhopal were being directly controlled by an increasingly transnational framework of economic power, which was concentrated in American corporations, and relied on the exploitation of labour and ecosystems in the Third World. The neocolonial implications of Union Carbide's presence in Bhopal went unquestioned, because the national discourse focused on the potential for economic development, which was viewed as inherently good.. Varma's play confronts contemporary Canadian audiences with this disaster in order to invite a critique of globalization itself, while *Bhopal* serves as a disturbing reminder that the process of economic integration is inherently neocolonial, and wrought with inequalities that further oppress disadvantaged populations in the Third World.

Varma skillfully employs language and characters in *Bhopal* to engage such a critique of globalization. He is conscious of the way the top-down language of progress is employed by neocolonial powers to influence local leaders, who then convince the masses that they have everything to gain by the expansion of multinationals. Language thus becomes the main tool of oppression in *Bhopal*, and facilitates a willful collusion between the locals and the corporations to abandon ethical practices in the name of economic development for all. The microcosm of the Union Carbide slum is an example of the success found in propagating neoliberal economics. Without the direct presence of 'foreigners', the slum dwellers rely on local business and government leaders, who deliberately ignore the signs of oncoming disaster because they are convinced Union Carbide can only have a positive impact on the community. *Bhopal* exposes the complicity of Indians in the creation of a dangerous investment climate, where the health and wellbeing of the masses is overlooked for fear of losing foreign investment. Neocolonialism manifests itself in the attitude of wealthy Indians towards the suffering of the poor in their immediate surroundings, because they are able to compartmentalize their empathy to focus on maintaining a good relationship with the American corporation. As the leaders are essentially accountable to their 'bosses' in the West, they cannot allow the local population to resist the negative effects of Union Carbide in the city. They are aware that the masses must remain depoliticized, so that the corporation is not tempted to explore other national markets to invest in. They know the importance of presenting the economy as lucrative, socially stable and free from barriers to trade at a huge environmental and human cost.

The two local figures presented in *Bhopal* are Devraj Sarthi, the CEO of Union Carbide India, and Chief Minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh, Jaganlal Bhandari. The two men have various interests in mind, which conflict at some points and come together at others. These dynamic characters are singularly convinced that the presence of Union Carbide in Bhopal will be of benefit to the underprivileged masses living in the slums. They approach the operation of this multinational from their unique political and economic positions. While Devraj is a thorough businessman, Jaganlal is the archetypal opportunistic politician. They are both accountable to higher levels of authority and must implement globalization with utmost efficiency in this community, so that their superiors in the United States and in the Indian government are able to remain profitable. Neither man is unaffected by the suffering of the masses, seeing as they must interact with them on a daily basis. Yet Devraj and Jaganlal place their personal goals ahead of the community that they claim to be serving, and continue to exploit the slum dwellers. They are able to reconcile the ill effects of Union Carbide's presence in Bhopal by preaching progress to the people, and presenting them with small compensations to quell their doubts regarding the process of development. In the conversations between the two leaders, they always recognize themselves as higher than the people of Bhopal, with the responsibility of bringing globalized enlightenment to these people who were not capable of understanding the eventual benefit of hosting a multinational corporation in their community. Devraj and Jaganlal are aware of how the people are slowly being poisoned, but choose to focus their attention on how best to create more jobs and better housing, and ultimately attract even more investment from the Americans. They believe that while the community may be sick at present, it is only because the problem of poverty has

remained unresolved. It is poverty, not the expansion of Union Carbide, which is to blame for the people's condition. Once the corporation becomes even more established in the city, it is guaranteed to lift the masses out of their suffering by providing jobs and raising the standard of living. In effect, the only solution to the present decay in Bhopal is creating conditions for aggressive expansion and increased foreign investment.

