# Theatre and Postcolonial Desires

Awam Amkpa



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# Theatre and Postcolonial **Desires**

This book explores the themes of colonial encounters and postcolonial contests over identity, power, and culture through the prism of theatre. The struggles it describes unfolded in two cultural settings separated by geography, but bound by history in a common web of colonial relations spun by the imperatives of European modernity. In post-imperial England, as in its former colony Nigeria, the colonial experience not only hybridized the process of national selfdefinition, but also provided dramatists with the language, imagery, and frame of reference to narrate the dynamics of internal wars over culture and national destiny happening within their own societies.

The author examines the works of prominent twentieth-century Nigerian and English dramatists such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, David Edgar, and Caryl Churchill to argue that dramaturgies of resistance in the contexts of both Nigeria as well as its imperial inventor England, shared a common allegiance to what he describes as *postcolonial desires*. That is, the aspiration to overcome the legacies of colonialism by imagining alternative universes anchored in democratic cultural pluralism. The plays and their histories serve as filters through which Amkpa illustrates the operation of what he calls "overlapping modernities" and reconfigures the notions of power and representation, citizenship and subjectivity, colonial and anticolonial nationalisms, and postcoloniality.

The dramatic works studied in this book embodied a version of postcolonial aspirations that the author conceptualizes as transcending temporal locations to encompass varied moments of consciousness for progressive change, whether they happened during the heyday of English imperialism in early twentiethcentury Nigeria, or in response to the exclusionary politics of the Conservative Party in Thatcherite England.

Theatre and Postcolonial Desires will be essential reading for students and researchers in the areas of drama, postcolonial, and cultural studies.

Awam Amkpa is currently an Associate Professor of Drama at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. He trained in Nigeria under Wole Soyinka and completed a Ph.D. in Drama at the University of Bristol. He is the author of critical essays and plays – Not in My Season of Songs and Ajasco, a director of film documentaries – Winds Against Our Souls, It's All About Downtown, National Images/Transnational Desires, and the feature film Wazobia.

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ISBN 0-203-33751-4 (Adobe eReader Format) ISBN 0-415-31287-6 (Print Edition) In loving memory of Alice "Mama Aba Road" Amkpa And to Festus Amkpa and Rebecca Amkpa

To inspiring teachers – Wole Soyinka, Yemi Ogunbiyi and Biodun Jeyifo

And to Abraham and Kader

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### Foreword

# Placing theatre at the center of postcolonial theory and modernist discourse

By Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, author of Decolonizing the Mind

Colonialism and the forces it generated have always been part of capitalist modernity. But that modernity, seen through a Eurocentric prism, tends to see colonialism as that Other, and Western civilization, as a linear development, untouched, in its formation and character, by colonial encounters. And yet the genesis of capital as the dominant mode in the production and reproduction of wealth, power, and values in modern society is simultaneous with colonial explorations and settlement, in fact colonialism is its external manifestation.

The other side of the same coin is to see African developments as linear until disturbed by ninteenth-century imperialism, often marginalizing the effect of slavery and plantation slavery on the formation of African identities.

In his book, *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires*, Awam Amkpa rejects a modernity seen through a Eurocentric prism and reads theatre and performance through the prism of these colonial encounters and their historical descendants, postcolonial aspirations. For him modernity is pluralistic and multi-layered. So also is Africa. Awam takes as his heritage, for better or worse, the multiple legacies Africa's interaction with a plethora of global systems from antiquity to the present.

In the process Awam Amkpa makes two important interventions in discourses on theories of the modern and postcolonial. His discussion of Africa's transition to modernity demonstrates the powerful influences these global systems have had on the evolution of the continent's cultural, political, and economic landscapes and thus tempers the tendency to reproduce the Hegelian notion of Africa as a region outside human history. His situating dramatic texts at the center of postcolonial cultural production is a welcome development since theatre texts tend to be neglected by theorists of postcoloniality.

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The notion of "postcolonial desire," the act of imagining, living, and negotiating a social reality based on democracy, cultural pluralism, and social justice, is the unifying theme of this book. African theatre and performance are in fact best placed to interrogate this pluralistic modernity and postcolonial desire.

