

Global Stages, Local Narratives: Theatrical Encounters through Selim Al Deen's *SwarnaBoal*¹

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Abstract

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of the intercultural dynamics of global theatre through an in-depth analysis of Selim Al Deen's *SwarnaBoal*, a seminal Bangla play that epitomises intercultural convergence. Employing a practice-based research approach, this investigation elucidates the mechanisms by which *SwarnaBoal* navigates international theatrical interactions while preserving the integrity of local cultural narratives. The play's distinctive amalgamation of traditional Bangla narrative structures and contemporary global theatrical expressions has facilitated its global dissemination, as exemplified by its 2024 performance at Goldsmiths, University of London. Key findings underscore the intercultural exchange fostered by *SwarnaBoal*'s theatrical presentation, thereby showcasing its potential as a paradigmatic exemplar for global theatrical encounters. The study's results have profound implications for future global theatre collaborations, emphasising the imperative of cross-cultural comprehension and dialogue in performance. As Gilbert (2018) astutely observes, intercultural theatre practices possess the capacity to facilitate global understanding and empathy, while Schechner (2004) posits that performance serves as a critical site for negotiating cultural meanings and identities. Through an examination of *SwarnaBoal*'s intercultural dynamics, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on global theatre practices, highlighting the potential for local narratives to inform and enrich global cultural landscapes.

Keywords : SwarnaBoal, Worldwide performance venues, Cross-cultural exchange, Theatrical encounter, Practice as research, International theatre, Multicultural collaboration.

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Introduction

The globalisation of theatre has resulted in theatrical works being disseminated across diverse cultural contexts, prompting reimagining that reflects local narratives and cultural specificities (Schechner, 2013). This phenomenon is a testament to theatre’s dynamic nature, which continually evolves through the interplay of local traditions and global influences. As esteemed theatre scholar Gilbert (2018, p. 145) asserts, “intercultural dialogue in global theatre practices serves as a catalyst for reimagining local narratives within a global context.” This article explores the complexities of intercultural convergence in theatre, examining the ways in which local narratives are reimagined within global contexts through the lens of Selim Al Deen’s significant Bangla theatre work, *SwarnaBoal*. Theatre is a dynamic and multifaceted art form that has long been a site for negotiating cultural meanings and identities, as noted by Turner (1982, p. 11), who views theatre as “a liminal space where cultural norms and values are questioned and redefined.” This liminal space becomes a critical site for intercultural dialogue and exchange, allowing for the negotiation of global cultural flows (Pavithran, 2015).



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The intercultural dynamics of theatre can be understood through key concepts such as the “expanded corporeal state” and “vital expressive language,” as explored by Barba (2005). Critical theories, including postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988) and globalisation theory (Appadurai, 1996; Robertson, 1992), provide a framework for understanding the complexities of intercultural convergence in theatre. Additionally, Deleuze’s (1994) concept of “rhizome” can be applied to understanding the interconnectedness of global theatre practices, highlighting the

multiple entry points and exits for cultural exchange. Moreover, Habermas's (1987) theory of "communicative action" can be used to understand the ways in which intercultural dialogue in global theatre practices facilitates mutual understanding and cooperation. Further critical theories can be applied to deepen understanding of intercultural convergence in theatre. For instance, Bourdieu's (1993) theory of "cultural capital" can also be applied to understanding the ways in which global theatre practices accumulate and exchange cultural value. Additionally, Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of perception can be used to understand the embodied experiences of intercultural dialogue in global theatre practices. These critical theories provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities of intercultural convergence in theatre.

Research aims and objectives

This research investigation seeks to explore the key research inquiry: How does Selim Al Deen's *SwarnaBoal* exemplify the dynamics of global stages and local narratives in theatrical encounters? To achieve this aim, the precise goals of the present research are aimed at: (1) analysing the global and local dimensions of *SwarnaBoal*; (2) examining its theatrical encounters; and (3) discussing the implications of these encounters for performance studies.