It does not occur to Devraj or Jaganlal that there may be an inherent flaw in the plan, or that the health risks faced by the slum dwellers are a direct result of the poisonous activities of Union Carbide. They are witness to the bodily damage and disfigurement among the locals and their newborn babies, but suggest that better healthcare and more favourable living conditions, both to be facilitated by increased foreign investment, will solve the problem. These two central characters in *Bhopal* are employed by Rahul Varma to demonstrate the kind of simultaneously explicit and tacit consent encouraged by the process of globalization. The leaders voluntarily undermine the well being of their own people in favour of personal advancement while being convinced of eventual benefit to the community. Jaganlal and Devraj are autonomous figures in their own right, and are considerably well educated, yet lack the critical intent to resist the systems of power that govern them. This does not mean, however, that the two men are in any way ignorant of the perils brought on by globalization. They are intelligent men who choose to overlook the obvious signs of socio-economic and environmental degradation in their city. Far from being victims or puppets of neoliberal powers, Jaganlal and Devraj are willful participants in the creation of an oppressive neocolonial 'empire'. They speak in generalities about hope and progress, promote the

erasure of resistant discourses and most importantly, implement the plan of global integration charted out in the boardrooms of the West.

Devraj Sarthi is the quintessential NRI, or Non-Resident Indian. He received his higher education in the United States, where he remained for several years until deciding to return to India as a representative of his American employer. He is a hard working individual, and has embraced the Western values of rationalism, capitalism and utilitarian development. Devraj speaks highly of his American boss Anderson, and constantly seeks to relate the goals of Union Carbide to the goals of the local community in Bhopal. In scene five, Devraj flashes back to the time he convinced his boss to expand operations in India. He regurgitates marketized language to persuade Anderson that "India offers us a competitive advantage in many ways" and asserts that he will be able to "find ways to make our India operation more efficient and productive", resting his case with the altruistic suggestion that "if something can keep hungry millions from starving, it will more than make up for the risk" (Varma *Bhopal* 21). In effect, Devraj sets in motion the plan to systematically corrode the city of Bhopal by emphasizing his belief in the project of neoliberal globalization. He is clearly willing to look beyond risking the health and happiness of a few individuals when striving towards the larger economic goal of developing India. This commitment is, in Devraj's mind, well-meant and progressive, and serves as a reminder that neocolonial expansion relies primarily on shaping discourse to impact social reality. The violence Devraj unleashes on Bhopal is the result of his training in an American business school, where he would have learned the value of market expansion and trickle-down economics. Devraj sincerely believes in the potential of Union Carbide to help the Indian people out of poverty. To add a level of irony in

Devraj's characterization, consider the real words spoken by Warren Anderson about the role of multinationals in the Third World: "…without the technologies and the capital that multinationals help to introduce, developing countries would have little hope of eradicating poverty and hunger" (qtd. from Everest 1986 in Pearce and Tombs 185). In the play, Anderson expresses no such sentiment, and Varma leaves it to Devraj to express such sincere and ideologically influenced sentiments.

When considering the ontological alterations that globalized discourse propagates, the language employed by Devraj becomes important to examine. In every public interaction, he is sure to denounce the present conditions of India and contrast them with the promise of globally integrated development. Such a narrative permanently changes the perception of Indian society, from a picture of self-sufficiency to one of lack and under-development. The collective imaginary transitions into a state of constant 'othering' so that the very concept of India in the mind of its people becomes that which is not as good, or not as evolved, as the West. This creates a societal void, which must then be filled by allowing intervention from the West into the local economy. The speech Devraj gives at a high-profile party is an example of this. He spends the first half of his speech giving graphic descriptions of the poverty and suffering he has seen since his return to India, before moving on to his agenda of reaffirming the value of Union Carbide's presence in the area:

> I met a woman, a poor woman, who told me that her first child died of worms that crawled out of its body. Why? How did this happen? There are those who will blame industrial development. Chemicals like Carbide Thunder. Obviously, that is not the case; we always think of safety first. But environmental safeguards are irrelevant if we don't attack poverty first, for it is the poverty that is our greatest environmental hazard. Yes, my efforts aren't reaching the people yet. But with