African performance has always been central to questions of social being. Performance was part of the anti-colonial resistance and after independence part of the questioning of the new postcolonial realities, with theatre becoming the site of struggle for social democracy. Not surprisingly, Africa's performance was the first to be assaulted by the cultural forces of colonialism to give space for construction of a colonized being. The same colonized being, mutating into a neo-colonial dictator sees theatre as a threat, and he often sends theatre practitioners into prisons, exile, or death in some cases. But theatre refuses to die either as text or as practice. It becomes a crucial part of the entire process of decolonization and understanding of modernity.

The Africa that has produced this theatre is one of overlapping modernities. It is a product and an expression of multivocal pluralistic modernities and throughout his very intriguing analysis, Amkpa insists on the centrality of the plurality of the African experience. It is because he himself is a product of these overlapping modernities that Awam is able to brilliantly use colonial encounters to interrogate both Africa and Europe guided by his belief that socially conscious art is an essential tool for creating and sustaining democracy.

This book, using Africa and England as the basis of its inquiry, places theatre at the center of postcolonial theory and modernist discourse. Students of literature, theatre, performance, the politics and economies of art should find it useful.

> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Director, International Center for Writing and Translation Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature University of California, Irvine

> > Irvine, 2003

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New York, 2003

## Introduction

From colonial modernity to postcolonial desires: oppositional theatre in Nigeria and England

The alarm went off at 5 a.m. It was an unusual Monday morning over three decades ago in northern Nigeria's Islamic city of Kano. I woke up to a lingering sense of the merrymaking that had taken hold of our home since the Friday before. My parents had thrown one of their usual lively parties, climaxed by the performance of a nostalgic masquerade native to their hometown of far-away Lokoja. Masquerades and the mysterious pre-Islamic, pre-Christian African legends they represented, had early cast a spell upon my childish mind, which no amount of Sunday School admonitions against "pagan" rites could ever break. Imagine then, my exhilaration that weekend, upon discovering that it was my bedroom the performers had chosen in which to bedeck themselves in the magnificent insignia of the make-believe world about to happen. As I watched them put on their masks from a corner of my room, I heard someone express the apprehension that the lead actor's real-life conversion to evangelical Christianity may have drained him of the ancient mystical powers demanded by the role he was about to play.

Yet, if the performer was culturally "inauthentic," so was his audience. For, like him, the rest of us – my family and the guests who were waiting to be entertained - straddled multiple worlds of what I would later describe as "overlapping modernities." Recent converts to Christianity, we had emigrated to the Islamic and Hausa city of Kano from Lokoja and the surrounding Bassa-Nge villages at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers in central Nigeria, where the masquerades originated. Lokoja was itself heir to a pre-European modernity – a cultural pluralism shaped by the area's successive encounters with global systems and internal migrations long before the English created Nigeria. Over the ages, waves of newcomers to the region – the Bassa-Nges, Bassa-Komos, Igbiras, Igalas, Nupes, and Gwaris, many of them refugees from the trans-Saharan slave trade in the north and later the Atlantic slave trade in the south – forged a multi-ethnic society, overlaid in the nineteenth century by the culture of European colonialism. Indeed, Lokoja became colonial Nigeria's first political capital. It was, however, a primordial Lokoja, a "pure" indigenous cultural entity, that the masked performers and their audience

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imagined and celebrated with song and dance in my parent's home that Friday afternoon thirty years ago. The aboriginal protagonist (neo-Christian in real life) gyrated to the "pagan" songs rendered by his neo-Christian on-lookers with a gusto that swept away anxieties over authenticity on all sides. It signified instead, a sense of alienation from Islamic Kano, a rejection of the marginalization faced by non-Muslim and non-Hausa immigrants to that teeming city, and a nostalgic longing for the comfortable familiarity of the participants' Lokoja "home." That weekend's festivities were, for me, an early lesson in theatre's role in opening up and reflecting a *desiring process* through which we imagine and live alternative universes. Years later, as a cross-Atlantic denizen of both my native Nigeria and its imperial inventor England, I would use theatre as the principal vehicle for registering my postcolonial desire for a democratic Africa and a pluralistic Europe.

