

From Colonial Wounds to Global Displacement: A Postcolonial Reading of “Imaan Imaan Paani”

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ABSTRACT

Imaan Imaan Paani (We are Drowning), a politically-charged Assamese play written and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, emerges as a powerful postcolonial narrative that stages the lingering trauma of colonization and its transformation into contemporary forms of displacement and cultural erasure. Drawing from the surrealist motifs of Salvador Dalí and the existential angst of Edvard Munch, the play invokes a non-linear, symbolic theatrical language to explore themes such as collective memory, state violence, environmental degradation and forced migration. This paper attempts a postcolonial reading of *Imaan Imaan Paani*, situating its aesthetic choices within broader theoretical frameworks offered by scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. It interrogates how the fragmented identities, loss of indigenous time-space structures, and metaphoric cycles of destruction presented in the play resonate with the postcolonial condition in the global South. By examining performative elements like the interplay of puppets, clocks, children’s rhymes and bodily protests this study argues that the play transcends regional boundaries to offer a trenchant critique of both colonial residues and neoliberal violence. Ultimately, the work asserts theatre’s potential to reclaim silenced histories and envision acts of resistance and renewal.

KEYWORDS: Post-colonialism, displacement, memory, performance, violence, migration, Assam, global South, theatre

1. INTRODUCTION

Theatre, as a performative art, has long served as a critical site for exploring historical memory, political resistance, and socio-cultural trauma. In this context, *Imaan Imaan Paani* (*We are Drowning*), written and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, stands as a remarkable theatrical intervention from Assam that traverses regional boundaries to articulate global postcolonial anxieties. Drawing visual and thematic inspiration from Salvador Dalí’s *The Persistence of Memory* and Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, the play transforms surrealist motifs into living metaphors of historical wounds, fragmented temporality and existential despair (Goswami, 2013, p. 1). Goswami, a noted playwright and theatre director, has consistently engaged in socially conscious and aesthetically radical theatre practice rooted in Assamese cultural idioms while dialoguing with global forms and concerns.

This study adopts a postcolonial lens to analyse *Imaan Imaan Paani*, a play that intricately stages the lingering psychological and cultural trauma of colonization and its transmutation into modern forms of violence particularly displacement, environmental collapse and cultural amnesia. Postcolonial theory offers a critical framework to explore such layered experiences. As Edward Said asserts, the legacy of imperialism persists in cultural representations and

institutional structures that continue to “define, categorize and control” (Said, 1978). In Goswami’s play, this legacy is embodied in cyclical violence, paralyzed memory, and the recurring image of the clock a metaphor for colonial temporality and loss of indigenous rhythm.

This research investigates two central questions:

- How does *Imaan Imaan Paani* stage colonial trauma and its aftermath through metaphoric and symbolic storytelling?
- In what ways does the play critique contemporary global displacement and systemic violence rooted in postcolonial and neoliberal structures?

Methodologically, this paper employs close reading and textual analysis of the play’s script and performance elements, supported by postcolonial and performance theory. The analysis foregrounds the use of metaphor (e.g., clocks, puppets, polythene), fragmented temporality and multilingual performance (Assamese, Bodo, gibberish) as narrative strategies. The paper is structured into thematic sections addressing postcolonial memory, symbolic violence, migration and globalization, and the performative resistance encoded in the play. Ultimately, the study argues that *Imaan Imaan Paani* functions as both cultural remembrance and a critique of the mechanisms of global displacement and neo-colonial dominance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POST-COLONIALISM AND THEATRE

Postcolonial theory emerged as a critical response to the legacies of imperialism, addressing the cultural, psychological and political ramifications of colonial domination. At its core, it interrogates how colonial power continues to influence identity, representation and history even after formal independence. Edward Said’s foundational work *Orientalism* (1978) reveals how the West constructs the East as an inferior “Other” to assert dominance, a process rooted in discourse and knowledge production. Said emphasizes that “Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental and his world” (Said, 1978, p. 40), underlining the performativity of colonial ideology.