> my plan in place, the benefits will trickle all the way down to the poorest of the poor. That's why we need the People's Progress Zone. (Varma *Bhopal* 24)

Devraj is strategic in his defense of the corporation. He acknowledges the naysayers who have been pointing out the harmful effects of the chemicals produced by Union Carbide, and then assures the public that they are wrong. He then shifts away from health hazards altogether and begins to highlight the endemic of poverty in Bhopal, as if poverty was solely responsible for the declining health of the community. He focuses on the economic, rather than social, aspect of development, and claims that everything else will fall into place so long as his company can have free reign. By demonizing poverty and presenting it as the greatest social evil, Devraj erases all other factors that contribute to the degradation of human life in Bhopal. With this speech, he streamlines the discourse of development to eliminate environmental and safety concerns, and promotes a typical single-issue politics approach to development. There is no attempt to clarify or nuance the discussion, which is typical of neoliberal discourse. Devraj is thus successful in recasting the issues of the city into sites of potential – he chides the failure of the Indian people to develop themselves and immediately presents a solution that he, a conduit of the West, is confident will achieve positive results. Given his unique positionality as an NRI, the public is highly likely to believe him.

Although now a foreigner himself, Devraj grapples with a complex hybrid identity, which, I argue is essential to the intracultural narrative of *Bhopal*. Through this character, Varma pointedly challenges the ethnic diaspora in his audience, asking us to consider our own hybrid identities: like Devraj, have we become vehicles that carry out Western exploitation of non-Western populations? On the one hand, Devraj is loyal to the Americans who groomed him and made him successful, and on the other, he feels

responsible for the underprivileged in his home country. As an NRI, he is a privileged 'child' of India, and must contribute wealth to the country now that he is back (Dharwadker *Diaspora* 308). The locals look to Devraj as a messenger of hope and Western-style development, but they also treat him as an outsider, someone who is "not really Indian" (Varma *Bhopal* 19). This suspicion of Devraj as a foreigner does not allow him to develop an intimate relationship with the community, and he always views himself as a class above the people. Despite the people's emotional distance from Devraj, they treat him with respect as an economic source, knowing that he comes from the West and is somehow automatically more intelligent than the locals. He becomes the representative of a developed, technocratic, and corporate India, a future that is on the horizon.

But without this closeness to the people among whom he lives, Devraj is emotionally detached and believes in using money as the solution to all problems. It also has the effect of turning the slum dwellers into opportunists, who endure the health risks and the loss of their children and animals as long as Devraj is compensating them. For example, when the slum dweller Izzat visits Devraj and shows him her deformed baby, he is visibly horrified and concerned, yet quickly ends the interaction by suggesting she see a doctor and hands her two hundred rupees. Devraj does not lack empathy towards the condition of the local population, but chooses the path of immediate reparations over an investigation into the cause of their suffering. Every time they bring sick children or dead animals to his workplace, he silences their dissent by cursing the people's poverty and compensating them, rather than acknowledging the harmful effects of Union Carbide's presence in the area. The impending tragedy is thus never truly acknowledged.

This quick-fix opportunism is Varma's direct commentary on the logic of globalized development in Bhopal, and the relationship between Devraj and the locals shows the workings of neoliberal discourse. Devraj is the disembodied voice of the West in that he is not truly from there but carries its ideals, while the people of Bhopal are successfully lured by the immediate benefits of foreign presence in their community, to the extent that they are willing to let their animals die and their children's health suffer without raising a political outcry. Are the locals convinced that foreign investment will indeed increase their standard of living in the long term? Perhaps yes perhaps no. All they know is their dire poverty and that a short-term cure is available to them in the form of Devraj.

