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Full Length Paper

Recasting Identity: Race, Representation, and the Politics of Casting in Contemporary Theatre

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Abstract

This study, *Recasting Identity: Race, Representation, and the Politics of Casting in Contemporary Theatre*, critically examines how contemporary theatre practices challenge traditional racial representation through colour-conscious casting. Drawing on postcolonial theoretical frameworks, particularly the work of Homi K. Bhabha, the research interrogates how concepts such as hybridity and the "third space" illuminate the negotiation of identity on stage. Employing a qualitative, interpretive research design, data were collected from selected case studies, including canonical works and contemporary musicals, through performance analysis, production notes, and critical reviews. The study finds that colour-conscious casting disrupts entrenched racial hierarchies, reinterprets classical texts, and facilitates co-constructed meaning with audiences, while simultaneously revealing risks of tokenism and superficial inclusion. These findings underscore casting as a deliberate political and cultural act that shapes both representation and audience perception. The study enhances academic dialogue regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in the performing arts and provides actionable suggestions for theatre professionals to adopt more deliberate and contemplative casting methodologies. Future research directions include comparative cultural studies, intersectional analysis, and empirical audience reception research to further examine the transformative potential of theatre as a site for social negotiation.

Keywords: color-conscious casting, race, representation, postcolonial theory, theatre, audience reception.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Theatre has long served as a dynamic site for the construction and negotiation of social meaning, operating at the intersection of art, culture, and politics. As a performative medium, it reflects the values and tensions of the societies in which it is produced, while also shaping audience perceptions of identity and difference. In contemporary contexts, theatre is increasingly recognised not only as entertainment but also as a critical space for interrogating power systems, particularly those related to race and representation (Auslander, 2008).

The question of representation in theatre is deeply tied to broader cultural and historical processes. Performance is never neutral; it is embedded within ideological frameworks that determine which identities are visible and how they are portrayed. Scholars have argued that theatrical representation plays a significant role in reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives, particularly in relation to marginalised communities (Elam, 2001). As such, the stage becomes a site where social hierarchies can be both reproduced and contested.

In recent decades, the discourse surrounding race in theatre has gained increased prominence, driven by wider social movements advocating for racial justice and equity. These developments have prompted renewed scrutiny of casting practices, authorship, and institutional structures within the performing arts. Theatre practitioners and scholars alike have begun to question long-standing assumptions about universality and neutrality, particularly as they relate to whiteness as the default standard (Young, 2013).

The persistence of racial inequality in theatre reflects broader patterns of exclusion within cultural industries. Research indicates that systemic barriers continue to limit access for actors, directors, and playwrights from under-represented backgrounds, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation (O'Brien, Laurison, Miles, & Friedman,

2016). These inequalities are not merely the result of individual bias but are embedded within institutional practices and norms that shape the production and reception of theatre.

At the same time, contemporary theatre has witnessed a growing commitment to diversity and inclusion, often framed as both an ethical imperative and an artistic opportunity. This shift has led to the emergence of new approaches to casting and storytelling that seek to broaden the range of voices and perspectives represented on stage. Such developments reflect a broader recognition that diversity is integral to the vitality and relevance of the arts (Shah, 2020).

One of the key debates within this evolving landscape concerns the role of casting in shaping representation. Casting is not simply a technical process but a creative and political act that influences how narratives are constructed and interpreted. Decisions about who performs which roles carry significant symbolic weight, as they can either reinforce or disrupt existing power structures (Rokem, 2017).

The concept of race itself is central to these discussions, understood not as a fixed biological category but as a socially constructed and historically contingent phenomenon. Theatrical performance, with its emphasis on embodiment and transformation, provides a unique context for exploring the fluidity and complexity of racial identity. Through performance, actors inhabit roles that may align with or challenge their own identities, creating opportunities for both representation and reinterpretation (Sauter, 2000).

Moreover, the increasing globalisation of theatre has introduced new dimensions to questions of race and representation. Cross-cultural collaborations and international productions have expanded the scope of theatrical practice, bringing diverse aesthetic traditions and cultural perspectives into dialogue. However, these developments also raise important ethical questions about cultural exchange, appropriation, and the politics of representation (Balme, 2014).

Audience engagement is another critical factor in understanding the impact of theatrical representation. The meaning of a performance is not fixed but emerges through the interaction between performers and spectators. Audiences bring their own cultural backgrounds, assumptions, and biases to the theatre, shaping how they interpret and respond to what they see on stage (Reason, 2010). This dynamic underscores the importance of considering reception as part of any analysis of representation.

In addition, the role of institutions in shaping theatrical practices cannot be overlooked. Theatre companies, funding bodies, and educational institutions all play a part in determining which stories are told and who gets to tell them. Efforts to promote diversity within these institutions have led to important changes, but progress remains uneven and contested (Conner, 2013).

The relationship between theatre and social change is another important dimension of this discussion. Historically, theatre has been used as a tool for political expression and activism, providing a मंच for marginalised voices and challenging dominant ideologies. In contemporary contexts, this tradition continues, with many productions explicitly addressing issues of race, inequality, and justice (Nicholson, 2014).