Building on this, Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concepts of hybridity and mimicry, arguing that colonial subjects resist domination not through outright rejection but by subverting colonial authority through imitation. This mimicry, “almost the same but not quite,” becomes a space of ambivalence and disruption (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Hybridity challenges fixed cultural identities and exposes the instability of colonial power. In *Imaan Imaan Paani*, such hybridity is visible in the juxtaposition of folk forms with surrealist imagery and the layering of indigenous languages (Assamese, Bodo) with gibberish speech creating a theatrical space where colonial and postcolonial worlds collide.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, warns against the silencing of marginalized voices in postcolonial discourse, especially those of women and subaltern subjects. She critiques the tendency of elite postcolonial discourse to overwrite the agency of the oppressed (Spivak, 1988, p. 287). In *Imaan Imaan Paani*, this critique resonates through the portrayal of voiceless figures such as the children, the mother figure (symbolizing Mother Earth) and the puppets who are subjected to cyclical violence, dislocation and erasure.

Frantz Fanon, particularly in *The Wretched of the Earth*, emphasizes the psychological impact of colonization, describing it as a process that internalizes inferiority and dehumanization. He controversially argues that while violence is used to oppress, it can also serve as a cleansing force in the process of decolonization, restoring the colonized subject's sense of agency (Fanon, 1963, p. 94). In the play, violence is not only literal but metaphorical represented through shattered clocks, mutilated puppets and disrupted musicality marking the trauma and resistance encoded in postcolonial identity.

Theatre, as a living medium of performance, becomes a potent site for cultural resistance and memory work in postcolonial societies. Rustom Bharucha emphasizes that postcolonial theatre must engage with "the complexities of location, language, and cultural context" rather than merely adapt Western forms (Bharucha, 2000, p. 15). Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls for the decolonization of the stage, advocating for the revival of indigenous performance practices and languages as a counter to imperial aesthetics (Ngũgĩ, 1997, p. 88).

In *Imaan Imaan Paani*, this postcolonial performance strategy is realized through a multi-layered aesthetic that blends folk idioms with modernist abstraction. The play utilizes symbolic staging, repetitive temporal motifs (e.g., the melting clock) and non-linear narrative to subvert Western dramatic conventions and foreground indigenous temporalities and cultural memory. The use of gibberish, performative silences, and physical theatre destabilizes language itself an echo of Bhabha's idea of colonial dislocation of meaning, where mimicry and hybridity fracture the authority of colonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994, p. 122).

Thus, this theoretical framework provides the lens through which the dramatic elements of *Imaan Imaan Paani* can be read as a postcolonial palimpsest where fragmented history, cultural hybridity and performative resistance converge on stage.

3. MEMORY AND METAPHOR: COLONIAL ECHOES IN IMAAN IMAAN PAANI

In *Imaan Imaan Paani*, memory functions not as linear recollection but as a fragmented, hallucinatory terrain populated by broken symbols and disrupted rhythms. Through powerful metaphoric devices such as clocks, puppets, polythene and laburnum flowers, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami constructs a dramaturgy of rupture and remembrance, allowing the play to embody the disorientation experienced by postcolonial societies struggling to reassemble their shattered histories (Goswami, 2013, pp. 2–5).

The motif of the melting clock, directly referencing Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), becomes a central visual metaphor throughout the play. Dalí's surreal clock, famously bent and soft, evokes the distortion of time and perception. In the context of postcolonial theatre, it symbolizes the breakdown of colonially imposed temporality and the lingering confusion of cultural memory. The clock in Goswami's play "runs," "stops," "hangs," and eventually bleeds, suggesting the burden of history and the trauma of temporality shaped by imperial violence (Goswami, 2013, pp. 3, 7). As Bhabha (1994) explains, postcolonial identity emerges in a "time-lag" a temporality in which history is neither fully resolved nor accessible in the present, but instead haunts the now as a site of tension and reinterpretation (p. 219).

