
Aesthetics of Indian Feminist Theatre

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Abstract

This study addresses a number of Indian feminist plays (both by men and women) that were written and performed in the last century and early years in this century. The paper focus specifically on Indian theatre because of its long established theatre tradition that goes back to 1st century B.C. Ironically in such a country there were hardly any women dramatist to speak of before 19th century. At the core, the belief of a Feminist theatre is in the efficacy of theatre as a tool for conscientization, for critiquing social disparities and for self exploration and expression. Feminist theatre is a source of empowerment; it enables women to speak out. It is at the intersection of art, activism and social relevance and sees theatre as an instrument of real change in women's lives. It is an exploration of women's own unique idiom, their own form, their language and ways of communication. It is a challenge to the established notions of theatre.

Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it
(Bertolt Brecht)

More than two thousand years ago, Electra, in Euripides's play of the same name, whose father had been killed by the machinations of her mother and her paramour Aegisthus cries out in grief and anguish: "How should I begin my accusations? How should I end it? What should go in the middle?" The cry of Agamemnon's daughter has lost none of its relevance. Women's Theatre as a public literary form is most immediately engaged in social change it works with a vengeance to redo the wrongs done to women. It could be technically innovative and by definition subversive because it challenges existing ideas of theatrical practices. It could be thematically revolutionary, calling into question accepted ideas and values and conceded structures, and thus is continued renewal.

This study addresses a number of Indian feminist plays (both by men and women) that were written and performed in the last century and early years in this century. I have chosen to focus specifically on Indian theatre because of its long established theatre tradition that goes back to the 1st century B.C. Ironically in such a country there were hardly any women dramatist to speak of before the 19th century . There may have been women actors on the Indian stage since the ancient times. There may have been women playwright but these women actors/authors did not find a specifically female voice on the stage; they never

dominated the repertoire and their contributions have been largely written out of history. A number of articles and books have provided factual documentation of the systematic differences women experienced in preparation and production that affected their mastery of technique, their opportunities to be original and their achievement of expressiveness. Through an analysis of the operation of gender throughout the Indian/ western art world over four centuries, feminist practices have established that regardless of individual artist's occasional successes, art registers discriminatory cultural practices. Linda Nochlin, for instance, suggested in her provocative essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"(1971)) that Idealism aside, art is gendered.

Emergence of Indian feminist theatre

Though the Municipal vote for Indian women was acquired right in 1855, it had not been properly utilized by them for lack of education, lack of opportunity for self-development, lack of interest in social problems. The independence struggle paved the way for women out of the hearth and chimney hooks into the life of the nation. Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement gave a new direction and dimension to the Feminist movement in India .He acclaimed the concept of *Ardhangini*, enshrined in Indian culture, and accepted the fact that men and women are complementary to each other, and one is never a whole without the other. He accepted the Hindu scriptural view, which conceived *Prakriti* and *Purusha* as one, man and woman as one in the concept of *Ardhanariswara*. He realized and believed that men and women were partners, sharing equal duties in social life and equal rights in political field.

Feminism in India can also be traced down to the days of Ram Mohan Roy and the *Almiya Sabha* started in 1914. The earliest feminists were men who had set out to introduce reforms in upper caste Hindu society addressing social evils like child marriage, dowry, female illiteracy and the practice of *sati*. Social reformers believed that education was the key to social change for improving the position of women.

The National Council of women in 1921 and All India Women's Conference in 1927 and 1930 protested against, the feudal forces, which kept Indian women under subjugation. Sarojini Naidu was in the forefront of the Indian freedom struggle and struggled to redeem Indian Women from the clutches of

slavery and superstition. In 1920, the power of Vote was first given to women in Cochin and Travancore and in 1921 in Madras presidency. Many laws have been passed after 1947, like the Hindu Marriage Act and Hindu succession Act of 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, which gave a wide spectrum of right to Indian women.