But let us return for a moment to the Monday morning following the masquerade. For I was about to cross cultural borders - from a world of make-believe, nostalgic Lokoja "authenticity" in Islamic Kano into a cultural space fashioned by the Euro-modernity of Nigeria's recent colonial past. I attended a school run by an American Evangelist group called the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). That Monday marked the beginning of an annual religious retreat at the school - an occasion that attracted many visiting pastors from the United States. For me, the most attractive feature of the event consisted in the singing. I especially liked one song known as "The Song of Colors." It was a simple song, yet when sung by the entire school in unison with the choir, it never failed to send a tingle down my spine. Its presentation held a special import for me that day, for I, of all the children in the school, was selected to hold the special book from which we sang the hymn. The book contained no words but rather had pages splashed with different colors, each of which provided a cue to the singing of a particular verse of my favorite song. According to the missionaries, the "black" pages stood for the color of sin in which we were all born; "red" represented the blood of Jesus Christ which He sacrificed for us; "white" symbolized the purity of Christ's intentions and the state of sinlessness all of God's children, but heathens in particular, must aspire to attain. We were also told the "gold" colored pages signified the immense wealth awaiting us in the kingdom of God when we achieved "whiteness" in our hearts. It was a beautiful song, rendered in call and response by my starryeyed schoolmates and our sacred interlocutors. We sang joyfully, secure in the knowledge that the wisdom and guidance of our American evangelical teachers would lead us, black children born in sin, all the way to heaven.

A few years later, I moved to St Thomas, an elite secondary school run by the Catholic Church, with Irish priests as well as Catholic teachers from England and India. It was there that I became conscious of the ambiguities of my state of being and place of belonging, of the trauma of identity in a crazy, complex, paradoxical postcolonial state. Every morning at assembly, students from a variety of cultural backgrounds including my closest friends - Amir Qureshi from Pakistan, Ralph Bailey from Guyana, Raphael Bassey from south-east Nigeria, Nasiru Hamza from north-east Nigeria, Akinloye Ogubanjo from Western Nigeria, and Patrick Akusu from mid-west Nigeria - congregated in the same school uniform of white pants, white shirts, and white shoes. There, as we said our prayers, we were supposed to meld into one community under a Catholic God united in heart, mind, and spirit. Yet, no less a person than Father James Gillick, the school Principal and teacher of Literature and Religious Studies, disrupted any simple, unitary notions of identity that such an exercise may have implied. One day, in an attempt to capture the rhythmic beauty of a nostalgic English poem, he chose to speak in his native Gaelic rather than in English. His insistence that he was not "English" confused me. The colonial education I inherited from my parents suggested that Europeans spoke only a few languages: English, French, German and Portuguese, and of course the classical Latin, "the language of God and the church." Father Gillick's choice of Gaelic over English somehow made him an "inauthentic" European. I could not understand why he of all people – to all appearances a white man from the English Isles – would want to disavow an English identity.

My bewilderment over the Irish Father's rejection of Englishness stemmed at least in part from the success with which English colonialism in Nigeria had succeeded in acculturating my family to its cultural assumptions. My parents embraced Christianity and Englishness with enthusiasm. While my mother managed a large family at home, my father worked for the English as a telephone engineer in the then Department of Post and Telegrams. I recall the colonial uniform he sometimes wore on special occasions: khaki shorts, long knee-high brown socks, black ties, and jackets with large buttons emblazoned with the English coat of arms and the inscription "HM's Government" (Her Majesty's Government). He also had the same helmets the English brought to their colonies and the cross-body belts colonial administrators wore on official duties. We were assigned a house in the exclusive Government Reservation Area once occupied by Sir Bryan Sharwood Smith,<sup>1</sup> a former communications and intelligence officer who later became the colonial Governor of Northern Nigeria. My father spent his final working days in post-independence Nigeria lamenting the departure of the English, who alone, in his opinion, knew how to manage the "modernity" they had created for us. As a teenager, I discovered his uniforms, training manuals, and other colonial memorabilia neatly packed into boxes in a closet where they had been consigned after Nigeria became independent in 1960. These items included a wind-up gramophone emblazoned with the image of a dog singing into what appeared like the open end of a large trumpet with the words "his master's voice" scribbled on a brass plate at the base of the equipment. I also found very fragile playing records, telephones, tools, and airmail letters from his

