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Gender and Racial Issues in the Adaptation of Ancient Greek Tragedy: Performing *A Mouthful of Birds* by Caryl Churchill

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Abstract: This study aimed to translate and perform the play *A Mouthful of Birds* by Caryl Churchill and examine the way of directing the stage, which raises problems without reproducing conventional discrimination and prejudice. *A Mouthful of Birds*, an adaptation of the ancient Greek tragedy Euripides's *The Bacchae*, recreates its theme of possession and women's violence. While this work succeeded in fluctuating politics and stereotypes around gender with both content and format, it carries over the issue of describing the non-Western world as incomprehensible and abnormal. A female character from Trinidad-Tobago, Marcia, demonstrates as being a victim of violence among British white women getting power with violence. When performing the play, the oppressive circumstances around Marcia must be recreated. On the other hand, since the colony of England does not have the same meaning in Japan, it has to take different approaches. Thus, we reconstructed and shot parts of *A Mouthful of Birds* starring Marcia, posted them on Youtube, and held an online inquiry. Through those research, we attempted to find the most suitable approach without reproducing conventional problems along with adaptations, such as translation using dialect and makeup of blackface.

Introduction

As a continuation of *Misogyny in Greek Tragedy and Its Solutions Presented in Modern Performances* (Yasukawa, 2020), this research focuses on the adaptation of the Greek tragedy written by a feminist playwright, Caryl Churchill. The research aims to examine how the stage is directed, which raises problems without reproducing conventional discrimination and prejudice.

Regarding the research methodology, firstly, we translated *A Mouthful of Birds* into Japanese. We secondly scrutinized previous research from the viewpoints of feminism and post-colonialism. Thirdly, we interviewed Mr. Satoshi KINSUI, Ms. Miho SUZUKI, and Mr. Matthew BURDELSKI. Finally, we created a film that reflected our research on how to represent gender and race, and conducted a questionnaire survey for the audience.

Caryl Churchill and *A mouthful of birds*

Author: Caryl Churchill, David Lan Director: Ian Spink, Les Waters

Designer: Annie Smart Company: Joint Stock Theatre Group

Places Performed: Birmingham Repertory Theatre, The Royal Court Theatre (London)

Start date: 29. August. 1986

The British dramatist, Caryl Churchill, who started her career in 1972, has been creating works based on interests in dynamics of gender and hierarchy, then the criticism of patriarchy and capitalism.

A Mouthful of Birds is a play inspired by Ancient Greek Tragedy *The Bacchae*, extracting the themes of 'possession' and 'violent women'. In the 12 weeks of the workshop, Churchill got the idea of 'undefended days' that nothing can protect them from power inside or outside them. For this reason, she created the format that seven characters stop their everyday lives and become possessed by spirits, ecstasy, and intense emotion. This play consists of three parts while inserting 'Dionysus dance' between them. In the first part, seven people spend their everyday complex lives. Then, in the second part, they experience the supernatural world through many kinds of possession. Finally, in the third part, they monologize how their lives changed.

Analysis from three points of view -Greek Tragedy

A mouthful of birds is one of the adaptations based on the ancient Greek tragedy, Euripides's *The Bacchae*, written in the last years of his life and first performed in 405 B.C. The story is about the god Dionysus and his punishment for Agave, who did not believe her sister was loved by Zeus and gave birth to Dionysus, and her son, king Pentheus who banned Dionysus's religion. Dionysus comes to Thebes with bacchantes and drives local women mad, and finally, Pentheus is torn to pieces by insane Agave and other mad women. In the work, several significant themes like the (1) binary confrontation between the west and east, (2) gender and sexuality, (3) patriarchy and vulnerability of masculinity, (4) religion, (5) transformation, imagination¹, and meta-theatricality are included.

Focusing on modern performances, the number of contemporary experimental Greek tragedy performances, which include political or social themes, has increased after the success of Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* based on *The Bacchae* (Hall, 2004, p.1). According to the production database of APGRD (Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama), in the 1960s, 37 productions were registered, almost seven times as many as the previous decade, and the number has increased since then, with 92 productions being staged in the 1990s. *A Mouthful of Birds* could also be one of the avant-garde adaptations created in the context of that trend.