Urbanization and industrialization opened up new vistas of employment for women. However things were not upbeat for them after independence. The socio-political situation in India in the 1960's and 70's was grim: politically the 1960's marked the gradual collapse of certain values and mores that were identified with the pre-independence era. The fourth general elections saw the decline of the congress party and this led to no party having majority and thus gave rise to horse traders among legislators. India fought two wars within three years – with China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965. Again, large parts of rural India were gripped by food scarcity and thousands died. An industrial recession followed soon, leading to retrenchment of workers. Rural unrest exploded into armed uprising of poor peasants under the leadership of the Communist Part of India. That spread within a few years from Naxalbari in the north eastern Bengal in 1967 to other parts of India, as far as in certain villages of Andhra Pradesh in the south. As it developed into a full fledged movement by the 1970s, its impact was felt on the cultural scene. The dalits were organizing themselves around the same time to articulate their demands for equal rights. Aggressive assertion of rights by the downtrodden illuminated a hitherto neglected corner of Indian society and shook up sensitive writers and artists from urban middle class milieu, who turned their attention to the histories and culture of the Indian lower /marginalized order—the landless peasants , the dalits , the women , tribal people—and their existential problems.

A parallel literature was created by the subaltern classes. Theatre with strong ideological content in it was extensively practiced and the birth of street theatre became visible during this period; thousands of young men and women were scripting and mounting ideological plays, agitprop plays and angry plays of political protest. Street theatre had emerged as a strong medium for highlighting women's issues and an exclusive forum where women audiences could relate the issues. It was an intimate way of revealing and connecting the lives of women audiences and sharing their perspective with the world. An example of this is a

play on eve-teasing (directed by Tripurari Sharma), which was performed in colleges only by women participants. These plays, therefore, served as devices to bring out and evolve a women's perspective.

In the charged atmosphere of the mid- to late-1970s, socially relevant theatre and the women's movement began to show the way forward. A number of tabooed issues found expression and acceptance through theatre. In 1980's and 1990's women's question entered the Indian theatre scene in a large way. Though feminist theatre was an emergent cultural form in the 1970's it had its origin in the experimental theatre group and women's movement. The form of the experimental theatre and the agenda of the women movement shaped the content and mounting of plays. It sought a definition and found several:

- Production and script characterized by consciousness of women as women;
- Dramaturgy in which art is inseparable from the condition of women as women; performances (written and acted) that deconstructs sexual differences and thus undermines patriarchal power;
- Scripting and production that present transformation as a structural and ideological replacement for recognition and creation of women characters in the subject position.

To begin with feminist theatre thrived in cities and towns in India primarily in non commercial spaces. *Jan Natya Manch* of Safdar Hashmi (*People's Theatre Front*, formed in 1973) performed an agitprop street play *Aurat (Women, 1979)*, which dealt openly with issues like bride burning, dowry and wife battering. It was exciting because it dared to venture to the public with such diverse representations and explanations of women that it created a new audience for theatre.

During 19th century many female authors carved out an important place for themselves in the genre of fiction and poetry: the stage remained largely closed to them. The last twenty years or so have seen a significant change in this respect. The Indian theatre is no longer the male preserve it used to be. Women directors, previously a rarity, have come to the fore. Names like Laxmi Chandra, Chama Ahuja, Ipsita Chandra, Usha Ganguli, Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury, Rani Balbir Kaur, Sheila Bhatia, B.Jayashree, Arundhati Raje, S.Malati,

Saumya Verma, Gauri Dattu , Nadira Babbar, J.Shailaja , Anuradha Kapur , Amal Allana come readily to mind.

A great boost to the theatrical aspect of women centered issues was the development of the IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Movement) active from 1943. Although in fact women's issues was only one among its cluster of various social, political and aesthetic concerns. Subsequently a plethora of theatre festivals, workshops, ideologically committed theatre groups celebrating the cause of women burgeoned. To cite just a few examples – *Akka* , the National Women's Theatre Festival held in Mysore , 2001, National Women's Theatre Festival organized by *Yavanika*, a theatre group based in Hyderabad, National Workshop on Women , *Poorva* , Festival of Asian Women, 'Voicing Silence', Gendered Theatre by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation organizes yearly festival and has held four interactive women's theatre festivals, called *Kulavai* or celebration, (*kulavai* is the Tamil name for the ululation sound made by women), *Samudaya* from Karnataka , *Kalashetra* from Manipur , Prithvi Theatre from Mumbai , *Alarippu* from Delhi (means blossoming, established in 1983), *Rangkarmee* from Kolkatta, *Rangayana* from Mysore and *Koothu –p-pattarai* from Chennai along with organizations/institutions such as the National School of Drama , the ICCR , *Natarang Pratisthan* often mount women centered plays and ideologically committed theatre and use theatre as a medium for social change .

