

# Transcreation as a Tool for Cross-Cultural Dialogue in Theatre

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**Abstract:** Transcreation in theatre is a subtle art of cultural translation, wherein the spirit of a story is retained while translating it to appeal to new linguistic and cultural contexts. This article discusses transcreation as a key instrument for cross-cultural communication in Indian theatre, where various performance traditions, based on folklore, mythology, and community forms, tackle the challenges of adaptation for wider audiences. Though Indigenous and refugee populations throughout India have traditionally employed theatre as a storytelling medium, their stories struggle to be transcreated for national and international audiences. Drawing on the transcreation of theatre throughout India, with observations from northeastern practices, the paper discusses how narratives deeply rooted in culture, full of local imagery, rituals, and socio-historical detail, are transcreated to be used internationally without losing their emotional resonance and authenticity. By case studies of folk performances, adaptations of classical theatre, and marginalised narratives, this essay foregrounds the ways transcreation cultivates empathy, intercultural understanding, and the retention of marginalised voices. The analysis will look at the sensitive tension between linguistic accuracy and creative reinterpretation, underscoring how transcreation protects cultural heritage while making Indian theatre an interface between traditions and new-world storytelling.

**Keywords:** *Transcreation, Cross-Cultural Communication, Indian Theatre, Cultural Heritage, Marginalised Narratives.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Transcreation, as opposed to simple translation, is a sensitive and multifaceted negotiation of meaning, affect, and symbolic culture. Transcreation is not merely about the identification of linguistic counterparts but about restaging the soul of a tale for a fresh audience. As the term becomes familiar in literary and marketing culture, its utilisation in theatre, an intensely contextualised, performative, and communal art form, is of extreme significance. Theatre in India, particularly in multilingual and multicultural geographies, has never been involved in anything other than multiple modes of cultural translation, consciously and unconsciously translating stories, styles, and expressions to fit new social environments. Transcreation in theatre is a nuanced art of cultural translation, where the essence of a story is preserved while translating it to be appealing to new linguistic and cultural environments. Unlike direct translation, which is concerned mainly with linguistic equivalence, transcreation allows for cultural subtleties, idioms, emotional undertones, and symbolic layers of meaning. In the world of performance, where the interaction of language, body, space, and ritual is crucial, transcreation is an especially potent tool.

## II. TRANSCREATION IN LITERATURE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In literary criticism, transcreation came as a solution to the inadequacies of literal translation. While translation aims to recreate the original text in another language, transcreation gives more room for interpretation in order to preserve tone, intent, and cultural specificity. Invented in advertising and later borrowed in literary theory, transcreation entails a faithful transformation not to the word, but to the substance. Literary translators who work across genres then base their translation work on transcreation to translate the poetry, prose, and plays into forms that are still aesthetically and emotionally alive and yet take on the idioms and cadence of the target culture.

For example, the translation of Indian epics like the Ramayana or Mahabharata into local languages or even foreign languages is not a word-for-word activity. It involves reinterpretation, sometimes even reinvention, of metaphors, socio-cultural values, and narrative priorities. The translator acts as a cultural mediator, and the process of transcreation is one of negotiation between loyalty to the source and sensitivity to the target audience. This is particularly important when texts contain embedded cultural knowledge,

ritualistic aspects, or regional world views. Since, according to Susan Bassnett, "The translator of dramatic texts must be both a reader and a director, recreating the text not just for the mind but for the stage" (Bassnett, 1991), this is particularly relevant in Indian contexts where the written word can encounter elaborate oral and performance traditions.

➤ *Theatre as a Space for Cultural Translation*

Theatre, as a collaborative and performative art form, is the best place for transcreation. Theatre uses several semiotic systems such as language, gesture, costume, music, and space to convey meaning. The performative aspect of theatre makes it uniquely capable of dealing with cross-cultural translation since it can use visual and auditory signifiers that bypass linguistic boundaries.

In India, where theatre overlaps with ritual, folklore, and mythology, transcreation is typically inscribed within the tradition of performance itself. Playwrights and directors undertake cultural translation not just to reinterpret classical scripts to suit contemporary expectations but also to introduce regional or minority stories onto national and international agendas. Such translation is seldom literal; it is artistic, intuitive, and well-entrenched in socio-political contexts.

➤ *Transcreation and Theatre: Beyond Words*

In the case of theatre, transcreation adds a performative dimension. Unlike written language, theatre involves gesture, movement, voice inflexion, scenography, dress, and audience reception, all of which have a culturally deep-seated nature. Translating a play between linguistic and cultural milieus requires more than dialogue alteration; it requires reimagining worlds.

This is especially true in Indian theatre. Plays such as Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*, Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, or Heisnam Kanhailal's translations of folk tales such as *Pebet* show how playwrights and directors employ transcreation to connect traditional tales with modern or international audiences. These artists don't just translate, they transform. They take on local performance conventions, dialects, and faith systems and reprocess them through visual, musical, and dramaturgical transformations for new publics, maintaining the thematic and emotional richness of the original. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, "Translation is the most intimate act of reading" (Spivak, 1993). This intimacy becomes even more layered when translation occurs on stage, when every gesture, rhythm, and silence all add to the act of interpretation.