Varma creates a character like Devraj to successfully counter the tendency to portray the West as a belligerent force that oppresses its victims in the third world. He avoids this demonization of the North American corporation knowing that it might instantly alienate a Canadian audience. If Varma were to have embodied the Western neoliberal voice in a white, North American character instead, it would certainly have the effect of deepening the East/West binary and potentially disengaging the audience. Some of his previous plays were decidedly propagandist when they pitted the dominant culture against a minority culture in a very confrontational way. This simplification was not conducive to critical dialogue and remained one-sided (Kulkarni 4). Neocolonialism and neoliberal discourse, of course, work in more complex ways. The sources of power and oppression are more economic than ever, and can permeate various sensibilities around the world. Varma is cognizant of this fact, and invests Devraj, a hybrid of Indian and American/Western identity, with the responsibility of being the neoliberal mouthpiece.

Devraj's character is in a state of constant negotiation between his empathy for the locals and his sense of duty to expanding American globalized business in India. Throughout the play, he tries to convince the people, and indeed himself, that Carbide's development plan would lift the community out of its suffering, despite glaring evidence to the contrary.

Varma is also careful to humanize the character of Devraj, so that he does not merely appear as a ruthless businessman, or as someone who is uninterested in the welfare of the locals. In fact, Devraj's primary motivation in returning to India after spending several years in the United States is precisely so that he can help his people out of their destitution. In a flashback, Devraj reflects on the time he had to leave his childhood best friend, a young servant boy, behind and head to America for further studies. He loathes the lack of economic opportunity for his friend, knowing that despite all the boy's talents, the boy would end up pulling a rickshaw for a living (Varma *Bhopal* 20). Devraj believes that the Indian people are capable of much more than their poverty, but severely lack access to the kind of opportunities they need to showcase their potential. As an Indian who earned his way to a senior position in a multinational company, Devraj knows that progress is possible, and he embraces the responsibility of bringing development to his people. By showing this human side of Devraj, Varma opens up a critical space for the audience to comment on the nature of Devraj's intracultural negotiations. This character is misguided in his actions and allows the community of Bhopal to become poisoned, but his remarkable sincerity allows the audience to question how globalization and economic colonialism might work to produce individuals who participate in their own oppression. By centering the narrative on a character who

simultaneously belongs to both East and West, while serving as a mediator between the two worlds, Varma also encourages the audience to reevaluate their understanding of the West/East binary and the power dynamics that underlie this complex relationship.

To further complicate the audience's perspective, however, Varma introduces the character of Madiha, who is initially a submissive figure consumed by love for Devraj. She works as his secretary, and is revealed to be pregnant with his child. Madiha, though a local, participates quite aggressively in the subjugation of the local population. She even asks Devraj to stop giving the slum dwellers money for their dead animals, accusing them of killing the animals themselves (17). Madiha supports Devraj throughout the play, even coming to his defense after the gas disaster has taken thousands of lives. Eventually, however, she realizes the lies and deceit being practiced by Carbide International, and that Devraj's active neglect of the signs allowed the gas leak to happen. She also reassesses her opinion of Devraj's motives in asking her to have an abortion and ultimately refuses to do so. Madiha's journey is very important for its reversal and liberation: she begins as a submissive figure who buys into the globalized discourse of progress and defends exploitative practices, but when she experiences the gas disaster and sees evasive reactions from those in power, Madiha acknowledges the skewed power dynamics present in Bhopal and finds the courage to speak out against them. For the audience, Madiha is presented as a figure who liberates herself from the framework of oppression by critically examining her situation. In the final image of *Bhopal*, Madiha breaks away from Devraj, rejects his offer to settle in America, and walks towards the audience on her new journey as an independent woman.