All this bubbling up of interest and organizational support produced an explosion of plays written by women. New women playwrights are not necessarily to be lumped together indiscriminately as explicitly feminist authors. However, there is a connection between the greater number of women authored plays in the Indian stage and the upsurge, especially during the 70's and 80's of feminism as a potent force in society. Let me reel off the names of some of these authors with no comment to their respective merit and no attempt at completeness: Poile Sengupta (English), Varsha Adalja (Gujarati), Manjula Padmanabhan (English), Dina Hehta (English), Tripurari Sharma (English and Hindi), Dr. Kusum Kumar (Hindi), Gitanjali Shree (Hindi), Iripinder Bhatia (Hindi), Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury (Punjabi), Binodini (Telegu), B. Jyashree (Kannada), Shanoli Mitra (Bengali), Usha Ganguli (Hindi), Shanta Gandhi (Gujarati), Suahma Despande

(Marathi), Veenapani Chawla (Marathi), Qudisia Zaidie (Urdu)—an impressive roll call in anyone's book on numbers alone.

Evidence of this explosion of women dramatists and directors in India can be found in the regularity with which the major journals like *Theatre India*, *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, *Rang Prasang*, *Bharat Rang*, *Natrang* now publish feminist theatre criticism, history and theory. Anthologies and critical books on women's drama also make a regular appearance. Tutun Mukerjee has edited an anthology of women dramatists titled: *Staging feminism: Plays by Women in Translation* (2005) published by the Oxford Press, *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival*, published by Seagull books: 2000, among several other plays and translated works. Plays by and about women continue to be written and produced but the most striking development in the domain of gender and drama in the present times has been the emergence of a rich and diverse array of writings in feminist criticism and theory. Lakshmi Subramanyam edited a volume on theatre criticism titled: *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theater* (2002). Apart from these we have noteworthy theatre critics like: Aparna Dharwardkar, Maya Pandit, Vasudha Dalmia, Kirti Jain, Deepa Gehlot among many others.

Aesthetics of Indian feminist theatre

"Beauty is the struggle for living, for survival. Through many struggles we have to create a sense of value."
Dang Tu Mai, Vietnam

Feminist theatre was born out of an interaction between experimental theatre movement of the 1960's and the feminist movement going on around the same time. It is as much a political endeavor as a theatrical one. It is revisionist in spirit and it questions orthodoxy. It questions – phallogocentrism: male centered view of life. Phallogocentrism: male dominated discourse. It is *avant garde* movement, as it deconstructs and has many facets. It deconstructs patriarchal metaphysics.

Like the postmodern with which it is closely associated - some might say it is but one branch on the postmodern tree. It challenges the notion of representation/focuses on the politics of representation and reveals how meanings are socially produced and historically conditioned.

Feminist theatre argues that for over two millennia, since even before Aristotle wrote out his *Poetics* or after Bharata's *Natyashastra* and the dramatists that followed; dramatic text and performances were dominated by male ideologies. In response, feminist theatre evolved not only to share the tragically under represented experiences of women living in a patriarchal society, but also to create a theatricality that would subvert traditional theatre's most sacred traditions.

Theatre practices since ancient times focused on a single protagonist. Plays written by women undermine the classical Indian aesthetic in which a single protagonist follows a linear plot by focusing on an ensemble, thus dramatizing the feminist belief that the group is more important than the individual. To take the example of a solo written and performed by Usha Ganguli *Antaryatra* (2002) - The eternal journey of an actress, the 63 years old actress/director weaves in autobiographical introspection with the voice of famous women theatrical characters into a rich narrative of feminine consciousness. It is a play in which Usha Ganguli uses herself as a reference point to narrate the story of an actress's struggle through life. She attempts to explore Indian woman's psyche through a variety of characters like Nora, Himmat Mai, Rudali, Kamala and Anima. Her experiences obviously enrich her one-woman show.

Antaryatra is a tribute to at least a dozen crucial female heroines played by her who are representatives of real life women, each one belonging to a distinct social space and yet bound in some way by the virtue of being a woman. In *Antaryatra* there is a whole history of Indian womanhood played out in large enough social space covering middle class homes in the urban space to the rural women at the extreme margin as well as dramatic moments in the history in the 19th century Bengal, Fascist Germany and the 17th century Thirty Years' War in Germany. A journey within and without, the drama here is not born out of conflict, but rather out of the juxtaposition of characters and the stories, the relationship they share with the performer/director/writer/producer of the play.

