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## The Impact of Political Theatre on Audience Psychology, Social Consciousness, and Ideology

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### Abstract

Political theatre has historically functioned as a powerful medium for shaping civic consciousness, ideological orientations, and collective psychology. Originating in fifth-century BCE Athens, theatre emerged alongside direct democracy, where active citizen participation in governance was regarded as a fundamental public responsibility. Influenced by the philosophical traditions of Plato and Aristotle, and the dramatic works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, Greek theatre evolved into a critical forum for political reflection and social communication.

This study investigates the extent to which political theatre influences audience psychology, political literacy, and ideological formation within the Sri Lankan context. Drawing upon a qualitative content analysis of approximately 125 political plays selected from nearly 7,000 independent, adapted, and translated theatrical productions staged in Sri Lanka since 1956, the research examines dramaturgical structures, narrative strategies, and thematic representations. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between theatre, governance, and civic awareness across key socio-political periods.

The findings indicate that while Sri Lankan political theatre has contributed to audience awareness and critical reflection, its capacity to construct sustained political ideologies and significantly enhance political literacy remains limited. Nevertheless, the study argues that political theatre retains considerable potential as an alternative communicative medium for strengthening participatory democracy and fostering social consciousness beyond conventional mass media frameworks.

**Key Words, this study investigates the extent to which political theatre influences audience psychology, political literacy, and ideological formation within Sri Lanka.**

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### Introduction

The relationship between theatre and politics is deeply embedded in the historical development of democratic societies. From its earliest manifestations in ancient Greece, theatre has served not merely as a form of artistic expression but as a public arena for political dialogue, ethical inquiry, and social critique. In particular, Greek theatre emerged within the sociopolitical context of the Athenian polis, where civic participation, public debate, and collective decision-making constituted the foundations of governance.

This historical convergence of theatre and democracy established drama as a medium through which questions of state power, justice, authority, and citizenship could be critically examined. The philosophical discourses of Plato and Aristotle further reinforced theatre's role in cultivating civic virtue and political awareness. Consequently, political theatre has continued to evolve as a significant form of social communication, capable of shaping audience perceptions, ideological orientations, and collective consciousness.

Within the Sri Lankan context, theatre has similarly functioned as a reflective and interventionist cultural practice, particularly in response to post-colonial political transformations. This study situates Sri Lankan political theatre within a broader historical continuum, tracing its intellectual lineage to Greek dramatic traditions while critically examining its impact on audience psychology and political literacy since 1956.

### Greek Theatre and Politics

Greek theatre is generally believed to have originated prior to 700 BCE. Although scholarly perspectives on its origins and formal development vary, a widely accepted view identifies its roots in Greek religious

rituals. The polytheistic belief systems of ancient Greece, together with ceremonial practices associated with divine worship, are understood to have provided the foundational framework for early theatrical traditions.

Despite its ritualistic origins, Greek theatre had attained an advanced artistic and literary status by approximately 525 BCE. The period extending to the fourth century BCE represents the golden age of Greek drama, marked by the emergence of canonical playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Their works constitute a foundational corpus within Western dramatic literature.

The study of Greek theatre is significant not merely for historical reasons but also because it established enduring formal and literary conventions that shaped subsequent Western theatrical traditions. While early Greek drama drew upon mythological narratives and heroic legends, its evolution under these master playwrights transformed theatre into a medium for social philosophy, political critique, and civic dialogue. During the golden age of Greek drama, three primary genres were clearly delineated: tragedy, comedy, and satyr plays. Among these, tragedy commanded particular prominence. An examination of the tragic works of Aeschylus and Sophocles reveals that Greek tragedy served as a powerful forum for interrogating state power, governance, kingship, civic responsibility, war, conflict, and collective psychology. Through such themes, playwrights articulated profound social philosophies and facilitated critical public discourse.

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### Social Communication and Civic Consciousness

Social communication functions as a mechanism for cultivating civic awareness and political literacy. Even when examined through modern communication theories, the dramaturgical strategies employed in Greek tragedy reveal a sophisticated engagement with political instability, authoritarianism, war, and power relations. For instance, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* offers a nuanced exploration of political authority, moral responsibility, and the fragility of leadership within the polis.

Greek tragedians demonstrated acute sensitivity to social realities. Their theatrical works conveyed messages that played a critical role within political and social processes, a tradition that has continued to influence dramatic forms from antiquity to the modern era.