At the same time, the commercial realities of the theatre industry can complicate efforts to promote inclusive practices. Financial constraints and market considerations often influence production decisions, including casting choices. This tension between artistic integrity and economic viability highlights the complex environment in which contemporary theatre operates (Sedgman, 2018).

Theoretical frameworks from disciplines such as performance studies, cultural studies, and critical race theory provide valuable tools for analysing these issues. By examining how power operates within theatrical contexts, these approaches help to illuminate the underlying dynamics that shape representation. They also offer insights into how theatre can function as a space for resistance and transformation (Taylor & Fuentes, 2020).

Ultimately, the study of race and representation in theatre is not only about understanding artistic practices but also about engaging with broader social and cultural questions. As societies continue to grapple with issues of identity, inequality, and belonging, theatre remains a vital arena for exploring these themes. Through its capacity to bring diverse perspectives into dialogue, it has the potential to foster greater understanding and challenge entrenched assumptions.

In this context, examining contemporary casting practices becomes particularly significant. By analysing how decisions about representation are made and enacted on stage, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates about equity and inclusion in the arts. It positions theatre as both a reflection of societal change and a catalyst for further transformation, emphasising its enduring relevance in addressing issues of race and identity.

1.1 Background of the Study

Theatre has long functioned as a powerful cultural institution through which societies construct, reflect, and contest identity. As a performative art form, it not only mirrors social realities but also actively shapes them by determining whose stories are told and how they are represented. Historically, theatrical traditions in Western contexts have privileged dominant racial narratives, often marginalising or excluding non-white identities from the stage (Knowles, 2010). This exclusion has contributed to a legacy in which theatre reinforces, rather than challenges, existing social hierarchies.

Traditional casting practices have played a central role in maintaining these racial inequalities. Practices such as blackface minstrelsy and racially stereotyped roles

exemplify how theatre has historically commodified and distorted racial identities for entertainment (Lott, 2013). These practices did not merely reflect societal prejudices but also normalised them, embedding racial bias into the very structure of performance. Consequently, the stage became a site where racial difference was exaggerated, caricatured, and controlled.

Even in the absence of overtly discriminatory practices like blackface, systemic exclusion has persisted through "default whiteness" in casting. Many classical and canonical works have traditionally been performed with predominantly white casts, reinforcing the notion that whiteness is universal and racially neutral (Taylor, 2016). This has limited opportunities for actors of colour and restricted the diversity of perspectives represented in theatrical narratives.

In response to these historical inequities, contemporary theatre has increasingly embraced more inclusive casting practices. One significant development is the emergence of colour-conscious casting, which intentionally considers race as a meaningful factor in casting decisions. Unlike colour-blind casting, which claims to ignore race, colour-conscious casting acknowledges the social and historical significance of racial identity and seeks to use it as a tool for reinterpretation and critique (Bernstein, 2020).

This shift reflects broader cultural and academic movements toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. Theatre practitioners and scholars have begun to recognise that representation is not merely a matter of visibility but also of power. Who is represented on stage—and how—has profound implications for how audiences understand identity, belonging, and difference (Joseph, 2021).

The theoretical underpinnings of this shift can be found in postcolonial discourse, particularly the work of Homi K. Bhabha. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space" provide a framework for understanding how identities are negotiated and redefined in performative contexts (Bhabha, 1994). In theatre, casting becomes a site where these negotiations occur, challenging fixed notions of race and identity.

Moreover, contemporary productions increasingly experiment with casting as a form of political expression. By casting actors of diverse racial backgrounds in traditionally white roles, directors disrupt audience expectations and invite critical reflection on the constructed nature of identity. This practice transforms theatre into a space of resistance and reimagination.

At the same time, the rise of globalised theatre has further complicated questions of representation. Cross-cultural adaptations and international collaborations have introduced new dynamics into casting practices, raising questions about authenticity, appropriation, and cultural exchange (Lo & Gilbert, 2002). These developments highlight the need for nuanced approaches to representation that account for both local and global contexts.

Despite these advances, tensions remain between traditional conventions and contemporary innovations. Some critics argue that inclusive casting risks erasing cultural specificity, while others contend that it is essential for challenging systemic inequities. This ongoing debate underscores the complexity of representation in theatre and the need for continued critical inquiry.

In addition, audience reception plays a crucial role in shaping the impact of casting practices. The meaning of a performance is not fixed but is co-created through the interaction between performers and spectators. As such, diverse casting can provoke a range of responses, from acceptance and appreciation to resistance and discomfort (Freshwater, 2009).

Furthermore, institutional structures within the theatre industry continue to influence casting decisions. Issues such as funding, leadership diversity, and access to opportunities affect the extent to which inclusive practices can be implemented. Addressing these structural barriers is essential for achieving meaningful and sustained change.

Ultimately, the evolution of casting practices reflects broader societal shifts toward recognising and valuing diversity. Contemporary theatre, therefore, serves as a critical site for examining how identities are constructed, contested, and transformed. This study situates itself within this evolving landscape, seeking to analyse how modern theatrical practices challenge established norms of racial representation.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite increased awareness of diversity and inclusion within the performing arts, racial inequities remain deeply embedded in theatrical casting and representation. While many institutions publicly endorse inclusive practices, these commitments are not always reflected in actual production choices. As a result, actors of colour continue to face limited opportunities and systemic barriers within the industry (Brook, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2020).