Similarly, puppets without hands and feet, described as lying on the ground “like that of victims from a bomb blast, like in the 2nd world war” (Goswami, 2013, p. 2), serve as haunting metaphors of dehumanization, dispossession and voicelessness. The mutilated puppet evokes colonial subjects reduced to bodies without agency a theatrical manifestation of Spivak’s (1988) “subaltern who cannot speak” (p. 287). These puppets are not merely props but symbolic ancestors bodies suspended in historical trauma, unable to participate in the performance of sovereignty.

The laburnum flower, which starts as a beautiful golden presence but eventually transforms into crawling slugs and suffocating hallucinations (Goswami, 2013, p. 5), intensifies the affective layering of metaphor. The flower often associated with nostalgia, longing and aesthetic delight becomes corrupted, symbolizing the toxic residues of colonial aestheticization and the psychological decay of postcolonial consciousness. The transition from flower to mollusc marks a descent into subconscious trauma, reflecting Fanon’s (1963) argument that colonization systematically disfigures and dismantles the colonized people’s sense of historical continuity (p. 210).

The play also resists this disorientation through acts of cultural reclamation embedded in intertextuality. The children’s chant “*Imaan Imaan Paani, Ganga Rani / Imaan Imaan Buka, Sahab Dada*” is a traditional Assamese rhyme, re-contextualized to convey the message “We are drowning” (Goswami, 2013, p. 1). Its repetition acts as a ritual of memory, preserving indigenous expression in a disintegrating world. Similarly, the multilingual texture of the play using Assamese, Bodo, Rabha song and gibberish produces a polyphonic structure that reclaims linguistic space against the homogenizing forces of colonial and global languages.

By embedding indigenous memory, fragmented temporality, and hybrid metaphors into the performance, *Imaan Imaan Paani* critiques the violence of forgetting and affirms the power of metaphor as a political tool. It enacts what Bharucha (2000) refers to as “an aesthetics of cultural survival” (p. 24) a theatre of memory that resists erasure by transforming wounds into narrative symbols.

4. VIOLENCE AND THE REPETITION OF HISTORY

In postcolonial societies, violence is not merely an event it is a recurring structure that continues to shape collective memory, identity and political consciousness. In *Imaan Imaan Paani*, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami stages cyclical violence as a performative motif that echoes both colonial oppression and its contemporary manifestations in protests, state brutality and cultural erasure. Through choreographed sequences of protest and repression, the play dramatizes a history that refuses to remain in the past but returns with renewed force to haunt the present (Goswami, 2013, pp. 6–8).

One of the most poignant expressions of this theme is the repeated killing and resurrection of the artist figures the painter and the flute player. After their attempts to reconstruct a broken world are met with indifference and mockery, they are violently attacked by protesters who have themselves been brutalized by a corrupt system. This recursive death and rebirth sequence “We are born only to be killed again... again and again...” (Goswami, 2013, p. 7) suggests that artists in postcolonial societies are both witnesses to and victims of historical trauma. As Fanon

(1963) observes, “The native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power... only to find himself marginal in the new nation” (p. 158). Similarly, in *Imaan Imaan Paani*, the painter and the flute player, as allegorical artists, are rendered marginal and expendable punished for holding onto a utopian vision of reconstruction in a world governed by cynicism and spectacle.

The protest sequences, featuring gibberish slogans and state responses, are not merely spectacles of dissent but parodies of failed political dialogue. The leader’s empty assurances “We are discussing the matter with the high command...” reveal the institutional silence and bureaucratic impotence that postcolonial nations often inherit from colonial rule (Goswami, 2022, p. 6). These moments reflect what Homi Bhabha describes as the “repetition of the colonial signifier,” where power speaks but does not listen, and where governance mimics authority without offering resolution (Bhabha, 1994, p. 118).