Analysis from three points of view - Feminist critique

A mouthful of birds was highly evaluated in the following four points as a feminist play. First, this play undermines paternalism and the gender roles it regulates. Churchill claims this play challenges the traditional view that 'men are naturally violent, and women are naturally peaceful' by displaying violent women (Churchill and Lan, 1986, p.5). In addition, the possession forgives characters to behave beyond their role and position determined by social and gender codes (Suzuki, 2015, p.48). As Hersh pointed out, "The possessions which permeate the text of the play

¹ See Goldhill, Simon. *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*. Univ of Chicago Pr, 2007. p.38. Zeitlin, Froma. "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama." *Representations* 11. 1985. pp.63-94.

each function as “acts of resistance” which extend the conventional boundaries of gender roles and empower women” (Hersh, 1992, p.412). Second, the seven main characters, introduced only by their social statuses, such as wife/mother, unemployed, or business person, embody their oppression by social norms and fragmentation with each other. Thirdly, this play also breaks binary systems that regulate body and sexuality and frees characters from fixed standards. For example, unemployed Derek, obsessed with masculinity, is possessed by Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century hermaphrodite. Similarly, a sexist vicar, Dan, is possessed by an ambiguous god, Dionysus. Those two men who wear women’s apparel express the ambiguous identity of gender and sexuality and satisfy their situation in Part Three. “This ambivalence, together with the constant experimentation with cross dressing, role-playing, gender ambiguity, and gender switching, leads to a much more fluid sense of gender identity and of personal identity, and this fluidity suggests the possibility of transformation” (Winker, 1993, p.224). As mentioned above, Churchill tries to disrupt standards and dominant norms by writing fluidity to what were originally dichotomous features. However, there is a risk of incomprehension disorders of sex development and room for criticism about the use of minorities to relativize masculinity. Finally, Churchill seems to pay attention to patriarchy in expression form. She has worked on her plays with the awareness that the representation system is structurally similar to “phallo-centrism” in that they categorize everything as binary, like masculine/feminine, and place masculine above feminine. Thinking players and roles in theatre have similar relationships, Churchill tries to deconstruct them. (Kritzer, 1989, p.128, Diamond, 1988, p.189)

However, some researchers pointed out problems in depicting possession and violence. Possession does empower some characters, but at the same time, it dominates them more. Women’s capacity for violence, though probably targeting paternalism, is often used against other weaker women (Raima, 2001, p.269). Furthermore, being possessed does not necessarily change the character’s situation for the better. A Trinidadian medium, Marcia, always suffers from possession and violence while other women are somehow empowered.

Therefore, *A Mouthful of Birds* is against patriarchy in content and format. On the contrary, the impact of possession and violence as a way of freeing is limited and differs between characters of different races and ethnicity.

Analysis from three points of view - Postcolonialism

Caryl Churchill was evaluated as a “politically self-conscious” writer (Diamond, 1988, p.172) and created Cloud Nine, themed colonialism, with the same Joint stock theatre group in 1979. However, three scenes of Marcia, the only character who specified her race as Trinidadian, leave the problematic representation of ‘others’ that the Bacchae initially has.

In Part One, Scene 2, ‘Telephone,’ Marcia works as a switchboard operator hiding her home accent. She is enslaved by mechanical jobs and forced by her boss to be in a relationship with him. She says, “I am desperate.” (Churchill and Lan, 1986, p.19) In Part Two, Scene 13, ‘Baron Sunday,’ Marcia tries to be possessed by a Voodoo spirit, ‘Baron Sunday’ as a medium. Still, she becomes possessed by a

white middle-class female spirit, Sibyl, who represents the dominant British culture. Sibyl forces Marcia to follow the rules in England and takes over her bond with her home, culture, and even voice. In Part Three, Scene 28, 'Sea,' Marcia soliloquies on the boat drifting in the sea, disconnected from others.

Although Churchill might have intended to visualize the problem of hegemonic whiteness and racial oppression, those scenes fail to counter stereotypes, and "Marcia's possession scene only reinforces a racist and classist power structure" (Raima, 2002, p.280). At the same time, casting in the play had a particular tendency. In the performance, each actor plays multiple roles besides their primary role. Churchill uses this technique of 'Distanciation (Alienation effect),' dismantling 'player/role discontinuity.' However, in this play, two Caribbean performers are mainly assigned to play victims of acts of violence like murder and injury or servants like acupuncture or massage, compared to the other five 'white' performers. Therefore, when Caribbean characters are oppressed, performers could also be placed in the frames of victims and others.

Performance as research -Translation, Casting, Costume

In the last section, it was concluded that most studies from a feminist point of view acclaimed *A Mouthful of Birds*, while postcolonial critiques reveal some issues. Marcia, an immigrant woman from Third World, is the center of the issue. She is specified to speak both accented English and standard English. A Caribbean performer performed her in the original production. Since those characteristics are part of her identity, her qualities must be recreated when performed in Japan.