Another character who goes through a remarkably complex journey in *Bhopal* is Chief Minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh, Jaganlal Bhandari. He is the political force behind Union Carbide's success in Bhopal, and a complete opportunist who is only concerned about his own popularity in the eyes of the public, with the upcoming elections always on his mind. Jaganlal is not particularly concerned about the needs of his electorate, rather is interested in using the Union Carbide slum as an opportunity for sensational promotion during his time as Chief Minister. He wants to prove that Bhopal is a successful testing ground for the globalization experiment, and that the development opportunities created in the area by Union Carbide pave the way for a global approach to all future growth in the state and in the country. In other words, Jaganlal hopes that Bhopal will become the national example of globalization's success, so that more and more transnational corporations become interested in expanding their operations to his home state. This would guarantee not only his reelection, but also a steady inflow of bribes from foreign parties seeking to invest in Bhopal. Front and centre on his agenda is negotiating with the foreign investors to create more housing and jobs in the community, in exchange for relaxing labour laws and allowing unregulated, ethically questionable business practices. Jaganlal does not mince words when asking for bribes, knowing that he is the political authority that all corporations must go through before they can set up operations in the state. He is responsible for speaking directly to the citizens and convincing them that foreign presence in their local market and community is favourable in the long run. Without his approval and blessing of the multinationals, the people would likely remain suspicious of them and become inclined to dissent. Jaganlal speaks the people's language and plays an active role in the smooth day-to-day functioning of Union

Carbide. Whenever there is a concern from the people about their health and well being, he is able to resolve the tension and persuade them to look at the benefits for future generations, rather than being shortsighted. Jaganlal's contribution to creating a welcoming environment for multinationals is invaluable. Varma employs this character to reveal the adaptability of global capitalism, and how the political elite from third world countries uses its influence and rhetoric to create widespread acceptance of marketized ideology.

Jaganlal's interactions with Devraj reveal his complicity in propagating neoliberal discourse and placing the interests of foreign corporations ahead of his own people. Once again, Varma shows how language is employed as a political tool, and that the use of marketized discourse in national development can lead to an erasure of human rights concerns. Discussions that equate economic progress with overall social progress dilute the corporations' responsibility towards the well being of people in their communities. Further, Jaganlal's political aspirations combined with his economic vision for the state result in his emotional detachment from the constituency, and he ignores the locals' health concerns in favour of increased foreign investment.

When Jaganlal hears about Union Carbide's desire to create a People's Progress Zone, he hosts a party in Devraj's honour. Here, he allows Devraj to persuade him in favour of the Progress Zone, and also of the benefits from Union Carbide's pesticide production:

DEVRAJ If we want the world to respect us, India's output must be increased tenfold.

JAGANLAL Quite right!

DEVRAJ Granted your approval, I am prepared to increase our production tenfold.

JAGANLAL And reduce your costs, I believe?

DEVRAJ We've discussed the People's Progress Zone. It's like a country within a country.

JAGANLAL *Achha*. (I see).

DEVRAJ Free of bureaucratic barriers, an area of deregulation.

JAGANLAL Okay.

DEVRAJ Such incentives are needed to increase the country's industrial base, to generate wealth, and, yes, to support our efforts to produce profitable chemicals. (Varma *Bhopal* 22)

Here, Jaganlal cleverly plays the part of the foolish local, who appears to have no understanding of the way business works. In doing so, he persuades Devraj to become even more interested in expanding production. Eventually, Jaganlal gives his consent to the Progress Zone, and just as Devraj makes the announcement to the guests, he swoops in and declares that Union Carbide has also promised to build an entire new neighbourhood for the slum dwellers in the area. With this commitment locked in, Jaganlal ensures that he has a public display of the positive impact of foreign investment. Subsequently, upon inauguration of the housing project, which is named Jaganlal Colony, the Chief Minister turns the event into a massive public relations exercise. He feeds the language of globalization and sensationalizes its benefits to the common people, so that both West and East are able to recognize that foreign investment helps local communities prosper. He declares that the Progress Zone will set the precedent for future investment in the country, and become "a model site. A country within a country with distinct rules! To help us help our people. To catch up on decades of underdevelopment! As of today, all inhabitants of the People's Progress Zone will own the piece of land on which their

illegal huts sit" (29). It is important to note that in this section, Jaganlal strategically reproduces the kind of language employed previously by Devraj to describe the benefit of such an initiative. This neocolonial discourse automatically, then, reaches out to hundreds of thousands of people through the media present at the inauguration. Coming from a figure of local authority such as Jaganlal, it is apparent that the use of globalized language enters the lexicon and legitimizes the relaxation of laws for multinationals in all parts of the country. From a lecture hall or boardroom in the United States where Devraj perhaps first encountered these ideas, they are subsequently reproduced and are able to shape actual laws and government policies halfway across the world.