The presence of an evil painter, who manipulates symbols of time and space to produce weapons and distort artistic intention, embodies the ideological violence of postcolonial authoritarianism. He not only paints the clock into a gun but ultimately kills the good painter, turning creation into destruction and art into propaganda (Goswami, 2022, p. 8). His actions reflect Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1997) warning that postcolonial regimes, while formally independent, often continue the structural violence of colonialism by suppressing dissent and co-opting cultural production (p. 90).

Moreover, the play’s symbolic layering of cultural death represented by the silencing of music, the destruction of children’s innocence, and the paralysis of Mother Earth points to a larger crisis of postcolonial subjectivity. Violence here is not isolated but systemic, institutionalized, and intergenerational. It is not only the body that is wounded but the memory, the language, and the very possibility of re-imagining the nation.

In staging violence as a repetitive historical condition, *Imaan Imaan Paani* critiques the ways in which postcolonial societies become trapped in inherited cycles of trauma and domination. The play insists on remembering these repetitions not to succumb to despair, but to recognize them as the first step toward interruption and resistance.

5. Migration, Marginalization, and Global Displacement

Migration has long been a defining condition of postcolonial societies, where political borders, economic disparity, and cultural erosion are the residual scars of imperial history. In *Imaan Imaan Paani*, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami stages a deeply allegorical yet affectively grounded exploration of both forced and voluntary migration, unveiling its links with the postcolonial condition and the ongoing violence of globalization. The moment when the flute player and the painter observe a group of people passing by prompting their exchange: “*Migration... No, Globalization... Post-colonial impact or colonial hangover...*” captures the ambivalence of movement in the global South (Goswami, 2022, p. 8). Migration here is neither purely physical nor entirely economic; it is an existential response to historical displacement and contemporary crisis.

Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Frantz Fanon have noted that modern migration often stems from colonial disruptions of indigenous ways of life and the redistribution of wealth and power through global capitalist mechanisms (Said, 1993, p. xxiii; Fanon, 1963, p. 226). The migrants in the play claim space by displacing the original inhabitants symbolically evicting the painter and flute player from their site of cultural labor. Their chant of “Rock” over the artists’ plea of “Folk” dramatizes the invasion of indigenous cultural spaces by Westernized, commodified forms of expression (Goswami, 2022, p. 8). This moment encapsulates what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1997) terms the “cultural annexation” of the colonized, where traditional knowledge systems are marginalized by the aesthetics of global capital (p. 88).

Goswami’s dramaturgy critiques neo-colonialism not through overt political declarations but through metaphor and spatial displacement. The blue polythene representing a temporary hope or reconstructed platform is eventually turned red by the evil painter, signalling how even newly created spaces are contaminated by ideological or imperial violence (Goswami, 2022, p. 9). The act of colouring the transformation of symbols, spaces, and people serves as a performative critique of how modernity, under the guise of progress, continues to re-inscribe dominance and alienation.

This displacement is also ontological. The flute player, once a bearer of cultural rhythm, loses his voice as the migrant wave passes. His music falters, and the painter’s attempt to revive meaning through symbolism becomes futile. This crisis of expressive agency underscores Gayatri Spivak’s observation that in postcolonial modernity, “even when the subaltern speaks, she may not be heard within dominant epistemic structures” (Spivak, 1988, p. 295). The play thus presents displacement not merely as a socio-political condition but as a condition of epistemic violence a forced unlearning of selfhood, memory, and cultural rootedness.

The appearance of migrants also suggests a critique of developmentalism a modern narrative that legitimizes displacement in the name of progress. This mirrors Rustom Bharucha’s (2003) argument that globalization often masquerades as cultural exchange while perpetuating hierarchies and exclusions, particularly in the arts and cultural sectors of the postcolonial world (p. 31).

Through these layered metaphors and choreographies of movement, *Imaan Imaan Paani* unravels the myth of progress by spotlighting those left behind, uprooted, or overwritten by its machinery. It insists that without acknowledging historical wounds and present inequalities, any vision of global modernity will continue to reproduce the violence of its colonial predecessors.