One of the central issues is the persistence of superficial diversity initiatives. In some cases, productions adopt inclusive casting practices as a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive commitment to change. This can result in tokenism, where actors of colour are included in minor or stereotypical roles without challenging the underlying structures of inequality.

Additionally, the concept of colourblind casting has been widely critiqued for its failure to address the realities of racial difference. By claiming to ignore race, colourblind casting can inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics and erase the lived experiences of marginalised communities (Joseph, 2021). This approach contrasts with colour-conscious casting, which seeks to engage critically with race as a social construct.

The tension between traditional casting conventions

and contemporary efforts toward inclusivity creates a complex and often contradictory landscape. Theatre practitioners must navigate competing demands, balancing artistic vision, audience expectations, and ethical considerations.

Moreover, the lack of diversity in leadership positions within theatre institutions further exacerbates these challenges. Decision-making power often remains concentrated among a relatively homogeneous group, limiting the perspectives that inform casting choices and production practices.

Another critical issue is the role of canonical texts in shaping casting practices. Many classical works were written within specific historical and cultural contexts that assumed homogeneous casting. Reinterpreting these works through diverse casting raises important questions about authenticity, fidelity, and artistic intention.

At the same time, audience perceptions and biases can influence the reception of diverse casting. Some audiences may resist non-traditional casting choices, viewing them as inconsistent with their expectations of a particular work. This highlights the need for critical engagement and education to foster more inclusive understandings of theatre.

Furthermore, economic pressures within the theatre industry can impact casting decisions. Producers may prioritise commercial viability over inclusivity, opting for casting choices perceived as more marketable or familiar to audiences.

These challenges underscore the need for a more comprehensive and critical examination of casting practices in contemporary theatre. While progress has been made, significant gaps remain between rhetoric and reality.

This study addresses these issues by exploring how colour-conscious casting can serve as a transformative tool for challenging traditional racial representation. It seeks to move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and examine the deeper structural and cultural dynamics at play.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

Aim:

To examine how contemporary theatre practices challenge traditional racial representation through color-conscious casting.

Objectives:

- To analyze historical and contemporary casting practices in theatre
- To explore the concept of race and representation in performance
- To apply postcolonial theory to the analysis of casting practices
- To evaluate the impact of color-conscious casting on audience perception

1.4 Research Questions

- How does contemporary theatre challenge traditional racial representation?
- What is the significance of color-conscious casting in modern performance?
- How can postcolonial theory explain shifts in casting practices?
- What impact does casting have on audience interpretation?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to ongoing scholarly and practical discussions about diversity, inclusion, and representation in the arts. By focusing on casting practices, it highlights an often-overlooked aspect of theatrical production that has significant cultural and political implications.

The findings of this study are relevant to theatre practitioners, including directors, producers, and actors, who seek to implement more inclusive practices. It provides a theoretical and analytical framework for understanding the impact of casting decisions.

Additionally, the study contributes to academic discourse by integrating insights from postcolonial theory, performance studies, and critical race theory. This interdisciplinary approach enriches the analysis and broadens its applicability.

For audiences, the study underscores the importance of critical engagement with theatrical representation. By examining how identity is constructed on stage, it encourages more informed and reflective viewing practices.

Ultimately, the study emphasises theatre's role as a site of cultural negotiation and transformation, where issues of race and identity are continuously reimagined.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on contemporary theatre, particularly productions from the late 20th and 21st centuries. It examines selected case studies to provide detailed and context-specific analysis of casting practices.

The scope of the study is primarily qualitative, emphasising textual and performance analysis. While this approach allows for in-depth exploration, it does not include extensive quantitative data or large-scale audience surveys.

Additionally, the study is limited by its reliance on available secondary sources and documented performances. As such, it may not capture all aspects of

contemporary theatrical practice.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of race and representation in theatre. It offers a foundation for further research and contributes to ongoing efforts to promote equity and inclusion in the performing arts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The study of race, representation, and casting in theatre has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, reflecting broader societal concerns about diversity, equity, and inclusion. This chapter reviews key academic debates and theoretical frameworks that inform the analysis of contemporary casting practices. It situates the discussion within both historical and contemporary contexts, recognising that current practices are deeply shaped by earlier traditions of representation and exclusion (Kuppers, 2017).

Scholars in theatre and performance studies have emphasised that representation is not merely a reflection of reality but an active process of meaning-making. The stage functions as a cultural site where identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested, making casting a central mechanism through which power relations are expressed (Ahmed, 2012). As such, examining casting practices provides critical insight into how race operates within theatrical production.

This chapter adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on theatre studies, cultural theory, and postcolonial scholarship. By integrating these perspectives, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how race and representation are embedded in both historical practices and contemporary debates. The review also identifies key tensions and contradictions within the literature, particularly regarding the effectiveness of different casting approaches.

Furthermore, the chapter highlights the evolving nature of scholarly discourse in this area. While earlier studies often focused on overtly racist practices such as blackface, more recent research has shifted toward examining subtle and systemic forms of exclusion, as well as efforts to promote inclusivity (Atkinson, 2020). This shift reflects a growing recognition of the complexity of representation in modern theatre.