➤ *Transcreation during the Theatre of the Roots Movement*

The Theatre of Roots movement that emerged in India in the 1960s and 1970s was a watershed in Indian theatre practice's relationship with tradition and modernity. Responding to colonial models of theatre and Western naturalism, most Indian playwrights and directors wanted to establish a uniquely Indian idiom of theatre for addressing issues of modernity using indigenous vocabularies of performance.

One important aspect of this movement included transcreating contemporary Western and classic Western plays into forms that the Indian audience would consume. They did not merely translate; they recontextualised the works by making them compatible with the Indian socio-political context, traditional aesthetics, and performance ethos. Habib Tanvir's adoption of Brecht's *Charandas Chor*, for example, added elements of folk song, Chhattisgarhi, and the traditional performance habits, thus bringing about a cultural version of the same folkloric tale into being. In the same vein, playwrights such as Girish Karnad transcreated Greek and Elizabethan drama elements into Kannada plays based on Indian myth and folklore. This period of Indian theatre shows how transcreation functioned as a means of cultural assertion and intellectual resistance. Transcreation made it possible for Indian theatre artists to converse with international literary tradition and to substantiate the superior authority of vernacular languages, genres, and histories. Translating Shakespeare or Brecht through the filters of *Yakshagana* or *Nautanki*, these producers crafted a theatre that was universal in its scope but profoundly localised in its speech.

➤ *Indian Theatre and Cross-Cultural Dialogue*

The country's multilingual, multicultural environment presents a fertile theatre of experimentation regarding transcreation in theatre. Indigenous forms such as *Jatra* (Bengal), *Yakshagana* (Karnataka), *Ankia Naat* (Assam), and *Khongjom Parva* (Manipur) are not only entertainment modes but also modalities of common expression, oftentimes narrating mythological, historical, and socio-political themes. All these forms remain rooted in locality, and translating them directly results in ineffectiveness for broadcasting to a general audience.

Transcreation is required when these forms are transposed to national or international audiences. To illustrate, a *Jatra* performance retelling the *Draupadi* episode of the *Mahabharata* might employ regional metaphors, local idioms, and performance codes that could be lost on an alien audience. A transcreated version would re-imagine the same story with alternative staging, re-contextualised dialogues, and perhaps a hybrid theatrical language that brings together traditional performance with contemporary dramaturgy.

➤ *Voices from the Margins: Northeast India and Beyond*

Transcreation in the Indian northeastern states is frequently a cultural and political imperative. The states, with their patchwork of Indigenous peoples and histories of migration and displacement, are deeply reliant on oral tradition and performative ritual that embeds memory, identity, and resistance. Manipur, Assam, and Tripura theatre groups and playwrights have been engaged for many years in working on transcreation of these regional stories for wider stages, via national theatre festivals or international productions.

But this translation is seldom easy. When Indigenous or refugee stories are transcreated for a broader audience, there is always a danger of wiping out nuance or appropriating meaning. Here, transcreation has to work with sensitivity, preserving the emotional and cultural integrity of the narrative while making it accessible to people outside the community.

Examples are retellings of tribal legends in modern theatre that deals with environmental concerns or identity crises, frequently employing multilingual scripts, symbolic dance, and visual narrative. These shows not only cross linguistic divides but also serve as repositories of living culture, preserving endangered languages, rituals, and social memories.

As Anuradha Kapur observes, "In the moment of performance, history is not merely retold, it is reimagined and remembered anew." (Kapur, 2006).

### III. CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While transcreation has great promise, it has its challenges as well. Chief among these is the danger of cultural dilution or appropriation. When stories are translated without true understanding of their cultural and historical roots, they can end up being shallow or even insulting. This is very sensitive in the case of Indigenous or refugee storytelling, where telling is inextricably tied to dignity, identity, and survival.

Another challenge is keeping emotional resonance. Transcreation needs to keep the affective power of the original, as it is usually linked to particular cultural symbols or ritualistic contexts. The creative team has to balance carefully between innovating and respecting traditions.

Furthermore, the interactive quality of theatre makes transcreation not an individual translator's work but that of actors, designers, musicians, and dramaturgs, all of whom are part of the interpretive process. This makes theatre a singularly communal kind of transcreation, which can both intensify and complicate its cultural weight.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Transcreation in Indian theatre is not just a method, it is a cultural imperative. In a nation where diversity is the default, and where numerous communities are still underrepresented in dominant stories, transcreation provides a means to create empathy, intercultural exchange, and inclusive storytelling. It makes local tales move, not by reducing them, but by remaking them in ways that have resonance beyond their local geographies.

With Indian theatre drawing increasingly upon a worldwide audience, the task of transcreation can only become more central. It requires not only linguistic dexterity but also cultural attunement, historical acuity, and creative nerve. Through this act, theatre as a living archive of cultural

memory, a space where tradition collides with innovation, and where subaltern voices gain a platform to speak, to be heard, and to be heard.

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