There was often the dearth of substantive female roles; the western and Indian theatre had perpetuated a masculine perspective of the world at the expense of the feminine. A play like Rangkarmee's production *Beti Aayee* ('A Girl is Born'), is an all women cast play on women's issues (receiver of Lions

Kalkar award for best production) This play focuses on discrimination against the girl child, and highlights the problems of women as a whole. This is revealed through narrations and enactments. Written by Jyoti Mhapsekar, the play has been a big hit in colleges and schools and had over 70 shows.

Theatre and Television Associates, Delhi, presented the play *Nati Binodini* (Hindi) under the direction of Amal Allana (Allana has based the script on the English translation of *Aamar Katha* (My Life) and *Aamar Abhinetri Jeebon* (My Life as an Actress) by Rimli Bhattacharya). Nati Binodini was the fifth woman in Bengal to become a professional actor, in the 19th century. At that time theatre was by men and for men. From the age of 12 to 23, Binodini came to dominate the stage with her versatility and talent. Her autobiography is about her struggle and encounter with the *bhadralok*. The play was presented with a strikingly original conceptual design. Scenes moved seamlessly from past to present and vice versa, in a pattern that is based on "emotional memory" rather than hard fact or chronological order.

The play was a strikingly original presentation where five different actresses portrayed Binodini, representing different ages; occupied the stage at the same time. Except the senior most actress, the other four were dressed and made-up identically. Props were used iconically and poetically, rather than descriptively. For example, the older Binodini holds a white lotus flower in her hand for most of her performance. Not only is the lotus the most common flower of Bengal, but it suggests her perpetual innocence, her blooming from the mud. In fact, many meanings could be read, giving a sense of ambiguity, a sense in keeping with the quality of memory.

The past was, for the most part enacted by four actresses who suggested the growing maturity, her conflicting emotions, and the schizophrenic breakdown of Binodini's personality. From time to time they also become the characters Binodini had performed in the past. Structured in the flashback mode with the telescoping of the present and the past, the play opened with the octogenarian Binodini writing out her autobiography. As the old Binodini reads out from her writings, the scene moves back to reveal four other Binodini's of different ages, dressed and made up identically, sometimes narrating the story of Binodini's life, at times enacting scenes from her plays, and at times going into depression born of a shattered life.

One of the actresses plays the doddering old Binodini in the present, writing out her autobiography and often entering into a discourse with the ghost of Girish Ghosh, her teacher and mentor, the historic personality of the Bengali stage, on a wheelchair. The wheelchair is a metaphor for Ghosh whose theatre was almost crippled after Binodini left. The focus was more on the emotional and sexual exploitation of Binodini by her mother, by the first man whose mistress she was forced to be, and finally, by Girish Ghosh, than on Binodini, the actress. Ghosh persuaded her to live with Gurmukh Rai, a wealthy Marwari admirer, as his keep so that the theatre, that was about to close down, could be saved. Rejecting his offer of Rs.50, 000 outright, Binodini asked him to build a theatre. He agreed on condition that the theatre would be called B-Theatre, the "B" standing for Binodini, in celebration of her rich contribution to theatre. Yet, when the time came, the members of the group did not keep this promise. It was christened Star Theatre as it was felt that a theatre house named after a prostitute would fail to draw an audience. The play highlights that theatre was not considered a respectable profession for women by society, it was a male preserve- circulation, production and consumption was in the hands of men.

Also embedded in the structure of many feminist plays is the argument that identity and gender are not fixed or innate but rather dynamic and culturally created. *Umrao Jan Ada* (1905), a novel in Urdu by Mohammad Hadi Ruswa was adapted as *Umrao* (in 1993) by Geetanjali Shree. It was directed by Anuradha Kapur, produced by Vivadi. The play based on the life of a courtesan questions the stereotypical image of the courtesan and therefore of the woman as a sexual object, an embodiment of beauty, of glamour and woman as victim.

This is not only achieved through the narrative and the text but also by casting a middle aged actress in the role of this legendary glamorous courtesan. Kapur also breaks the linearity of the narrative to be able to accommodate different points of view about characters and relationships and deals with great complexity the notions of time, space, memory, gender, sexuality and guilt. *Umrao* attempted to know the life of a courtesan behind the image that gets created—courtesans came to embody the old ideal and could only figure in literature as instruments of sexual corruption or as golden hearted victims of society and object of elite pity. *Umrao* and the courtesan narrative has been constructed by the male gaze this play introduces both a male writer and a