Once the gas leak occurs, however, Jaganlal experiences a complete shift in his support of Carbide's operations. Having witnessed first hand all the horrors of the disaster, the thousands dead and disabled, he can no longer support the corporation, and begins to acknowledge the inequality propagated by Carbide's presence in Bhopal. In a conversation with Anderson, the head of Carbide, and Devraj, Jaganlal seeks reparations for the incident, and realizes that Indian lives do not matter to the American company in the slightest. Anderson offers a meagre compensation for all the lives affected, and it dawns on Jaganlal that he had been advocating for a corporation that was uninterested in creating genuine economic development for Bhopal. Carbide was largely unfazed by this disaster, and was simply going to wrap up its operations in India and move elsewhere, while the people of Bhopal would continue to suffer for decades to come. When Devraj defends himself by saying that the locals had absolutely nothing but poverty before Carbide's arrival, Jaganlal explodes:

> I licensed you to produce mega-quantities of Carbide Thunder and agreed to an outrageous extension to the People's Progress Zone. Why? Because my country is

> poor. We are not competitive on the global market. We are *always* in the position of trying to catch up to *you*. But the price *we* pay for trying to catch up leaves us *victims* of your progress, your technology, and your crimes against humanity. (57-58)

This outburst is a strong subversion of globalized discourse, and brings the issue of inequality into sharp focus. Until this moment in the play, Jaganlal had encouraged all of Carbide's activities in Bhopal, believing that economic progress was a possibility for his people. Now he understands his own role in effectively causing the disaster to occur, and he exposes the connection between globalization and the inevitable suffering of his people. Jaganlal comments on the one-sided nature of this 'progress', because ultimately the profits of operating in the low-cost environment of Bhopal were reaped only by the business elites of Union Carbide in the West, not by the locals. Varma crafts this change of perspective to invite the audience to reconsider their views on globalization, and question if the language of progress and development is necessarily benign or neutral. This reversal also changes the perception of Jaganlal's character, who had been an archetypal ruthless politician throughout the play. Now the audience can see his regret and horror at having complied with and executed the aggressive expansion of foreign interests in his city. It took the decimation of the city to awaken Jaganlal from his illusion of American-led development in Bhopal; perhaps Varma hopes his audience will come to a similar realization about the negative impacts of continued globalization, and further question their own role in promoting the project of unequal global capitalism. In this way, neocolonial language is put on display in *Bhopal* and the audience is invited to track the ways in which it permeates various levels of society.

Having engaged in a discussion of the language used in *Bhopal*, it is important to consider the impact on the audience and the statement the playwright attempts to make. Varma regards the play as "an act of dramatic dissent, designed to confront current violence through oppositional politics and creative subversion" and a way to deconstruct the economic-colonial attitudes that exist in the present, which permit "the low value attached to life in the non-Western world by the Western world" (Varma *Just World* 117). By creating characters that are locals and yet are compliant in the proliferation of mass violence, the playwright comments on the truly precarious nature of neocolonialism. This is not a case of classic colonialism where direct strategic force may be used. As *Bhopal* demonstrates, the new form of economic colonialism is based on wholly on consent, which is facilitated by language. People in the Third World, leaders and masses alike, ache for Western corporations to set up shop in their communities. This globalized system of oppression relies on discursive constructions, and the strengthening of binaries such as East/West, developed/developing, progress/poverty, etc. Varma's play, through characters such as Jaganlal and Devraj, calls attention to the use of dramatic, wide-ranging discourse in order to create an environment of mass consent. The play further asks audiences to consider their own complicity in allowing these disasters to occur, and perhaps become more aware of the power held by the way we speak about globalization and development. Could the events of Bhopal have occurred without the specific discursive structures that permitted them? How has the language of globalization since evolved, if at all?

