

# EMERGENCE OF INDIAN WOMEN'S THEATRE: A CASE STUDY

Written by *Tapas Kumar Barman*

*Assistant Professor, Samsi College, Malda, West Bengal, India*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focus specifically on Indian theatre and its long tradition. Feminist theatre in India, is a product of both political and theatrical movements, as well as a confluence of art and activism. Indian women's theatre came to limelight with women liberation movement of the west. This brought forward gender biased issues into the public arena. Several social issues like dowry deaths, female foeticide, sexual violence, ignorance, illiteracy, gender discrimination in families and society etc. have been exposed by the women's movement in India. Women Liberation Movement moved nations in support of women's fight against oppression. It proved that women are capable of thinking logically and are equally intelligent with respect to their male counterparts. In 1970s, the emergence of urbanization and industrialization created employment opportunities for women. This lead to emergence of sensitive writers who wrote about neglected section of the Indian society. Many tabooed issues found place in the writings of these writers. Women's movement along with socially active Indian theatre began to show way to the oppressed ones. Theatre became medium for creating social changes. Soon, street theatre presented various issues especially those of women from women's perspective. This also helps women to protest and resist against male domination and oppression. Women's theatre is now predominantly concerned with women's issues and feminist ideology.

**Keywords:** Women's theatre, women's liberation, patriarchy, violence, gender discrimination, resistance, empowerment.

Women's theatre actually coalesces with the street theatre movement, using the same technique in performance and production. It can be termed a 'Theatre Of Protest' because women writers have expressed their resentment against the politics of exploitation on the basis of gender discrimination.

The Jan Natya Manch or People's Theatre Front (1973) of Safdar Hashmi performed the street play called Aurat (1979) which took up bride burning, wife battering and dowry as its theme. Women's theatre also revived the traditional myths of Sita and Savitri and tried to reinterpret the epics from the women's point of view. The dramatic work of Usha Ganguli and Mahasweta Devi can be placed in this category. Mahasweta Devi emerged as a dramatist with a quest to explore something challenging and new. Her five plays are Mother of 1084, Aajer, Urvashi O' Johnny, Bayen and Water. The play Mother of 1084 is a moving account of the anguish of an apolitical mother who has witnessed the horrors of the naxalite movement.

Some of the Indian pioneers of feminist writing in India have shown a greater understanding of Indian life around them. Tutun Mukherjee writes in the prolegomenon to her anthology Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation thus: "The denial of education to women, the male exclusivity in the print culture, the tendency to 'vulgarise' and 'devalue' oral culture (generally the female domain), the separation of the private and public space have all served to confine women to certain genres and restrict or erase their presences in others" (2005, p. 4). This book tries to make us understand the possible reasons held responsible for the distancing and alienating women from theatre. Further, she emphasizes that "Theatre seems to reflect, like other cultural activities, an institutional structure in which artistic and administrative control still remains largely in the hands of men" (2005, p. 4). This discriminating ideology of male theatrical domain caused production of work that could be defined only in patriarchal terms. Theatre is regarded as an institution which still is controlled by males. It clearly indicates the role played by both the sexes in the public sphere. Here, women are restricted to the private domain, which is family where the most important task is the reproduction and bringing up the progeny.

National Women's Theatre Festival held in Mysore, 2001, National Women's Theatre Festival organised by Yavanika, a Hyderabad based Theatre group, Prithvi Theatre from Mumbai,

National Workshop on Women, Poorva, Rangkarmee from Kolkata etc. In West Bengal, Rangakarmee and Usha Ganguly, Pancham Vaidik and Shaoli Mitra are particularly associated with a patronage of women's theatre and voicing women's issues. On the other hand, Tutun Mukherjee's invaluable anthology of women's drama (*Staging Resistance*) draws attention to the various women playwrights writing in different languages in India. The plays of Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta, in a similar way, can be seen as involved in what can be termed 'Writing resistance'. Their plays have challenged social taboos about women such as women's desire and sexuality and the sensitive issue of rape or domestic violence. However, despite these efforts, the Indian theatre scene has been particularly a male-centric one. The scene of Modern Indian theatre has been dominated by stalwarts like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar etc. Even in the genre of Indian drama in English, the scenario has been dominated by figures like Pratap Sharma, Asif Currimbhoy and now, Mahesh Dattani. With such a powerful male domination one is left speculating about the existence of the Indian English woman playwrights. In her comprehensive work on the history and politics of Post-Independence Theatre, Aparna Dharwadker also finds a "conspicuous...imbalance of gender" especially in the absence of a single major important woman playwright in contrast to several successful woman directors. Dharwadker's book also does not refer to the Indian women playwrights writing in English. But women playwrights have not been altogether absent from Indian English drama. Mention can be made of Bharati Sarabhai's two plays: *The Well of The People* and *Two Women*. *The Well of the People* is about the old woman Rani, who widowed, looks for comfort through work and displays selfless sacrifice in a Gandhian way. The situation gradually begins to change in the post-Independence period as more women playwrights take up the pen and begin to 'write resistance'. In the later years the genre of Indian drama in English has been enriched by powerful playwrights like Mrinalini Sarabhai, Uma Parameshwaran, Shanta Gokhale, Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta and Tripurari Sharma among others. It must be remembered that direct legal support for women comes quite slowly—the first anti-dowry laws in India were passed in 1961 and domestic violence became punishable by law only in 1983.