SwarnaBoal stands as a paradigmatic example of intercultural convergence, melding local Bangla narrative structures with contemporary global theatrical expressions. This work is a cultural artefact that encapsulates the diversities and complexities of Bangla narrative traditions while engaging with global theatrical practices, echoing Foster's (2011, p. 112) observations on the "choreographic negotiation of cultural meanings in performance." Choreographic practices, according to Foster (2011), negotiate cultural meanings through embodying local narratives within global contexts. This research delves into the confluence of worldwide performance platforms and traditional storytelling via an in-depth examination of Selim Al Deen's *SwarnaBoal* (Deen, 2007). Combining sociological insights and performance studies frameworks, this research explores how *SwarnaBoal* navigates global theatrical encounters while preserving local cultural narratives. Employing a practice-based research methodology (Carter, 2004; Nelson, 2013), this study analyses excerpt performance in the UK in 2024. Findings highlight the intercultural dialogue facilitated via the theatrical presentation *SwarnaBoal*, demonstrating its potential as an exemplary model for global theatrical encounters. The importance of intercultural theatre lies in its ability to bridge global cultural multiplicities and redefine the contours of contemporary theatre, as asserted by Gilbert (2018).

Methodology

The present research employs a Practice as Research (PaR) methodology, which involves the generation of knowledge through creative practice, as conceptualised by Carter (2004) and Nelson (2013). Focusing on Selim Al Deen's *SwarnaBoal*, this methodology draws upon performance practice insights from Goldsmiths University of London's MA Theatre programme 2024. This programme boasts a multicultural cohort of students from diverse regions, including Asia, Africa, Europe, and

America. Most of these students have theatre and performance academic backgrounds and share a keen interest in exploring the Bangla narrative style play by means of performance, which resonates deeply with the content of *SwarnaBoal*, as observed by Gilbert (2018). At Goldsmiths, the MA Theatre programme fosters a creative-critical and experimental approach to performance, encouraging students to question, challenge, and reconfigure performance-making (Schechner, 2013). The programme's multicultural student cohort, made up of people from a range of multicultural heritages, offers a distinctive setting for exploring intercultural convergence in theatre. Through workshops, seminars, and lectures, students develop practical and critical skills in composing performance, preparing them to conceive, make, critique, and write about their own or others' performances (Foster, 2011). Combining the in-depth analysis of *SwarnaBoal* with insights from Goldsmiths' MA Theatre programme, this approach offers a nuanced understanding of how intercultural dialogue facilitates the reimagining of local narratives within global contexts, drawing upon the researcher's own practice-based experiences with *SwarnaBoal*.

Sociological Framework

The sociological framework draws upon Bourdieu's (1993) theory of "cultural capital" to understand the accumulation and exchange of cultural value in global theatre practices. This framework also incorporates Habermas's (1987) theory of "communicative action" to analyse the facilitation of mutual understanding and cooperation through intercultural dialogue. These sociological theories provide a structured approach to understanding the social dynamics underpinning intercultural convergence in theatre (Appadurai, 1996).

Performance Analysis

Performance analysis is informed by Foster's (2011) concept of the choreographic process of mediating and constructing cultural significations within performative contexts. This approach also draws upon Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of perception to understand the embodied experiences of intercultural dialogue in global theatre practices. Through this PaR approach, the performance analysis is deeply embedded in the practice-based inquiry, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the performative dimensions of intercultural convergence in *SwarnaBoal*.

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is anchored in the intersection of postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988), globalisation theory (Appadurai, 1996; Robertson, 1992), and performance studies (Foster, 2011; Schechner, 2013). Postcolonial theory, as conceptualised through the work of Bhabha (1994), offers a lens to elucidate the cultural dynamics of *SwarnaBoal* theatre production, a play that embodies the complexities of Bangla narrative traditions within global theatrical contexts. This theoretical perspective allows for an examination of how *SwarnaBoal* negotiates cultural meanings and identities, reflecting the postcolonial condition of hybridity and cultural difference (Bhabha, 1994). Spivak's (1988) work on the

subaltern also offers insight into the ways in which *SwarnaBoal* represents marginalised voices and perspectives, highlighting the importance of listening to and amplifying subaltern narratives.