6. The Evil Painter: Allegory of Imperialism and Neo-Colonial Power

Among the most potent allegorical figures in *Imaan Imaan Paani* is the evil painter, who stands in sharp contrast to the “good” painter and flute player. While the latter embody creativity, empathy, and reconstruction, the evil painter represents the forces of manipulation, destruction, and ideological control marking him as a theatrical metaphor for both colonial authority and its neo-colonial avatars. The moment he transforms a symbolic clock into a gun and later colours the entire space red is not merely an aesthetic gesture but a brutal act of redefinition:

art is weaponized, and time already melting and fragmented is militarized (Goswami, 2022, p. 8). This action serves as a powerful critique of how colonial regimes re-appropriated indigenous cultural symbols to impose systems of domination.

The evil painter performs the role of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1997) calls the "cultural manipulator" those who rewrite and repaint histories, traditions, and artistic expressions to suit the dominant order (p. 91). His laughter following the death of the good painter, and his act of hanging a blood-stained clock on a symbolic tree, suggests that violence and spectacle have overtaken meaning, echoing Fanon's (1963) insight that colonialism "is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip... but tends to dehumanize them" (p. 250).

This dehumanization is not limited to physical oppression but extends to the realm of cultural production. In the world of the play, artistic creation and destruction are in constant tension. The good painter and the flute player attempt to repair the broken platform, create harmony through music, and even use white cloth as a new surface for meaning-making. However, these efforts are thwarted each time by the interventions of the evil painter, who co-opts the language of art for ideological violence (Goswami, 2022, p. 9). This conflict symbolizes the larger battle between de-colonial creativity and neo-colonial spectacle.

The evil painter also embodies neo-colonial commodification. His control over symbols especially the recurring clock demonstrates what Edward Said (1993) identifies as the imperial tendency to "control time and representation" to establish cultural dominance (p. 257). The transformation of artistic tools into instruments of fear and ideological submission aligns with Homi Bhabha's (1994) assertion that postcolonial authority is often marked by mimicry and mutation where oppressive regimes adopt cultural symbols only to subvert or sterilize their subversive potential (p. 122).

In this reading, the evil painter is not merely a character but a dramatic structure he stands in for the forces that resist decolonization, that seek to recolour the world in hegemonic hues, erasing indigenous expressions and replacing them with commodified, militarized representations of power. His final act accidentally hitting the clock and spilling a pot of blood reveals the limits of such control. The staining of time itself with blood is an act of unintended resistance, a poetic justice inscribed into the dramatic texture of the play. Even the most dominant forces, the play suggests, remain vulnerable to rupture and collapse.

7. PERFORMING RESISTANCE: THEATRE AS HEALING AND POLITICAL GESTURE

While *Imaan Imaan Paani* offers a powerful critique of colonial violence and neo-colonial displacement, it also presents a vision of resistance and restoration through theatre. The play does not end in despair; rather, it mobilizes performative elements children, folk instruments and maternal figures as agents of healing, memory and hope. Theatre, in this context, becomes not only a site of protest but also of re-connection to cultural roots and communal resilience.

One of the most moving sequences is the entry of children with a *sharenja* (a traditional string instrument), symbolizing innocence, continuity and cultural heritage. Their performance, rooted in familial transmission "play that one... taught by our grandpa..." signifies a living

archive of indigenous knowledge (Goswami, 2013, p. 8). As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1997) asserts, "The struggle for cultural freedom is inseparable from the recovery of our memory and values" (p. 101). In this context, the child musicians in *Imaan Imaan Paani* emerge as carriers of ancestral memory and radical hope, challenging the violence of historical erasure through the restorative act of music.