With the changes in times and perspective, it has become inevitable to treat women not as inferior to her male counter parts. So, it's time for women to make their own identity. There is an urgent need to recognize women in a proper perspective and look upon their problems

without any kind of discrimination. The best means to achieve this is Theatre which is considered a medium in the service of women's empowerment. In the context of modern Indian theatre, the location of women playwrights and directors is complex and demands a flexible approach. The Women theatre is predominantly concerned now with social change and feminist ideology. There is a fundamental difference between feminism and theatre; while Feminism comes under cultural politics, Theatre is an act of performance. Susan Basnett says that feminist theatre is based on seven demands: equal pay, equal education and opportunities, financial and legal independence and end to discrimination against lesbians and women's right to define her own sexuality and freedom against violence (Mukherjee, 2005, p. 14). In the west, contemporary feminist theory regards feminist theatre in a political context. So, feminist theatre was written and directed by women. Feminist theatre questions the existing realities, social norms and practices that are against women. Its main aim is to enable changes in women's lives through theatrical representations. The debate in feminist criticism regarding playwriting has focused on the question whether a realist play could ever be considered a feminist play. But, Feminist Playwrights should not only write in realistic mode in order to be produced but also face inherent challenges in garnering support for the empowerment of women writers and performers.

Women writers were trying to break silence and reveal the cause of their sufferings through their work. Their writings are an attempt to reflect the need for change in women's living conditions. Women are compelled to accept their destiny with silence and without any protest. 'Silence' can be seen as something which is forcefully imposed on women in a patriarchal society. Women are never allowed to raise their voice against the evil practices against them and are forced to remain silent throughout their lives. In return, this silence kills them from inside from which they seek escape. Women writers or Women artists felt empowered after entering the field of theatre. Male face dominated theatre for a long time. Women's participation began with the devadasi tradition. Even the female characters were played by male actors. Eventually, women got their voices and started representing themselves. Women playwrights and directors started writing for increasing female performers in theatre. This created a women centric approach in theatre women's experiences and thoughts became the

subject of the plays. A series of theatre festivals and workshops were organized by various theatre groups to celebrate the cause of women.

The women writers in English literature can be broadly classified into three categories. The first category consists of writers who are writing before the emergence of feminism as a well-defined forte. In this phase, women writers were struggling hard to be acknowledged on par with men among the intelligentsia. The second category in the order is the feminist writers who wrought the essential rebellious spirit against the male chauvinism and talked of women's emancipation, individuality, and their socio-economic and political equality. This group revolted against patriarchy and demanded freedom from male dominance. The last category tries to strike a balance between the two afore said groups. Here, too one can find an emphasis on the sense of suffocation in a patriarchal society complimented by an acute awareness about rights and equality. However, this group talks less about social and political freedom (Khan, 2006, p. 50).

Both the western and Indian dramas, which are phallogocentric in character, have focused mainly on man and looked at the world through man's eyes. Drama mainly focuses on social issues and holds up mirror to the contemporary society. As such women playwrights, being victims of gender restrictions, remained absent from theatrical world for a very long time. While we find a large number of women making mark in different genres and sub-genres such as poetry, novel, short story, autobiography and fiction, their number is conspicuously low in the field of drama in India.