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former bosses in retirement homes in England, as well as assorted books. Most interesting of all was a manual entitled *The Book of Don'ts*, a masterpiece of prescriptive literature designed to assimilate natives into colonial norms of hygiene and etiquette.

These treasures represented the legacy of what I would later recognize as "colonial nationalism," - an essential cultural corollary to England's invention of what we know as the state of Nigeria. The colonization of West Africa was part of the larger story of Western imperialism, driven by European power rivalries and the economic imperatives of the Industrial Revolution – an often violently competitive quest for markets, raw materials, and sites for the investment of surplus capital. In 1884, the German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck convened a landmark conference of European nations at Berlin to regulate the terms of Western engagement in Africa. The Berlin meeting effectively formalized the "Scramble for Africa" by demarcating spheres of political influence and economic interest that the various European powers would subsequently consolidate by force and chicanery. The region that became Nigeria fell to England's lot. In order to facilitate colonial administration, the English divided the Nigerian region into two sections. They established direct control over the southern part which provided access to the sea. There, the native authorities were reorganized and subordinated to a coercive colonial government. The North, by contrast, was run indirectly through existing Islamic chieftains, to whom the English offered military support and safe passage for their articles of trade through southern ports onto European markets. It was not until 1914 that Governor General Frederick Lugard, with a mandate from the Crown, amalgamated the two sections into the single state of Nigeria, named after the great river originating in the Fouta Djallon mountains of Guinea and "discovered" by the English missionary and adventurer Mungo Park.

As in Asia, England faced the formidable challenge of reorganizing the diverse peoples and cultures that inhabited this geographical space into a homogeneous entity readily governable from London. To that end, trade, education, and Christian missions, promoted by the Royal Niger Trading Company on the one hand, and the Anglican Church on the other, served as significant vehicles of "civilization." Most importantly, forging a unified nation out of over two hundred heterogeneous entities that were themselves part of other global formations on the continent, called for a lingua franca. Thus, English became the dominant language of administration, socialization, and communication in colonial Nigeria, as well as the defining feature of the "modernity" into which the colonial masters sought to conscript the "natives." These profoundly important cultural trappings of colonialism - from etiquette and dress to religion and language - were fashioned into a discourse of what I call "colonial nationalism" that sought to "modernize" and "civilize" the colonized by assimilating them into Englishness. Colonial nationalism promoted the incorporation of Africans into a version of European modernity that I call "colonial modernity" – a modernity semantically, culturally, and politically synonymous with European values and institutions, especially Christianity, the English language, and a clear consciousness of the boundaries between the secular and the sacred in cultural life. Colonial modernity was inherently hierarchical in that it assumed the natural superiority of European mores over those of the subdued "natives," and therefore, the legitimacy of the West's mandate to govern the colonized. In this context, the colonial regime tolerated indigenous cultural practices to the extent that such practices did not challenge the colonial nationalist project. When not demonized, African cultures were allowed as markers of barbaric difference that were then depoliticized and turned into romantic spectacles. In other instances, they were sustained to signify the very savagery that needed to be overcome by Europeanizing the Africans.

Yet, no amount of assimilation to Anglo-European norms could place Africans at the center of European modernity. The colonized remained trapped in what I describe as an "inter-modernist" landscape on the margins of that modernity, bounded by English constructions of race. Encircled by the Africans' blackness, this "inter-modernist" location marked moments of European intrusion into local civilizations and occasions of cultural fusion between European and African. Yet, it was this very space, set up by colonial modernity to define the limits of assimilation that also became the theatre for confronting colonial domination with tropes of anticolonial nationalism. Within the inter-modernist landscape, colonial epistemologies and their modes of representation encountered what V.N. Volosinov referred to as "a struggle for the sign."<sup>2</sup> In this struggle, the colonized frequently appropriated the words, images, symbols, and institutions of the colonizer to talk about and resist their own marginalization.