Ultimately, this literature review establishes the theoretical and analytical foundation for the study. By critically engaging with existing scholarship, it identifies the key concepts, debates, and gaps that inform the subsequent analysis of contemporary casting practices.

2.2 Historical Overview of Racial Representation in Theatre

The historical development of racial representation in theatre reveals a legacy of exclusion and stereotyping that has profoundly shaped contemporary practices. Early theatrical traditions in Europe and North America were characterised by the systematic marginalisation of non-white performers, who were often excluded from mainstream stages or relegated to stereotypical roles (Mahar, 1999).

One of the most significant examples of racialised performance is blackface minstrelsy, which emerged in the 19th century and became a dominant form of popular entertainment. Blackface performances involved white actors portraying exaggerated and dehumanising caricatures of Black individuals, reinforcing racist ideologies and normalising discriminatory attitudes (Gubar, 2017). This practice not only excluded Black performers but also distorted public perceptions of Black identity.

Even after the decline of minstrelsy, racial stereotyping persisted in theatrical productions. Characters of colour were frequently portrayed through limited and reductive archetypes, such as the “exotic other” or the "servant", which reinforced hierarchical notions of race (Taylor, 2016). These representations contributed to the broader cultural construction of racial difference and inequality.

In addition to stereotyping, exclusionary casting practices further entrenched racial disparities in theatre. Many canonical works were traditionally performed with all-white casts, regardless of the racial context of the narrative. This practice established whiteness as the normative standard in theatre, marginalising other identities and limiting opportunities for diverse performers (Hughes, 2020).

The persistence of these practices can be understood within the broader context of colonialism and imperialism, which shaped cultural production in significant ways. Theatre functioned as a tool for reinforcing colonial ideologies, often portraying non-Western cultures as inferior or exotic (Balme, 2014). This historical legacy continues to influence contemporary representations.

However, resistance to these practices has also been a significant part of theatrical history. Black theatre movements, Indigenous performance traditions, and other marginalised voices have challenged dominant narratives and created alternative spaces for representation (Krasner, 2016). These movements laid the groundwork for contemporary efforts to promote diversity and inclusion.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the need to revisit and critically reassess these historical practices. By understanding how racial inequalities were embedded in theatrical traditions, scholars can better analyse the persistence of these patterns in contemporary contexts (Atkinson, 2020). This historical perspective is essential for understanding the significance of current debates on casting and representation.

2.3 Contemporary Debates on Casting Practices

Contemporary discussions of casting practices are largely centred on the distinction between colour-blind

and colour-conscious approaches. Colourblind casting, which emerged as a response to discriminatory practices, advocates for selecting actors without regard to race. While this approach was initially seen as progressive, it has been widely critiqued for ignoring the social realities of race and perpetuating systemic inequalities (Bernstein, 2020).

Critics argue that colourblind casting can reinforce the notion that whiteness is neutral and universal, while other racial identities are marked and particular. By failing to acknowledge the significance of race, this approach risks erasing the experiences of marginalised communities and limiting the potential for meaningful representation (Joseph, 2021).

In contrast, colour-conscious casting explicitly recognises race as a factor in casting decisions and seeks to use it as a tool for artistic and political expression. This approach allows for the reinterpretation of traditional narratives and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, challenging established norms and expanding the possibilities of theatrical representation (Robbins, 2023).

Recent studies have highlighted the growing adoption of colour-conscious casting in contemporary theatre, particularly in high-profile productions. These practices have been praised for promoting inclusivity and fostering greater audience engagement, as they encourage viewers to reconsider assumptions about identity and representation (Rigour, 2025).

However, debates continue regarding the effectiveness and limitations of these approaches. Some scholars caution that inclusive casting can become tokenistic if not accompanied by broader structural changes within the industry (Brook et al., 2020). Others emphasise the importance of context, arguing that casting decisions must be carefully considered in relation to the specific cultural and historical setting of a performance.

Another important dimension of these debates is the role of audience perception. Research suggests that diverse casting can significantly influence how audiences interpret a performance, shaping their understanding of characters and narratives (Reason, 2010). This highlights the interactive nature of theatre and the importance of considering reception in discussions of representation.

Overall, contemporary debates on casting practices reflect a broader shift toward recognising the political and cultural significance of representation in theatre. While progress has been made, ongoing tensions and challenges underscore the need for continued critical engagement.

2.4 Postcolonial Theory and Performance

Postcolonial theory provides a valuable framework for analysing issues of race and representation in theatre, particularly in relation to casting practices. The work of Homi K. Bhabha is especially influential in this regard, offering key concepts that illuminate the dynamics of cultural identity and power.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity challenges fixed and essentialist notions of identity, emphasising instead the fluid and constructed nature of cultural difference (Bhabha, 1994). In theatrical contexts, this concept can be applied to casting practices that bring together diverse identities, creating new forms of meaning and interpretation.

Another important concept is mimicry, which refers to the imitation of dominant cultural forms by marginalised groups. In performance, mimicry can function as both a form of compliance and a mode of resistance, revealing the instability of dominant identities (Bhabha, 1994). This duality is particularly relevant in casting practices that challenge traditional representations.