modern day woman writer in the play. We see the courtesan as a woman. The character was deconstructed to see—the public and the private face. Umrao sails through loves, rejection but the novel does not dwell upon what she feels. The novel ends with a major speech by Umrao herself, who is now old. It is edifying in content and it is one of the main statements that the novel makes. She warns other women not to follow her fallen path for though she had great moments in her life and extracted most from it, she is now old and abandoned and has nobody to love. So she advises other women to be honourable. In this play this speech is turned around and another is introduced. Umrao does not see herself as a fallen woman, but is placed in a mixed situation. She talks about positive and negative things in life and defines herself as an intelligent woman not as a prostitute, and claims she has handled the vagaries of life intelligently and creatively. For the male writer Ruswa, Umrao's life is over, but the present day women writer looks at her and asks 'what else? Umrao pauses and then utters a great line: 'but now I will turn over' (*lekin ab to hum karwat badalte hai*) *karwat* has both literal and metaphorical meaning. For Umrao life is not over. *Umrao* had two divergent meaning—one from Ruswa's ending which was didactic and the other is the alternative ending where Umrao turns around, one phase has finished and another has started.

Tripurari Sharma's *Lado Mausī* (1990) is a comedy that was inspired by Graham Greene's 'Travels with My Aunt' as also by the number of old woman who enjoy traveling, seeing places even if they are cloaked as pilgrimages. Their undaunting spirit and love of adventure leads them into interesting pathways. And most importantly it breaks an image.

The theme of how the performing arts can unloose the shackles of gender constraints is explored in Madhushree Dutta's *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (designed by Bhupen Khakhar and Nilima Sheikh, and the dramatization was by Geetanjali Shree and Dinesh Khanna. Produced by Majlis, the performance opened in Delhi in May 1998; it received much critical acclaim and toured widely in India.). The story is based on the autobiography of an early twentieth century female impersonator Jaishankar Sundari, active in Bombay from 1901 to 1931. The performance dealt with the meanings of cross-dressing and the dangers and the erotics of living between two genders. The play documents the process of his journey from a boy to a man and simultaneously from a male to a female. The

play can be read in the context of contemporary gender discourses and the politics of acting.

A traditional dramatic structure would often hinge on exposition complication/conflict and denouement. 'Herstories' or women centered drama is hinged on revelation and recognition of the assumed perceptions on the differences between men and women. These devices along with a preference for non linear plots and open ended conclusions as opposed to climaxes are just some of the elements that comprise feminist theatre.

Post-independent and transnational textual and dramatic/cinematic works have revisited the violence of India-Pakistan partition and cross-border migrations with specific attention to the abduction, raping, and mutilation of women's bodies through literary texts and films. The vast increase in collections of first person accounts or memoirs in this field, in Indian languages and English, is a testimony to the imperatives of revisiting this historical moment (Bhalla, ed., 1994). We can site an example here of *Aur Kitne Tukde*, B.Gauri's script, directed by Kirti Jain, based on Urvasi Butali's book on partition (*The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, 2000.) (Performed at Poorva, the Asian Women Directors Theatre Festival, New Delhi (January 3-10, 2003). The book is the product of more than 70 interviews Butalia conducted with survivors of the Partition, and emphasizes particularly the role of violence against women in the collective experience of the tragedy. The story is no story in the literal sense of the word. It is actually the depiction from life as it progresses for a woman. With each sequence on stage, arouses the most sacred and basic of emotions — that of pain.

Aur Kitne Tukde looks at Partition through the eyes of four female protagonists. India and Pakistan, it succinctly sums up, were not carved on dusty ground, they were carved on a woman's chest. Through startling vignettes, it creates moving montages on the horror that happened and the horror that went unreported in the sundry treatises that surfaced and are still surfacing. More importantly, it comes up with two of the most moving sequences on stage: the beheading of young Punjabi girls by their fathers to prevent their molestation and the leaping of women in wells to escape the holocaust. In a compelling climax, the protagonist says: When the history of India's freedom struggle is written, you'll find a wall full of heroes names...men who laid their life for the nation. Any