However, the way of directing must be taken into account carefully because the imprudent method itself could lead to new discrimination. Therefore, in order to consider methods of directing as a practical approach, we created a script, directed, filmed, and did a questionnaire survey. Through those processes, we focused on her language and appearance as parts of her identity for Marcia and utilized translation, casting, and costume. The effects, risks, and our plan for the performance direction of each three patterns will be listed below.

(a) Translation

What we paid attention to in translation was not replacing accents with Japanese dialect mindlessly. Regardless of fiction or nonfiction, translation sometimes gives speakers stereotypical expressions due to their attributes like sex, birthplace, and profession. While it works effectively to show their background, it is liable to reproduce stereotypes.

One common expression for displaying characteristics is 'sentence-final particles'. Being put at the end of a sentence changes the impression of the speaker from audiences/readers, while it doesn't affect the contents. For instance, in Japanese translation, male characters are frequently assigned to use 'daze' or 'sa,' and female ones are assigned to use 'dawa' or 'yo'. These contribute to regulating adequate language for each attribute, and the same thing can be applied for race.

When black characters appear, they are often given the Tohoku dialect, spoken in northeastern Japan. This might be a replacement for accents, but it can be

harmful, considering the Tohoku dialect being given a negative image. As Kinsui says, “this type of language projection is established by overlapping the Japanese people’s perceptions of <Rural Language> with their perceptions of black people” (Kinsui, 2017, p.116). In short, reflective uses of translation of black characters’ English into Japanese Tohoku dialect repeats “uneducated, dominated” images for both black people and Tohoku dialect speakers. (Kinsui, p.116).

Despite those problems, we experimentally adopted the Tohoku dialect as a Japanese translation of Marcia’s West Indian accent. We intend to replace the original work’s linguistic hierarchy between standard English and immigrant English. As mentioned earlier, this translation preserves ongoing stereotypes for ‘black people and ‘Tohoku dialect speakers.’ Still, we deliberately choose this translation to call attention to this use.

Though not adopted in the performance, translating accents into the Japanese Kansai dialect and translating based on each gender were proposed as alternatives in the process. Kansai dialect is similar to the West Indian accent in that they are considered unsuited for formal places and seen as inferior to the standard language. Having translators and actors from the Kansai area, we could avoid the situation of non-dialect speakers one-sidedly consuming dialect speakers. Nevertheless, this option was dismissed because the Kansai dialect was relatively known among other dialects, and since it was to be performed in Osaka, it would be difficult to propose the Kansai dialect as a language of a minority.

Examples of Japanese translations are in the table below.

Table 1: Three versions of the Japanese translation

Language	Original writing	Japanese pronunciation
Original English	I got to go back home and find myself. I lost myself. I don’t know where.	
Standard Japanese	家に帰って、なくしてしまった自分を見つけないと。今はどこにあるか分からない。	Ie ni kaette nakushite shimatta jibun wo mitsukenaito. Ima wa doko ni arunoka wakaranai.
Kansai-dialect	家に帰って、自分を見つけないと。今はどこにあるんか分からんから。	Ie ni kaette jibun wo mitsukento. Ima wa doko ni arunnka wakaran kara.
Tohoku-dialect	家さ帰(けえ)って、なくすすまった自分(ずぶん)を見づけねと。今はどこさあるが分かんね。	Ie sa keette nakusute sumatta zubun wo midugeneto. Ima wa doko sa aru ga wakanne.

(b) Casting

Secondly, points in casting should be mentioned. In Japan, characters specified as black are, in many cases, played by non-black people painting their skin darker, not casting Caribbean/African performers who have closer skin color to characters. This makeup is called blackface and has always been associated with discrimination toward black people. One of the most known examples is the Minstrel Show, a theatrical entertainment in 19th century in the U.S., where white people played black people with blackface makeup and spread wrong and stereotypical “uneducated” (Thompson, 2021, p.56) images of black people. Thus, blackface is highly detrimental because of its racism and employment deprivation for black performers.

In Japan, probably because of the difference in ethnicity, blackface has been done without being problematized. However, it is starting to be reexamined after the criticism of blackface by famous talents and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Whereas the cast of Caribbean/African performers is yet to be standard, more works are performed without blackface. Specifically, major theatre production companies, like Toho and Horipro, which did adopt blackface when performing foreign musicals, are doing more works without blackface in the 2020s. Altogether, while Caribbean/African performers should be employed for the job more, costumes and props are beginning to take the place of blackface. Since there are no unified guidelines about blackface and no absolute ‘right’ way, it is imperative to suggest a suitable way for each work and its surroundings.