Aeschylus (525–456 BCE), through tragedies such as *The Persians*, situates political discourse within a dramatic framework that contrasts autocracy with Greek democratic ideals. Set in the Persian capital of Susa, the play dramatizes the aftermath of Xerxes' defeat, offering implicit praise of democratic governance through the responses of Persian elders and Queen Atossa.

Similarly, works such as *Seven Against Thebes*, *The Suppliants*, *Prometheus Bound*, and the *Oresteia* trilogy (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*) provide rich political interpretations concerning justice, governance, civic order, and the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Sophocles (496–406 BCE), who authored over 120 plays, remains one of the most celebrated Greek dramatists. Among his extant works, *Oedipus Rex* occupies a central position and was famously described by Aristotle as the pinnacle of Greek tragedy. Drawing upon well-known myths, Sophocles reconfigures these narratives to explore fate, moral agency, and political authority.

Plays such as *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *The Trachiniae*, and *Electra* further examine the tension between individual conscience and state power. *Antigone*, in particular, dramatizes the conflict between divine law and civic authority, thereby offering a profound political and ethical critique of absolutist governance.

Euripides (480–406 BCE), often regarded as a pioneer of realism and a precursor to modern drama, diverged from his predecessors by portraying ordinary individuals rather than idealized heroes. Influenced by Sophist philosophy, Euripides challenged conventional norms and emphasized the constructed nature of social and political values. His plays—including *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Cyclops*—underscore the political dimensions of social communication embedded within dramatic narratives.

Aristophanes (c. 446–386 BCE), the foremost playwright of Greek comedy, employed satire and humor to critique politics, war, religion, and social hypocrisy. In plays such as *The Acharnians*, *The Knights*, *The Clouds*, and *The Frogs*, Aristophanes exposed the absurdities of political leadership and the irrational foundations of warfare, thereby fostering political awareness through comedic discourse.

Collectively, the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes demonstrate that Greek theatre—across tragedy, comedy, and satyr plays—functioned as a critical site for political reflection, civic engagement, and social philosophy. Despite their mythological frameworks, these plays articulated enduring concerns regarding governance, citizenship, and collective responsibility.

### The Impact of Sri Lankan Theatre after 1956

The influence of Greek theatrical traditions on global theatre can be discerned within the evolution of Sri Lankan drama, which developed from indigenous forms such as *nadagam* and *nurthi* in the late nineteenth century. Early Sri Lankan dramatists, including Charles Dias and John de Silva, incorporated themes of statehood, governance, and cultural identity, albeit within predominantly nationalist and religious frameworks.

The establishment of the Tower Hall Theatre in Colombo in 1911 marked a significant milestone in Sri Lankan theatrical history. Although the rise of cinema led to a temporary decline in stage drama, the resurgence of theatre in the 1930s—particularly through the Minerva Theatre movement—revitalized public engagement with dramatic performance.

The post-1956 period represents a golden era in Sri Lankan theatre, initiated by Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra's *Maname*. Drawing upon indigenous performance traditions and global theatrical forms, this period witnessed the emergence of influential playwrights such as Dayananda Gunawardena, Henry Jayasena, Sugathapala de Silva, Gunasena Galappatti, R. R. Samarakoon, and others. Their works expanded the thematic scope of Sri Lankan drama to include political critique and social analysis.

From the 1950s onward, Sri Lankan political theatre responded to major socio-political transformations, including the events of 1956, 1971, 1988, 1994, 2009, and 2022. Although approximately 125 political plays can be identified among nearly 7,000 theatrical productions, the number of original political dramas remains relatively limited.

An analysis of selected plays—such as *Dunna Dunugamuwe*, *Kelani Palama Yata*, *Manaranjana Wada Warjana*, *Marana Thuneniya*, *Ahasin Wataunu Minisun*, and *Kekille Rajjuruwo*—indicates that Sri Lankan political theatre has contributed to audience awareness and psychological engagement. However, its capacity to construct sustained political ideologies and deepen political literacy remains limited.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that political theatre possesses significant potential to influence audience psychology, ideological orientation, and political consciousness. In a post-colonial society such as Sri Lanka—shaped by over four centuries of colonial domination—theatre represents an underutilized medium for cultivating civic awareness and national political ideology.



Despite the formal availability of democratic rights, Sri Lankan citizens continue to exhibit low levels of political literacy and civic consciousness. Drawing upon the historical legacy of Greek theatre, this research argues that political drama can serve as a powerful alternative to conventional mass media in fostering participatory democracy and ideological clarity.

Accordingly, the findings affirm that political theatre retains the capacity to play a transformative role in shaping social consciousness, strengthening democratic engagement, and advancing political literacy within contemporary Sri Lankan society.

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