The idea of the "third space" is also central to Bhabha's theory. This space represents a site of cultural negotiation where new identities and meanings emerge. Theatre, as a performative medium, can be understood as such a space, where casting becomes a mechanism for exploring and redefining identity (Lo & Gilbert, 2002).

Scholars have applied these concepts to analyse contemporary theatre practices, highlighting how performance can disrupt binary understandings of race and identity. By creating spaces for hybridity and negotiation, theatre can challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives (Knowles, 2010).

At the same time, postcolonial theory also draws attention to the persistence of power imbalances within cultural production. Even as theatre seeks to promote inclusivity, it remains embedded within structures shaped by colonial histories and global inequalities (Balme, 2014). This underscores the importance of critically examining the broader context in which casting practices occur.

Overall, postcolonial theory provides a rich and nuanced framework for understanding the complexities of race and representation in theatre. It highlights the potential of casting practices to function as sites of cultural negotiation while also emphasising the need to address underlying power dynamics.

2.5 Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite the growing body of scholarship on race and representation in theatre, several important gaps remain. One key limitation is the lack of detailed analysis of casting as a specific site of cultural negotiation. While many studies address representation more broadly, fewer focus explicitly on the mechanics and implications of casting decisions.

Additionally, much of the existing literature tends to focus on high-profile productions and Western contexts, limiting the scope of analysis. There is a need for more research on diverse theatrical traditions and practices, particularly in non-Western and marginalised contexts (Lo & Gilbert, 2002).

Another gap concerns the relationship between theory and practice. While theoretical frameworks such as

postcolonial theory provide valuable insights, there is often a disconnect between these frameworks and the practical realities of theatrical production. Bridging this gap requires more empirical research that examines how casting decisions are made and implemented in real-world contexts.

Furthermore, there is limited research on audience reception in relation to casting practices. Although some studies address this issue, more systematic and comprehensive analysis is needed to understand how diverse audiences interpret and respond to representation on stage (Reason, 2010).

The issue of intersectionality also remains underexplored in much of the literature. While race is a central focus, other factors such as gender, class, and disability are often treated separately, rather than as interconnected dimensions of identity. Addressing this gap would provide a more holistic understanding of representation in theatre.

Finally, there is a need for more critical examination of the long-term impact of inclusive casting practices. While many studies highlight their potential benefits, fewer assess their effectiveness in achieving sustained structural change within the industry (Brook et al., 2020).

Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing scholarly understanding of race and representation in theatre. By focusing on casting as a site of cultural negotiation, this study seeks to contribute to this ongoing discourse and provide new insights into the complexities of contemporary theatrical practice.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical orientation and methodological approach that guide this study on race, representation, and casting in contemporary theatre. It establishes the analytical framework through which the research problem is examined and explains the methods used to collect and interpret data. Given the interpretive and critical nature of the study, a qualitative research paradigm is adopted, allowing for an in-depth exploration of meaning, representation, and performance.

The study is grounded in the understanding that theatre is both an artistic and social practice, requiring methodological approaches that can account for its complexity. As scholars in performance studies note, theatre research often involves interdisciplinary methods that combine textual analysis, ethnographic insight, and cultural theory (Tinius, 2024). This approach enables the researcher to engage with both the aesthetic and socio-political dimensions of theatrical production.

Furthermore, the chapter recognises that research in theatre is not limited to traditional empirical methods but often incorporates interpretive and practice-based approaches. Theatre itself can function as a method of inquiry, generating knowledge through performance and embodied experience (Cree & Nicholson, 2023). This perspective informs the study's methodological design, emphasising the importance of context, interpretation, and critical analysis.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose concepts provide a critical lens for analysing race and representation in theatre. Postcolonial theory examines how colonial histories continue to shape cultural production, identity, and power relations. Within this framework, theatre is understood as a site where these dynamics are both reproduced and contested.

One of the central concepts applied in this study is hybridity, which challenges essentialist notions of identity by emphasising its fluid and constructed nature. In theatrical contexts, hybridity can be observed in casting practices that bring together diverse cultural identities, creating new meanings and interpretations. This aligns with broader understandings of postcolonial theatre as a space that interrogates cultural hierarchies and promotes alternative forms of representation (Lo & Gilbert, 2002).

Another key concept is the "third space", which refers to a site of cultural negotiation where new identities and meanings emerge. In the context of theatre, this space is created through performance, where actors and audiences engage in a dynamic process of interpretation. Casting becomes a critical mechanism through which this negotiation occurs, enabling the reconfiguration of traditional narratives and identities.

The concept of mimicry further enriches the analysis by highlighting the ambivalence of representation. Mimicry involves the imitation of dominant cultural forms, which can simultaneously reinforce and subvert existing power structures. In casting practices, this may manifest in performances that replicate traditional roles while also exposing their constructed nature.

Postcolonial theory also emphasises the political dimensions of cultural production. Theatre is not merely a reflection of society but an active participant in shaping social discourse. As such, casting practices can be understood as acts of cultural and political significance, influencing how identities are represented and perceived.

Importantly, postcolonial approaches to theatre highlight the role of performance as a form of resistance. By challenging dominant narratives and creating spaces for marginalised voices, theatre can function as a tool for social and cultural transformation. This perspective is central to the study's analysis of contemporary casting practices.