Theatre became a significant site of these "inter-modernist" struggles. Ousmane Diakhate and Hansel Eyoh<sup>3</sup> have written that Africans did not name their theatre; rather they "lived it," as an integral part of their everyday lives at home and in public spaces. The singing and dancing, masquerades and folk-tales, the rituals and festivals that peppered family and communal life in West Africa all contributed to a theatre of engagement. As practiced in auditoria, market places, community halls, schools, streets, and in religious and secular ceremonies, theatre came to mean a symbolic interpretation of social reality that facilitated communication, socialization, and community. It bound performers and spectators together in a surreal journey of empowerment that carried real potential for collective action. Borrowing from studies in semiotics, I have come to define theatre as a process of enacting and scoring signifiers which enable audiences to identify or counter-identify with the ideological discourses informing the performance. The dramatic arts, like language, consist of a symphony of signs which make and share "meaning," flesh out identities, and galvanize agency. These signs make up "representations" and without modes of representation, identities make no sense.

Moreover, the system of signification that theatrical practices embodied, endowed them with the capacity to not simply illustrate culture, but to make it as well. In the Nigeria of my birth, culture reflects a condition of in-betweeness within the framework of which identity, citizenship, and representational approaches are negotiated. Identity is never finished. Animated by a culture's production of signifiers, it remains in a state of dynamic flux. Thus, try as they might, colonial representations of African identities did not always succeed in locking Nigerians into a static, passive, debased sense of "self." As Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson have suggested, the discourse of colonialism did indeed incorporate colonized subjects in a system of representation.<sup>4</sup> Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines, Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, and Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson all relegated Africans to the margins of a modernity constructed as exclusively European. Likewise, William Shakespeare's Othello and The Tempest dramatized an imagery that connected blackness with lust, emotional volatility, and "inherent" intellectual inferiority. Colonial representation sealed African identities and stigmatized them as a dispossessed people with no serious possibilities of agency. Yet, unflattering colonial representations provoked the proliferation of counter texts contesting those representations. Tiffin and Lawson drew attention to this fact when they asserted "[colonial] control is complete only up to the moment of its announcement; once enunciated it can never again be total, since the circulation of the knowledge loosens it."5 Anticolonial theatre created identities and settings for the negotiation of subjectivity and issues of morality between performances and their spectators.

This theatre of nationalist resistance was profoundly hybridized not only by the Africans' own cosmopolitan brushes with different global systems - the trans-Saharan, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic - but also by their experience with colonial nationalism. Thus, the "inter-modernist" site of semiotic struggles between the imperialist and the colonized was a culturally hybrid space that, according to Homi Bhabha, had the effect of threatening the very authority of colonial discourses: "The effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions."6 The political potential of hybridity enables the colonized to imagine and live what Bhabha calls a "Third Space" where "the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides."7 "Pidgin English" - one medium of Nigeria's dramaturgies of resistance - represents a case in point. It deliberately subverted the grammatical norms of the colonizer's language even as it used that language to articulate aspirations for independent nationhood. It was within such spaces of inter-modernist hybridity, spaces that demarcated the limits of "native" assimilation to European modernity, that ideologies and practices of decolonization were conceptualized and developed.