Women playwrights did not write any play till the twentieth century. "As playwrights, women scarcely figure on the literary map. They seem to have shied away from writing plays though they have excelled in all other genres" (Mukherjee, 2005, p. 5). Women writing in other genres like novels, short stories, autobiographies, poetry etc. have performed very well. Women's writing tries to protest against the male dominance, repression, division, alienation and marginalization and thereby offers a different perspective and opinion. Women performed in the earlier phase very happily to the script written by male playwrights. They had neither their voice nor their words to express themselves. They had no option but to read out or speak

words written by male writers and perform roles created out of their imagination. Though many male playwrights talked about women's issues, their presentation lacked the authentic ring of women's emotions and feelings. The contrary is true of the women writers. In her interview with Mahesh Dattani published under title "Dialogue with Dattani" in her book Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre, Laxmi Subarmanyam asks Dattani about the reason behind dearth of women playwrights in the modern Indian theatre. Dattani cautiously shares his observation thus: "women playwrights write about strong feminine concerns or simply write about women for no political reasons (same as male playwrights write about men without really thinking about it)". However, "theatre companies prefer to do plays with a male protagonist" and this may be reason for "less female representation among visible playwrights" (2002, p. 20). Many men who run theatre do not take women playwrights seriously because they find it hard to connect to the stories written from a female perspective. This adversely effected women who wanted to pursue their career in the field of Playwriting.

The women playwrights who are remembered for their remarkable contribution are Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan and Polie Sengupta. They have introduced new subjects affecting the feminine psyche in their works. Deena Mehta is a playwright and an editor from Mumbai. Her first full length play was The Myth Makers (1969). Her play Brides are not For Burning (1993) won the first prize in worldwide competition sponsored by BBC in 1979. Some of her well known plays are Getting Away with Murder, When One Plus One Makes Nine, Sister Like You etc. Next is Manjula Padmanabhan who won the inaugural Onassis Prize for her play Harvest. She has written powerful plays, comic strips, short stories, novel for children, travelogue, picture books, autobiographical novel and Illustrator. Her well known plays are Lights Out, The Artist Model, Sextet and Harvest. Poile Sengupta was born in Kerala in 1948. She has won the Sandesha Special Recognition Award for Children's Literature in 1994. Her first play is Mangalam. Apart from this, she wrote Keats was a Tuber, Samara's Song etc. She is also a founder of theatre club. Recently, she published her novel titled Inga. Women writers in India keep on writing about complex issues such as sensuality, subjugation, alienation, migration, identity crisis, free sex etc. The contemporary women writers were always considered inferior to their male counterparts their canvas was narrow and they largely confined themselves to the depiction of the enclosed domestic space and their experience



within it. In spite of the limitations, they have definitely raised the consciousness about the woman's role in the society. The portrayal of women characters by a women writer is always realistic and as such authentic. Portrayal of women and their issues by a male playwright tends to be a little unconvincing as he fails to understand the female psyche and perspective. Only a woman playwright like Manjula Padmanabhan could write a play like Lights Out about women's objectification and victimization. This play poignantly depicts an incident like gang rape and captures the reaction of both the males and females of the house over the incident. Absence of women playwrights could be accounted for by the fact that theatre was a public space along with the problem of publication, public performances etc. If woman as a playwright entered the domain of theatre, she was considered a woman first and a writer next. Now that women have entered the theatre as playwrights, they have shaped theatrical techniques which have no author defined consciousness, no resolutions, even tried to build a new class of audiences who would not expect to be entertained. After successfully establishing themselves as accomplished artists, women playwrights have now created plays which are critical the institution of marriage and family hierarchy. They have written plays with strong, complex female characters that demolish the cultural barriers which are discriminatory in character. Theatre can take measures like sponsoring workshops for play readings to develop playwriting skills and encourage female playwrights.

Feminist theatre is a creative theatre that challenges representation of our dominant culture. The goal of almost all feminist theatre groups is to subvert expectations, to enable or initiate positive changes in women's lives through political and theatrical representations. Feminist theatre is a cultural representation made by women and is informed by the perspective of its makers, its performers, its spectators and its critics whose aim is positive re-evaluation of women's role and/or to effect social change.

Theatre as a mode of intervention on women's behalf has meant departing from the conventional way of producing and staging plays. It has also meant addressing modes of performances, idioms of expression and representation of women, and using training in theatre for articulating the perception and aspiration of women. From creation of the script through improvisation and visualisation on to rehearsal, right up to performance and relating to the audience, the emphasis has been on collective function. Feminist theatre aims at empowerment;

it enables women to speak out, giving them voice. It is considered as being at the intersection of art, activism and social relevance. Feminist theatre is seen as an instrument of real change in women's lives.

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Indu Pandey is a Research Student at Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi, India.

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