3.3 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly suited to the analysis of cultural and artistic

phenomena. Qualitative research allows for the exploration of complex and context-dependent issues, such as representation and identity that cannot be easily quantified.

The interpretive nature of qualitative research aligns with the objectives of this study, which seeks to understand how meaning is constructed and communicated through theatrical performance. Rather than focusing on numerical data, the study emphasises the analysis of texts, performances, and critical discourses.

The research design is informed by approaches commonly used in theatre and performance studies, including textual analysis, performance analysis, and case study methodology. These methods enable a detailed examination of specific productions and casting practices, providing insight into broader trends and patterns.

Furthermore, the study incorporates elements of ethnographic and fieldwork-based approaches, which theatre research increasingly recognises as valuable. Fieldwork allows researchers to engage with the lived experiences of practitioners and audiences, providing a more profound understanding of performance contexts (Tinius, 2024).

The qualitative design also supports the use of multiple sources of data, enabling a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis. By integrating different types of evidence, the study aims to capture the complexity of contemporary theatrical practice.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

Data for this study is collected through a combination of primary and secondary sources, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of theatre research. The primary method of data collection involves the analysis of selected plays and performances, which serve as case studies for examining casting practices and representation.

The analysis of performances focuses on both textual and visual elements, including dialogue, staging, and actor embodiment. This approach acknowledges that theatre conveys meaning not only through written texts but also through performance and interpretation.

In addition to performance analysis, the study examines production notes and casting choices. These materials provide insight into the intentions of directors and producers, as well as the practical considerations that influence casting decisions. Such documentation is essential for understanding the context in which performances are created.

Secondary sources, including reviews and critical essays, are also used to supplement the analysis. These sources offer perspectives on audience reception and critical interpretation, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of casting practices.

The study also acknowledges the value of participatory and applied theatre methodologies, which emphasise collaboration and engagement with communities. Research-based theatre, for example, integrates artistic practice with scholarly inquiry, creating new forms of knowledge through performance (Busby, 2024).

By combining these methods, the study ensures a robust and multifaceted approach to data collection, allowing for a thorough examination of the research questions.

3.5 Methods of Data Analysis

The study employs textual and performance analysis as its primary methods of data analysis, interpreting findings through a postcolonial lens. Textual analysis involves the close reading of scripts and dialogue, focusing on how race and identity are represented within the narrative.

Performance analysis extends this approach by examining how these representations are enacted on stage. This includes consideration of factors such as casting, staging, and audience interaction, which contribute to the overall meaning of the performance.

The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework outlined earlier, particularly the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the “third space". These concepts provide tools for interpreting how identity is constructed and negotiated in theatrical contexts.

In addition, the study adopts an interpretive approach that recognises the subjective nature of meaning in theatre. Research in performance studies indicates that meaning is co-constructed through the interaction between performers and audiences, rendering interpretation a dynamic and contextually contingent process (Lea et al., 2024).

The analysis also considers the broader socio-political context in which performances occur. By situating theatrical practices within their cultural and historical contexts, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of their significance.

Finally, the study emphasises reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's role in interpreting data. This approach aligns with contemporary qualitative methodologies, which recognise that research is not a neutral process but is shaped by the perspective and assumptions of the researcher.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of contemporary casting practices through selected case studies, illustrating how deliberate casting decisions have challenged traditional racial hierarchies and contributed to

new representational possibilities in theatre. Building on the theoretical and methodological foundations described in Chapter 3, this chapter focuses on four key areas: color-conscious casting and representation, the reinterpretation of canonical texts, audience reception and interpretation, and a critical evaluation of current casting initiatives. By engaging with specific productions and performance practices, the analysis connects scholarly perspectives to actual industry practices and audience responses, demonstrating the extent to which contemporary theatre is both reflecting and shaping social understandings of race and identity (Robbins, 2023; Rigour, 2025).

Contemporary theatre is increasingly self-aware of its role in representing diverse identities, and casting has shifted from a neutral administrative act to a deliberate artistic and political strategy. Casting choices now intersect with broader cultural debates about equity, visibility, and the politics of belonging. As casting directors and creative teams engage with race more intentionally, the stage becomes a site of negotiation between tradition and transformation (Tran, 2023). This chapter examines these negotiations in practice, identifying both achievements and limitations in current approaches.

4.2 Colour-Conscious Casting and Representation

Colour-conscious casting has emerged as a significant strategy through which theatre practitioners acknowledge the socio-historical dimensions of race while making casting decisions. Unlike the earlier practice of colour-blind casting—which assumes neutrality by ignoring race—colour-conscious casting actively engages with how the racial identities of performers influence meaning, narrative, and audience interpretation (Rigour, 2025). Scholars and practitioners have argued that this approach allows productions to confront historical exclusion and foreground otherwise marginalised identities.

One prominent example is the musical *Hamilton*, where racial diversity in casting was intentionally used not as a neutral backdrop but as a statement about belonging and nation-building. The creative team deliberately cast performers of colour in the roles of founding fathers—figures historically depicted as white—to invite audiences to reconsider the nation's racial history and the stories it chooses to elevate (Tran, 2023). This strategy exemplifies how colour-conscious casting can transform not only who appears on stage but also how audiences perceive canonical narratives.