Music plays a central role in staging resistance. The flute, previously silenced or destabilized by violence, is rekindled in moments of solidarity and creativity. Even as it falters under ideological pressure (e.g., the evil painter's interventions), the flute's reappearance signifies an emotional and spiritual reawakening a subtle act of defiance against enforced silence (Goswami, 2013, pp. 7–9). As Rustom Bharucha (2000) observes, traditional performance forms possess "an affective power that can intervene in the politics of despair" (p. 43). In *Imaan Imaan Paani*, the use of indigenous instruments such as the *sharenja* and the flute serves not simply as aesthetic ornamentation but as an act of cultural assertion restoring rhythm, memory and agency in the face of systemic silencing.

Equally significant is the mother figure, who appears multiple times as a symbol of care, loss and endurance. She embraces the mutilated puppets, sings in Rabha language and finally represents Mother Earth, attempting to awaken a world asleep in violence (Goswami, 2013, pp. 3, 9). Her body becomes the site upon which histories are inscribed colonialism, patriarchy, ecological destruction and yet she persists as a nurturing, resisting presence. This embodiment aligns with postcolonial feminist readings of the feminine body as the terrain of nationhood, where both suffering and resilience are enacted (Spivak, 1988, p. 288). The freezing of the mother figure by the evil painter is symbolic of the systemic silencing of maternal wisdom, yet her invocation lingers an unanswered call that still resonates.

In this way, *Imaan Imaan Paani* exemplifies theatre as a mode of memory-work, engaging what Connerton (1989) conceptualizes as embodied memory where the body becomes the primary medium through which cultural truths are enacted, remembered, and transmitted (p. 72). The performance space thus operates as a site of therapeutic reflection, inviting the audience not only to witness trauma but also to participate in the ongoing struggle for meaning, identity, and voice.

Ultimately, Goswami's play invites us to reimagine theatre not as spectacle but as political gesture and cultural ritual, where memory, art and resistance converge. The play does not offer easy resolutions but opens up a liminal space in which hope, however fragile, can emerge through communal imagination and aesthetic renewal.

8. CONCLUSION

Imaan Imaan Paani stands as a powerful postcolonial text that uses the medium of theatre to revisit, interrogate, and resist the layered violence's of colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization. Through symbolic staging and richly woven metaphors such as the melting clock, mutilated puppets, and the silenced flute Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami creates a performance landscape that embodies both trauma and defiance. The play renders visible the residues of colonial domination, the crisis of identity and displacement in a globalized world,

and the enduring struggle of marginalized voices to reclaim meaning through artistic expression (Goswami, 2013, pp. 1–9).

This paper has examined how the play constructs a poetics of resistance through memory-work, folk aesthetics and allegorical figures such as the evil painter and the mother. The repeated cycles of violence, protest, and suppression reflect Fanon's (1963) vision of colonial trauma as an ongoing historical condition, while the acts of creation, music and maternal invocation signify the possibility of healing and cultural renewal. As Bhabha (1994) reminds us, resistance in postcolonial contexts often emerges in the interstices through ambiguity, mimicry, and hybrid performance (p. 122).

The urgency of remembering and resisting through theatre becomes even more pronounced in the face of contemporary cultural amnesia and homogenization. The play illustrates that performance is not merely representational it is transformative, offering a space where marginalized histories can be reimagined, and suppressed voices can speak. By incorporating multilingual dialogues, indigenous instruments and surrealist visual motifs, Goswami situates *Imaan Imaan Paani* within a transcultural performance paradigm one that resists flattening cultural difference. This aligns with Bharucha's (2000) call for theatre that "mediates across histories rather than homogenizes them" (p. 27), foregrounding dialogue over appropriation and memory over mimicry.

For future research, this study opens avenues for comparative analysis with other South Asian postcolonial plays, particularly those that employ allegory and performative memory to address themes of displacement and resistance. Additionally, an intercultural performance analysis exploring how these themes traverse linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries may further enrich our understanding of postcolonial theatre as a global practice of memory and resistance.

In sum, *Imaan Imaan Paani* offers more than a story of trauma; it proposes a theatrical grammar of survival, where art becomes both witness and weapon, rupture and ritual. Its stage is not a fixed place but a contested space of remembrance, re-creation, and resistance.

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