With *Bhopal*, Varma presents a nuanced intracultural dialogue that serves to expand the audience's perception of cultural exchange. In *Counter Offence,* the

intracultural dialogue comes from examining the politics of various cultures inhabiting the geopolitical Canadian space. In *Bhopal*, Varma expands the site of intracultural exchange to a global scale, asking his Canadian audience to consider our direct role in the cultural subjugation of Third World populations. Indeed, this play's remarkable intraculturalism stems from its direct implication of the audience and its effectiveness in opening up a critical space where the audience may create associations between the local and the global, and how ethnocultural inequalities cause tensions not only within geopolitical boundaries, but also across them. By placeing the site of conflict outside Canada, Varma connects the audience's local consumer identities to their larger global impact, highlighting that we are, in fact, engaging with the ethnic 'other' through participation in the world economy. This relationship is rife with inequality and, in the case of Bhopal, can have lethal consequences. I argue that Varma recasts Canadian identity and culture in a uniquely globalized fashion; he indicates that propagating the exploitative force of globalization is an inherent part of our everyday lives as Canadians. In effect, our sense of Canadian-ness is inextricably linked to enabling events like Bhopal to continue occurring uninhibitedly. The play thus debunks the discourse of progress and brings a Canadian audience in close contact with a faraway culture, allowing for a collective "consciousness of difference" (Bharucha *Cultural Practice* 9). *Bhopal* makes the international networks of power and cultural hegemony starkly visible to the audience, revealing the truth behind supposedly harmonious and fruitful ethnocultural interactions.

Conclusion

As someone who grew up in India and immigrated to Canada in his teenage years, I have always grappled with the loss of identity and the sense of belonging to neither Canada nor India. My childhood and upbringing were highly privileged and Anglicized, and the literature and performance practices I was exposed to were primarily Western. I grew up reciting Shakespeare, watching Hollywood films, and reading English classics from Austen to Dickens. In that sense, I cannot really lay claim to being Indian without simultaneously acknowledging the exorbitant Western and globalized identity I developed. I could never fit in with the masses of people I witnessed in poverty and constant struggle for survival, what I would term as the 'real' face of India. After moving to Canada, however, my everyday experience of 'otherness' is the strongest factor I gravitate to in life and in art. I do not identify as truly Canadian either, after all, I did not grow up here and I do not feel a sense of patriotism or duty towards this country. My otherness defines me: I am not white, I was not born in Canada, and I must constantly struggle to prove my credibility because I am viewed as an outsider. Rahul Varma's theatre is precisely the kind of theatre I would make or wish to see because it is written primarily from the perspective of the racialized other. Varma does not write nostalgic or folkloric stories about India, nor does he attempt to assimilate himself into Canadian forms of storytelling. Instead, he writes societal otherness that constantly seeks to problematize power relations grounded in Canadian society. He experiences racism and discrimination, and witnesses it all around him, therefore his plays attack these concepts and are not satisfied with ideas of multicultural harmony.

My exploration of Rahul Varma's work has revealed the complex ways in which the playwright chooses to tackle the skewed power dynamics between dominant and minority cultures, both within Canada and between the West (of which Canada is an integral part) and the 'rest' or the developing world. By bringing these unequal relations to the stage, Varma challenges his audiences to consider the unifying rhetoric and discourse that allows such oppressions to continue, and further implicates them in the social consequences of these tensions. There is a conscious attempt to present various perspectives on the situations in his plays, so that the audience may not dismiss them as one-sided or propagandist. In fact, Varma creates characters who do not necessarily fall within stereotypes and thus become quite thought-provoking in their actions. Further, Varma writes keeping Canada's ethnic and cultural diversity in mind, knowing that his audience might be comprised of people from various backgrounds, both dominant and minority cultures. His characters, directly or indirectly, speak to the idea of multiculturalism in Canada and go beneath the surface of 'unity in diversity'.