Globalisation theory, as theorised by Appadurai (1996) and Robertson (1992), offers insight into the ways in which *SwarnaBoal* navigates global cultural flows and negotiates cultural meanings. This theoretical perspective allows for an examination of how *SwarnaBoal* engages with globalisation processes, reflecting the complexities of cultural homogenisation and heterogenisation (Appadurai, 1996). Robertson's (1992) paradigmatic formulation of "glocalization" proffers a heuristic scaffold for deciphering the critical encounter between global and local cultural spheres as exemplified by *SwarnaBoal* performance.

Performance studies, particularly Foster's (2011) concept of "choreographic negotiation of cultural meanings in performance," provides a framework for analysing the play's embodied movement and spatial practices. This theoretical perspective allows for an examination of how *SwarnaBoal* uses choreography to negotiate cultural meanings and identities, reflecting the play's intercultural convergence (Foster, 2011). Schechner's (2013) work on performance studies also offers insight into the ways in which *SwarnaBoal* uses performance to reconfigure global cultural flows and negotiate cultural meanings.

The intersection of these theoretical perspectives – postcolonial theory, globalisation theory, and performance studies – provides a nuanced understanding of the intercultural dynamics of *SwarnaBoal*. This theoretical framework allows for an examination of how *SwarnaBoal* navigates global cultural flows, negotiates cultural meanings, and represents marginalised voices and perspectives. Ultimately, this framework provides a lens for understanding *SwarnaBoal* as a powerful exemplar of intercultural convergence in global theatre practices.

This analysis covers three key areas: Global Stages, Local Narratives, and Theatrical Encounters. Selim Al Deen's *SwarnaBoal* is a seminal play in the Bangla theatrical tradition. Analytically, *SwarnaBoal* can be seen as a paradigmatic example of intercultural convergence, synthesising local Bangla narratives, classical Greek tragedy structure with contemporary global theatrical expressions. This convergence is facilitated through the play's choreographic negotiation of cultural meanings, which allows for the reimagining of local narratives within global contexts (Foster, 2011).

Analysing *SwarnaBoal*'s Engagement with Global Theatrical Platforms

SwarnaBoal engages with global theatrical platforms through its intercultural convergence, reflecting the play's potential to bridge global cultural multiplicities and redefine the contours of contemporary theatre (Gilbert, 2018). The play's performance at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2024, highlights its global reach and engagement with international audiences. The integration of narratives from Bangladesh's agricultural and fishing communities, combined with creative input from students of diverse heritages – including Australia, China, England, France, Taiwan, India, and Bangladesh – reinforces *SwarnaBoal*'s global stage

presence. This global-local interface can be understood through the critical theory of “glocalisation” (Robertson, 1992), which posits that global and local cultural forces are dialectically intertwined. *SwarnaBoal*’s global stage presence exemplifies this glocalisation process, demonstrating how local cultural narratives can be reimagined within global contexts.



International show, London, 26 March 2024, Photo courtesy: G R Sohail

Furthermore, *SwarnaBoal*’s engagement with global theatrical platforms can be seen as a manifestation of Appadurai’s (1996) theoretical notion of “scapes,” whereby refers to the fluid, imagined landscapes that shape global cultural flows. *SwarnaBoal*’s global stage presence navigates these scapes, creating a unique cultural landscape that blends local and global cultural elements, much like a rhizome, with its multiple entry points and exits for cultural exchange, allowing for diverse and complex flows of cultural meanings and practices (Deleuze, 1994). This navigation of global scapes is facilitated through the play’s use of intercultural choreography, which allows for the exchange of cultural meanings across global and local contexts (Foster, 2011).

Examining the Local Cultural Narratives Embedded in *SwarnaBoal*

The local cultural narratives embedded in *SwarnaBoal* reflect the play’s Bangla theatrical tradition roots. The narrative, which echoes the South Asian concept – in this world of binary values, “Shadhana” stands against defeat or win (Deen, 2007).² The story tells the story of Shanjhmalā, a mystic woman, and her relationship with Tirman, a young fisherman, can be understood through the lens of existential-phenomenology, highlighting the embodied experience of human beings in relation to the inexplicable world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The visible character of the play,

Shanjhmala, and the central but invisible character of the play, *SwarnaBoal*, both reflect the inexplicable world, with which the fisherman community – human beings – are engaged by their respective jobs and cultures, some of them connected by Shadhana, or sincerest devotion (Deen, 2007). This local narrative can be seen as an exemplar of Bhabha’s (1994) concept of “cultural translation,” which refers to the process of negotiating cultural meanings across local and global contexts. *SwarnaBoal*’s local narrative embodies this cultural translation process, reflecting the play’s ability to navigate global and local cultural forces.