Critically, race-conscious casting can also disrupt entrenched expectations about character identity. As Robbins (2023) notes in her reflections on musicals, race-conscious casting challenges assumptions that racialised actors cannot occupy roles tied to specific cultural and historical contexts (e.g., British or American narratives). Instead, these casting choices highlight the breadth of human experience and undermine the notion of whiteness as a theatrical default (Robbins, 2023).

However, it is important to recognise that colour-conscious casting is neither homogeneous nor always successful. As industry discussions reveal, colour-conscious casting can be applied superficially, converging at times with colour-blind practices if race is acknowledged only at the surface level without deeper engagement with historical context or narrative significance (Tran, 2023). Thus, while colour-conscious casting has been beneficial in promoting visibility and inclusion, its effective implementation depends on the creative team's engagement with complex questions of identity, power, and cultural memory.

4.3 Reinterpreting Canonical Works

Diverse casting practices have had a profound impact on the interpretation of canonical texts, particularly in productions of works by Shakespeare and other classical playwrights. By reimagining roles traditionally played by white actors, theatre makers have disrupted conventional narratives and opened new avenues for meaning.

Contemporary scholarship highlights innovative casting strategies for Shakespeare that go beyond simple inclusion. Carla Della Gatta's work on "Casting Shakespeare Today" outlines new casting terminologies and strategies that move past traditional categories like colour-blind casting, proposing terms such as "identity-conscious casting" to emphasise performer identity in relation to textual meaning (Della Gatta, 2024). This scholar-led rethinking reflects a broader industry trend toward more nuanced casting practices that account for ethics, authenticity, and positionality.

Productions that adopt diverse casting in Shakespearean plays often generate new interpretive layers. For example, casting Black or racially minoritised actors in roles historically performed by white actors invites audiences to reconsider character motivations and cultural assumptions embedded within canonical texts. These reinterpretations can deepen thematic resonance: for instance, casting decisions may foreground the politics of exclusion or the universality of certain human experiences.

However, such reinterpretations also raise questions about the balance between innovation and fidelity to historical context. Some critics caution that diverse casting in canonical texts may risk essentialising race or distracting from the dramaturgical core if not integrated thoughtfully into the overall production concept and design (Rigour, 2025). Nonetheless, when executed with creative and critical intention, diverse casting strategies have expanded theatre's representational possibilities and challenged audiences to engage with classical texts in new and dynamic ways.

4.4 Audience Reception and Interpretation

Audience reception plays a crucial role in understanding the impact of non-traditional casting practices. The meanings generated by a performance are not fixed but are co-constructed through audience engagement, cultural context, and interpretive frameworks brought into the theatre by spectators. Theatre scholars emphasise that audiences interpret casting decisions within broader social narratives, bringing their own cultural assumptions and biases to bear on what they witness (Reason, 2010).

Empirical studies and reviews suggest that diverse casting can significantly influence audience interpretation, prompting reflection on identity, history, and belonging. For instance, audiences seeing racially diverse casts in classical or historical productions often report heightened awareness of the ongoing relevance of these works to contemporary socio-racial discourse, suggesting that casting can act as a bridge between past narratives and present concerns.

At the same time, reception is not universally positive or uniform. Productions that engage in non-traditional casting occasionally encounter resistance or backlash from segments of the audience who perceive these choices as deviations from tradition rather than meaningful reinterpretations. Responses to casting announcements—such as the casting of a Black Juliet in a recent production of *Romeo and Juliet*—highlight how cultural tensions and identity politics shape reception, sometimes provoking controversy that reflects broader social divisions (Bowers, 2024).

These varied reactions demonstrate that casting practices do not operate in a vacuum but interact with public discourse, cultural memory, and social identity. The audience's role in interpreting casting decisions underscores the importance of contextualising theatrical representation within wider cultural debates about race, diversity, and historical imagination.

4.5 Critical Evaluation of Casting Practices

While contemporary casting practices have opened new fields of representation and challenged traditional hierarchies, they are not without criticism. One key concern is the risk of tokenism—where inclusion is superficial and symbolic rather than transformative. As arts journalists and practitioners observe, simply placing a performer of colour in a role does not necessarily constitute meaningful representation unless the broader creative context engages substantively with issues of identity and narrative significance (Tran, 2023).

Critics also note that inclusive casting must be part of systemic change rather than isolated gestures. Without changes in institutional structures—such as diversifying decision-makers in casting offices, artistic leadership, and rehearsal processes—diverse casting may remain limited in its impact. Observers of audition practices argue that lack of diversity among casting authorities continues to reinforce barriers for under-represented actors, even where intentions toward inclusion are evident (Myong, 2024).

Moreover, casting initiatives can sometimes reinforce cultural stereotypes if not accompanied by thoughtful dramaturgical work. Diverse casting that is uncritically applied may risk reproducing reductive understandings of race or inadvertently simplify complex identities. Theatre scholar Miranda Fay Thomas warns that representation alone is insufficient because diverse bodies on stage must be paired with empowering and nuanced storytelling to avoid perpetuating harmful tropes (Thomas, 2019).