In the first chapter, I problematized the widely accepted definition of intercultural theatre, noting that plays such as Varma's do not, in fact, fall within this category. Intercultural theatre is not conducive to diversifying and politicizing cultural narratives in Canada, and only seeks to reinforce relationships of inequality between majority and minority cultures. To this end, I chose the term intracultural theatre as defined by Bharucha, since it most adequately characterizes the socio-political aims of theatre created by minorities that comments on the realities of cultural exchange. Rahul Varma's theatre is certainly intracultural. I then delved into the background of Varma and Teesri Duniya Theatre, to explore his intracultural commitments and warrant an examination of

his plays to further understand the ways in which he uses language and characterization to engage his audiences in a discussion about unequal power relations between majority and minority cultures.

The second chapter, with my close reading of the characters and situations in *Counter Offence*, revealed how the concept of Canadian multiculturalism is indeed fragile and rife with conflict. Varma creates a narrative where systemic racism and domestic violence collide, resulting in an extremely tense situation that tests the supposed harmony between cultures in Canada, and its ultimate failure. Varma's aim with *Counter Offence*, as I have argued, is to persuade Canadians to come to terms with our differences and begin to resolve them through dialogue, however uncomfortable that might be. We cannot continue to ignore the inherent tensions between majority and minority cultures because it could result in grave consequences as seen in the play. The precise danger of multicultural discourse is its evasive nature, which leads Varma to create a concrete and plausible situation in the theatre to encourage audiences to challenge their own perceptions of cultural harmony.

In chapter three, I turned to Varma's most influential play *Bhopal*, and its capacity to encourage a dialogue about unequal power relations between the 'developed' and the developing world. The force of globalization is widely accepted as benign and favourable, with words such as progress being used to justify the expansion of neoliberalism around the world. The Canadian public is complicit with the discourse of globalization, and we are enthusiastic participants in a consumer culture that relies on the exploitation of people in the Third World. I showed how *Bhopal* reveals the realities of life in developing world and how multiple interests, namely corporate and political, come

together in perpetuating the oppression of already marginalized people. The gas tragedy of Bhopal and countless other instances of exploitation are a direct consequence of Western consumer culture and the process of globalization itself is skewed in favour of the developed world. For a Canadian audience, *Bhopal* serves as a wake-up call about our role in the continued suffering of Third World populations. Unlike *Counter Offence*, this play is not set in Canada but it readily implicates North Americans' participation in the discourse of globalization, revealing it to be inherently racist and designed to cause further disadvantaged non-Western lives. Once again, Varma makes visible those unequal relationships that are hidden by grand narratives of progress, and shows the multiple perspectives within and consequences of such discourse.

The complexity and multi-layered politics of Rahul Varma as a playwright of colour in Canada is what attracts me to his work. He is very conscious about the issues he wishes to address, and does so in a way that allows the audience to witness multiple truths and thus gain new perspectives. His playwriting style is also indicative of his belief in the transformative nature of theatre—creating microcosms of extreme inequality and tensions, with characters freely debating their points of view, helps an audience critically participate and dismantle their preconceptions of the issues at hand. Finally, Varma accurately represents the conflicts between majority Eurocentric cultures and their ethnic 'other', which makes his work very political. As an ethnic minority in Canada, he understands the need for both majority and minority cultures engage in a dialogue about their unequal relationships, which is the only way to move towards a future of genuine harmony. Rahul Varma's plays help to redefine the theatrical landscape in Canada by

acknowledging the politics of various cultures inhabiting a complex geo-political common space, thus enriching the narratives of cultural exchange.

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