Moreover, the local cultural narratives in *SwarnaBoal* can be understood through the critical theory of “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988), which posits that knowledge is always situated within specific cultural and historical contexts. *SwarnaBoal*’s local narrative reflects this situated knowledge, highlighting the specific cultural and historical contexts of Bangladesh’s agricultural and fishing communities. This situated knowledge is crucial for understanding the play’s intercultural convergence, as it allows for the reimagining of local narratives within global contexts.

***SwarnaBoal* Reimagined: A Hybrid Theatrical Experience Merging Bangla Storytelling and Greek Classics**

<i>Bandana</i> (prayer)		
Act 1 (opening ceremony)		
Scene	Character	Performance plan
song: <i>she ashey ashare</i>		
1	Shanjhmala and SwarnaBoal	music and movement
2	Praise of forefathers	music and movement (recite character’s dialogue in performers’ preferred language)
Bridging the scenes through a song: <i>Ami robo na robo na grihe</i>		
Act 2 (love and reveal)		
1	Shanjhmala and Tirmon	music and movement
2	Departure of Shanjhmala	character acting (in performers’ preferred language)
song: <i>Ai na nilam khowaj khijir</i>		
Act 3 (hunting SwarnaBoal)		
1	SwarnaBoal and Tirmon	music and movement

2	Departure of SwarnaBoal	music and movement (recite character's dialogue in performers' preferred language)
<i>song: Min rupe shai khele</i>		
Act 4 (death of Shanjh mala)		
1	Shanjh mala and hunter fishermen	music and movement
2	Accidental death of Shanjh mala	character acting (recite character's dialogue in performers' preferred language)
<i>alap: aan milo sajna</i>		
Act 5 (light and hope)		
1	Tirmon in-between the departed soul of Shanjh mala and the invincible fish SwarnaBoal	music and movement
2	Closing narration as <i>Mangal Porbo</i>	music and movement (recite character's dialogue in performers' preferred language)

The redesigned Bangla narrative play *SwarnaBoal* is a unique theatrical adaptation that ingeniously blends the structural framework of classical Greek tragedy with the rich cultural heritage of Bangla narrative traditions. This excerpt performance is meticulously crafted into a five-act structure, commencing with a poignant *Bandana* (prayer) segment that seamlessly integrates music and dance, thereby setting a reverent tone for the performance. The play culminates with an uplifting *Mangal Porbo* (light and hope), symbolising the triumph of hope and positivity. A succinct summary of the five-act excerpt performance in the UK in 2024 reveals a thoughtfully curated narrative arc. Act 1 inaugurates the performance with a ceremonial amalgamation of music and dance movements, creatively ritualising the performers' diverse heritage. Act 2 unveils the pivotal themes of the story, centring around the profound emotion of love. Act 3 dramatises the poignant episode of Tirmon's hunting of the fish SwarnaBoal, while Act 4 poignantly portrays the accidental death of Shanjh mala. Ultimately, Act 5 resonates with the profound South Asian philosophical concept of "Shadhana," which emphatically posits that true devotion and pursuit stand resolute against the binary dichotomies of defeat or victory, as conceptualised by Deen (2007). This innovative redesign of *SwarnaBoal* thus offers a captivating theatrical experience that not only honours the classical roots of Greek tragedy but also infuses it with the vibrant essence of Bangla narrative traditions.