Anticolonial nationalism was by no means a unified, monolithic movement, nor did it win the allegiance of all segments of the colonized population at the same time. My father's persistent loyalty to the English long after the sun had faded upon the British Empire should make this point clear. Indeed, the social cleavages and cultural hybridity of the colonized produced what I call an "intra-modernist" landscape marked by conflict and tensions among the "natives" themselves. Colonialism perpetuated age-old rivalries and invented new ones in many subordinated societies. In Nigeria, the English sought to assimilate their subjects into "modern" social classes, privileging some ethnic groups over others in ways that continue to produce regional and ethnic conflict to this day. The colonial organization of the region's myriad ethnic groups into four categories - the Yorubas, Hausas, Igbos, and the so-called "minorities," with the Hausas at the top - not only shaped a fractious independence movement in Nigeria, but also complicated the postcolonial work of redefining a single Nigerian nation. In this context, it is important to note that non-elites - the "people" or the "folk" - were subject to the same forces of reorganization, relabeling, assimilation and indeed hybridization to which the colonized elites were subjected. Anthony Appiah was quite right to observe, "we must not fall for the sentimental notion that the 'people' have held on to an indigenous national tradition, that only the educated bourgeoisie are 'children of two worlds.'"<sup>8</sup> The hybridity that characterized the "inter-modernist" and "intra-modernist" landscapes thus defied bi-polar constructions of anticolonial struggles as "European versus African." It also complicated essentialist readings of a unified "African" cultural "authenticity" at war with European imperialism. Wole Sovinka in his *Death and the King's Horseman* depicted a people navigating the slippery terrains of "intra-modernism" and "inter-modernism" as they struggled to determine who they were and where they belonged. Rejecting essentialist interpretations of authenticity, Soyinka suggested that European modernity had drawn Nigerians into a constantly shifting, highly pluralistic terrain that made it impossible to reduce nationalist contests into a bipolar "clash of cultures."

The Second World War turned the cultural landscapes of intermodernism and intra-modernism into hotbeds of anticolonial activity. A global war fought against fascism and racism in defense of democracy, supplied ample rationale to challenge imperialism across Asia and Africa, while Japanese victories in Southeast Asia during the war shattered the illusion of European invincibility. Nationalist movements, fed by resentment against the colonial powers' increasing demand for resources and labor, emerged all over Africa. Colonialism disrupted traditional agriculture, prompting mass migrations of rural populations to wartime shantytowns, which saw the development of potent anticolonial constituencies

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of unemployed workers. In the wave of Afro-Asian decolonization that followed, Nigeria itself was born anew as an independent nation state on October 1, 1960.

Yet, formal independence from English colonialism did not bring freedom to Nigeria's hopeful multitudes. Colonialism left the legacy of a dysfunctional parliamentary democracy paralyzed by ethnic and regional rivalries. In the post-Second World War period, Nigeria's English masters had crafted a series of constitutions in the course of their negotiations with various nationalist and other factions in the colony, granting a disproportionate amount of influence to their client chieftains in the north. The colonial tradition of privileging one section of the country over another accentuated conflicts among the ethnic groups reorganized by the English – often arbitrarily. Thus, the departure of the English was followed by a series of political crises culminating in the overthrow of civilian rule by military coups from the late 1960s to the 1990s. The anticolonial hope of self-determination yielded to Nigeria's long nightmare of neo-colonial dictatorships.

Oil lubricated the machinery of the neo-colonial state. Military dictators with firm support from European nations who bought the new nation's oil, derailed democratic processes with impunity. Conscripting their subjects into a unitary nationalism that paid no heed to the country's ethnic complexity, the dictators turned Nigerians into a people who produced things they could not consume, while developing a taste for consumer goods they could never produce. The unequal terms of Nigeria's ties to the industrialized West perpetuated its subservience to the colonial, hierarchical variant of European modernity, itself in the process of reconfiguration by the super power challenge posed by the United States. Kwame Nkrumah was perfectly right when he described neo-colonialism as the "worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress."

Neo-colonialism reconfigured the nature and function of the intermodernist and intra-modernist landscapes within Nigeria. Foreign nation states no longer served as the instrument of domination as in colonial times. Rather, multinational and transnational corporations whose economic power translated into political currency across many nation states, became the new vehicles for drawing formerly colonized peoples into a fresh global modernity centered in Europe, but encompassing the United States as well. This neo-colonial context transformed the inter-modernist landscape from a site where anti-imperialist cultures were developed into a conduit through which the new imperialism accessed the nation. The elite class at the forefront of the inter-modernist landscape became as corrupt as the military dictators who ruled the land with an iron fist. On the other hand, the intra-modernist landscape became more chaotic as class and religious differences superseded ethnicities as the primary lines of division. Such