In our directing, we intended to show Marcia’s visual differences without blackface. We initially attempted to cast Caribbean performers but could not find them. Eventually, an exchange student from Russia performed as Marcia. The script was written in ‘standard’ Japanese, but since she is not a native Japanese speaker, a peculiar accent is expected. While she is not as Caribbean as Marcia is, her race has a similar role in Japan. In Japan, often presumed racially homogeneous, the racial minority tends to be unseen. There, ‘foreigner,’ regardless of color or appearance, is recognized as non-Japanese. In this direction, we tried to recreate Marcia as ‘Other’ in Japan by casting a Russian performer.

(c) Costume

In addition to casting, we attempted two things about costume in order to differentiate Marcia from other white characters in appearance without using blackface. Firstly, we adopted the idea of expressing dark skin / ‘blackness’ with the black scarf on the neck. This is from a musical work themed on racism, *Parade*, performed in Japan in 2020. Secondly, we utilized color contrast of costumes. Marcia wears colorful costumes, such as red and yellow, and other white characters wear black and white ones in an effort to highlight that Marcia keeps her identity as an immigrant. Moreover, Marcia changes her costume to black and white in the third part, showing that her identity was robbed in the previous parts.



Figure 1: Scene 2 'Telephone' - Marcia's boss Colin (left), Marcia (right)



Figure 2: Scene 13, 'Baron Sunday,' - Marcia (left), Sybil (middle), Margaret (right)
- Tohoku dialect ver.



Figure 3: Scene 13, 'Baron Sunday,' - Marcia (left), Sybil (middle),
Margaret(right)- Russian performer ver.

Survey

Based on the research and hypothesis above, we shot a film starring Marcia. Then, we conducted a questionnaire survey to collect opinions about the social representation of 'black.' We collected 21 responses from audiences of the film via Google Forms during 10-20 in December 2021. Questions are about how they evaluate the following three representations of Marcia.

- (a) Tohoku dialect translation as Marcia's accent
- (b) Russian female performer cast as Marcia
- (c) Black scarf expressing the dark skin of Marcia

As a result, 81% of the respondents understood that Marcia was socially discriminated against and oppressed in the video. As for each method, (a) Tohoku-dialect translation as Marcia's accent, gained 57% of those who agreed with the questions above. Despite this, less than 30% recognized dialect as a sign of 'blackness' as social status. It is conceivable that most respondents are in their 20s and unfamiliar with the history of dialects and blackness. (b) a Russian female performer cast as Marcia, accounted for 24% and was primarily evaluated highly for the way of directing works with themes of racism. Regarding (c) Black scarf expressing dark skin of Marcia, most respondents did not notice the black scarf due to the dark screen.

Thus, three representations successfully showed Marcia's discriminated and oppressed situation to some extent but did not show specific social attributes. We also asked the audience what they think represents the social attribute of 'blackness' the best and found that visual impressions or clear explanations are requested. The survey was held for a brief period, and the number and generation of respondents were limited, so a more extensive scale will be required for a better survey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the English playwright Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* is a highly evaluated adaptation of the ancient Greek tragedy, which raises issues of gender. However, there are some problematic points from the viewpoint of post-colonialism. In our research, we discussed the scenes of Marcia, who is specified to be a Trinidadian among other white characters. Through reconstructing the script and directing the stage, we considered the way of expressing politics in the original work by using translation, casting, and costume, without reproducing conventional discrimination and prejudice. Through a questionnaire survey on performance, we concluded that it is difficult to show the issue of racism in the original work directly. Nonetheless, it is possible to express its politics and raise awareness of the issue by associating it with problems in Japan, such as contempt for dialect speakers and discrimination against foreigners.

It is reasonable to suppose that visual expressions are regarded as significant when performing works that need to clarify characters' race, but actors of involved race are not available. However, imitation in hairstyle, costume, and skin color easily connects to blackface. While untouched in this research, it also appears valid to introduce original work and issues in the work by announcement or brochure before or after the show, as answered in the survey.

Either performing an adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy, or relatively new works such as *A Mouthful of Birds* somewhere not expected in the beginning, there will be trade-offs between the original work and specific problems in the era or the area. This research could be one example of representing expression or awareness peculiar to original work through the analysis of *A Mouthful of Birds* and the creation of performance, including translation.

Lastly, we would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Reina Saijo for her support and supervision.

Credit of performance

【Cast】 Marcia: Honoka Takagi/Sasha Zhidkova, Collin: Taiga Morimura, Sybil: Ayumi Hayashi, Margaret: Mizuki Koyama

【Staff】 Lighting: Kim Doyoung, Camera Operator: Hikari Ito, Tomohikko Utsunomiya

【Place】 Kaitokudo for the 21st Century Studio, Osaka University (4 Dec.2021)

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