International show, London, 26 March 2024, Photo courtesy: G R Sohail

Discussing the Theatrical Encounters in *SwarnaBoal* and Their Significance

The theatrical encounters in *SwarnaBoal* are characterised by the play's embodied movement, such as the movements of the *SwarnaBoal* and *Shanjhmala*, which convey the mystical and inexplicable aspects of human experience, echoing Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion of embodied experience as a fundamental aspect of human existence. The choreography in *SwarnaBoal* is an exemplar of intercultural embodiment that reimagines the human experience of the inexplicable world, reflecting Mitra's (2015) observation on Akram Khan's choreography. The spatial practices in *SwarnaBoal*, such as using the river Chirli as a liminal space, foster wonder and awe among the audience, aligning with Schechner's (2004) concept of performance as a transformative experience. This theatrical encounter can be seen as a manifestation of Turner's (1982) concept of "communitas," which refers to the sense of shared humanity and collective experience that arises from ritual and performance. Through its theatrical encounters, *SwarnaBoal* creates a space for intercultural exchange and understanding, highlighting the play's significance as a work of contemporary theatre that transcends cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, the theatrical encounters in *SwarnaBoal* can be understood through the lens of postcolonial theory, which critiques the power dynamics of cultural representation and exchange (Bhabha, 1994). *SwarnaBoal*'s theatrical encounters subvert traditional power dynamics by centring local cultural narratives and embodied experiences, thereby challenging dominant global cultural discourses. This subversion of power dynamics reflects the play's potential to decolonise theatrical practices and promote intercultural understanding. The intercultural dynamics of *SwarnaBoal* provide a nuanced understanding of the performative dimensions of

globalisation, as conceptualised by Appadurai (1996). Appadurai's notion of globalisation as a complex, multifaceted process underscores the play's engagement with global cultural flows. The play's embodied local narratives serve as a site for negotiating cultural meanings and identities, allowing for the reconfiguration of global cultural flows, as posited by Schechner (2013). Schechner's concept of performance as a means of negotiating cultural meanings highlights the relevance of *SwarnaBoal* as a platform for intercultural dialogue.

Ultimately, this analysis and discussion reveal *SwarnaBoal* as a powerful exemplar of intercultural convergence in global theatre practices. The play's potential to facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation through intercultural dialogue is underscored by Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action. Habermas's emphasis on the importance of intersubjective understanding and cooperation highlights the value of *SwarnaBoal* as a catalyst for intercultural exchange.

The theatre encounter's utilisation of spatial practices, such as the river Chirli as a liminal space, evokes wonder and awe among the audience, aligning with Schechner's (2004) notion of performance as a transformative experience. This liminal space facilitates a sense of transition and transformation, critical to *SwarnaBoal*'s capacity for fostering intercultural understanding and cooperation. Moreover, the intercultural dynamics of *SwarnaBoal* exemplify Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where cultural meanings and identities are negotiated beyond binary oppositions. The theatre encounter's incorporation of embodied local narratives and spatial practices creates this third space, enabling the reconfiguration of global cultural flows.

Furthermore, *SwarnaBoal*'s engagement with globalisation reflects the process of glocalisation, emphasising the dialectical encounter between global and local cultural forces and highlighting the play's ability to navigate transnational cultural currents while remaining rooted in traditional cultural discursivities.

Conclusion

SwarnaBoal's intercultural synthesis is a pivotal aspect of its theatrical encounters, fostering a transformative experience for audiences and promoting mutual understanding and cooperation through intercultural dialogue. Navigating global stages and local narratives, *SwarnaBoal* creates a distinctive cultural terrain that amalgamates local narratives and global stage constituents, emblematising its significance as a seminal work of contemporary theatre. This study serves as a foundation for future research on the role of performance in charting global cultural flows and promoting intercultural understanding, highlighting the need to explore the applicability of *SwarnaBoal*'s intercultural dynamics to other global theatre practices.

Notes

1. The narrative play under study, published by Somoy Prakashan in Bangladesh, is credited as *Sharnoboal* (translated as *The Golden Boal* in the publication). However, in this research, the play's name is transliterated as *SwarnaBoal*, and the English translation is rendered as *The Golden Catfish*. This clarification is provided to ensure uniformity throughout this study and to reflect the preferred transliteration and translation used by the researcher.
2. translated by Rebecca Hoque.

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