Finally, the tension between artistic vision and equity work can create challenges for directors and creative teams. Balancing the authenticity of historical or cultural context with contemporary inclusion aims requires careful deliberation and often invites debate among artists and audiences alike. These critiques do not negate the value of inclusive casting but highlight the ongoing need for critical reflection and structural change in the practice of representation.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study critically examined how contemporary casting practices in theatre—especially colour-conscious casting—challenge traditional racial hierarchies and contribute to new forms of representational meaning. The analysis revealed that deliberate casting choices are not neutral administrative functions but are deeply political and cultural acts that shape the narratives audiences see on stage (Robbins, 2023; Rigour, 2025).

Contemporary productions such as *Hamilton* demonstrate how diverse casting can invite audiences to reconsider national histories and disrupt entrenched racial assumptions that have defined Western theatrical traditions (Tran, 2023).

Further, the study showed that diverse casting in canonical works—particularly in Shakespearean performance—extends the interpretive possibilities of classical texts. By intentionally positioning performers of varied racial identities in roles historically dominated by white bodies, directors can foreground alternative perspectives and deepen thematic readings of familiar narratives (Della Gatta, 2024). However, the analysis also highlighted that these approaches risk falling into tokenism or superficial inclusion if not embedded within broader institutional and dramaturgical commitments.

Another key finding relates to audience reception. Non-traditional casting practices often encourage audiences to reevaluate their own assumptions regarding identity and narrative authenticity, though reactions vary widely depending on cultural contexts and audience dispositions (Bowers, 2024). Importantly, the study confirmed that meaning in performance is co-constructed:

audience interpretation plays an active role in shaping the cultural impact of casting decisions.

Overall, the findings confirm that contemporary casting practices have the potential to transform not only theatrical representation but also cultural conversations about race. Yet these practices must be understood within larger structural and political frameworks that continue to influence inclusion in theatre.

5.2 Implications of the Study

The study's insights have broad implications for both theatre praxis and academic scholarship. For practitioners—directors, casting agents, producers, and dramaturgs—this research highlights the necessity of engaging with casting as a deliberate, ethical, and cultural process rather than a technical or aesthetic choice alone. Casting decisions influence how identities are rendered onstage and can either reproduce or challenge societal biases.

For scholars, the study emphasises the value of integrating critical theory into performance analysis. Frameworks from postcolonial theory, such as hybridity and the "third space", enable a deeper understanding of how identity is negotiated and enacted through casting (Bhabha, 1994). This theoretical lens reveals the complex ways in which contemporary theatre both mirrors and shapes cultural understandings of race and identity.

Additionally, recognising theatre as a cultural site of negotiation underscores its significance beyond art. Theatre contributes to public discourse on representation and belonging, as diverse casting can open spaces for reflection and dialogue about systemic inequality in broader society (Ahmed, 2012). Thus, practitioners and scholars alike must remain attuned to the political dimensions of performance.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of equity within institutional structures. Without intentional efforts to diversify leadership, creative authority, and decision-making power within theatre organisations, efforts at inclusive casting risk remaining isolated rather than systemic.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings, several key recommendations emerge:

1. Intentional Casting Frameworks: Theatre organisations should adopt more intentional and reflective casting processes that move beyond tokenism and engage meaningfully with the social and historical contexts of race. This requires transparent policies, articulated commitments to equity, and ongoing reflection rather than one-off gestures toward diversity.

2. Inclusive Leadership: Diversifying leadership within casting offices, artistic direction, and institutional governance is crucial. Practitioners from under-represented backgrounds should have substantive decision-making authority to shape narratives and production choices.

3. Critical Engagement Through Training: Artistic training programmes and professional development workshops should incorporate critical theories of race and representation. Theatre artists must be equipped not only with technical skills but also with cultural literacy that informs their casting and creative choices.

4. Collaborative Production Practices: Encouraging collaborative approaches that involve performers, directors, cultural consultants, and community voices can lead to richer and more authentic representation. Collaboration fosters shared ownership of interpretation and minimises reductive or tokenistic casting.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

While this study contributes to understanding the transformative potential of contemporary casting practices, significant avenues remain for future inquiry:

Audience Reception Research: More empirical research is needed to explore how diverse audiences — across cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic spectrums — interpret and respond to non-traditional casting. Longitudinal studies can reveal how audience perceptions shift over time.

Comparative Cultural Contexts: Comparative studies that examine casting practices in diverse national and cultural contexts (e.g., non-Western theatre traditions) can expand understanding of how race and representation operate globally. Such research would illuminate varied theatrical logics and approaches to diversity.

Intersectional Analysis: Future studies should foreground intersectional perspectives, examining how casting practices intersect with gender, class, disability, and sexuality. Intersectional analysis can reveal how multiple identity axes contribute to representational complexity and theatrical meaning.

Impact of Institutional Policy: Research that investigates how formal institutional policies (e.g., funding requirements and diversity mandates) shape casting practices would provide insight into structural enablers or barriers to inclusive theatre.

By extending inquiry into these areas, scholars and practitioners can continue to deepen critical engagement with representation in performance and support inclusive practices that resonate both onstage and in the wider cultural landscape.

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