mention of us women? Nah! For what did we do? We only got raped, butchered, maimed and tortured. Is that big deal? Revealing the horrors of partition, Jain centers on issues of nation making and violence on women's bodies. Here disability operates as a visible marker of women's survival: "Jain focuses on the experience of four women (three with real-life models) who survived gang-rape, mutilation, and forced exile under the patriarchal concept of 'honor'" (Donahue, 2003). Jisha Menon in "Rehearsing the Partition" (2006) points out: "Through an analysis of Kirti Jain's 2001 theatre production of *Aur Kitne Tukde (How Many Fragments?)*, I consider how Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs appropriate colonialist and nationalist ideologies surrounding the notion of 'woman' as repository of cultural value. The women in Jain's play are not a priori subjects who experience violence but rather the experience of violence makes (and unmakes) them as gendered, ethnic and national subjects. I argue that they come into subjecthood after a violent objectification and are re-constituted by their experience of national and sexual violence". The performance of nationalism—through embodied acts of sexual violence, conversion, martyrdom and state violence—is enacted upon female bodies that are transformed into political artifacts. "During partition, thousands of women were sacrificed in the name of honour, when I read the other side of silence, it shook me, it made me aware of many things, it exposed several layers of shame and guilt. We are told of so many women who wanted to die to save their honour, but there are also stories of a patriarch who killed 25 women and children from his clan to save his honour. No one asked if these women wanted to die. Did they have a choice? Even after partition, many were converted forcibly, forced to bring up families again. How many times do we tear them apart to save the honour of the families, to save the honour of nations and religions," asks Kirti with passion. A heart-rending script, which makes us bear the agony borne by thousands of women subjected to the partition of 1947, *Aur Kitne Tukde* surely challenges the often-quoted Biblical adage: The meek shall inherit this earth.

The backdrop is that of the partition days which saw the animal instinct triumphing in the name of patriotism. The castle of inconceivable pain builds around four women—Sadiya, Vimla, Zahida and Harnam Kaur. As the riots gain momentum, Sadiya finds herself being dragged by Raghubir who tells his mother that he had fetched the most beautiful woman out of the available lot. Subjection

is the crux of his narrative, and it's the crux of Sadiya's life throughout. She is now Sumangala because her new masters want it so. She still strives for happiness, believing that someday her brother will come and facilitate her redemption. But when the final moment comes she has no option but to claim the identity of Sumangala thrust upon her by her callous abductor husband.

Vimala dies every moment. Stripped off her home and hearth at the time of riots, she carries on her heart the indelible marks of sexual torture. Raped by the so-called patriots, who were fighting for their nation's prestige, Vimala's character embodies all that is shallow in the world. Following the post-partition agreement between the two governments whereby the misplaced women were to be sent back to their homes, Vimala returns home only to face rejection at the hands of her father and sister Kamal. Zahida is forever caught between love and destiny. At the outset, she is devoid of her first love Javed, whom she must leave following the partition riots. She struggles to breathe and finally finds refuge in the arms of Kartar Singh, who marries her and gives her a family. Soon after, the futile law of the land has it that Zahida must return to her country of belonging. She cries in pain and finally turns numb. The death of her feelings is evident in her refusal to go with Kartar, who reaches Pakistan to bring her back, but finds her swathed in burqua, unable to respond to his love, she cries aloud: "*Main shadishuda hoon, Main is shaks ko nahi pehchanti.*" Harnam Kaur lives in the forced shadow of guilt, for she, unlike other women of her times, had not been able to drown herself in the name of sacrifice. Her son charges her with cowardice, even as she serves him food. All these personal histories put together reflected the trauma which women underwent at the hands of politics. With their dissected heart and mind, they died every minute, much to the ignorance of the world around.

The play marks memories, personal history, silences and screams from victims, exiles and refugees. When warring nations agree to restore the abducted women from both sides- these women find themselves in families which spurn them and a motherland which scorns them. The worst sequence comes when the men folk kill women in the name of 'honour' as the fear defilement by the enemy. So we see, here meaning emerges from the collisions of characters, contexts and images, not from the standard plot progression.

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.

The street play (performed in *Poorva*, the Asian Women Directors theatre Festival, held in New Delhi, in January 3-10) *Who Bol Uthi* (literally, 'She Rose to Speak') by *Jana Natya Manch* is composed of vignettes- a little girl refuses to be coed down despite the family's favoring the male child; the dutiful middle class woman prevents her daughter being married off to corrupt official; a factory worker insists on a separate toilet for women being added to the union's demands.

A traditional dramatic structure presented a slice of life/realism. Feminist theatre presents an empty frame inhering an ability to question reality and assumptions and to portray/practice/question social norms. Tripurari Sharma's *Bahu (Daughter-in-Law)* (1979) the first play she ever wrote, deals with the subjugation of women. It is about a woman known throughout the play as *bahu* (daughter-in law). *Bahu* leaves her marital house to not only escape from the claustrophobic *haveli* but also a rejection of the values that go with it. In rejecting the patriarchal world/and her claims to the house she has in fact laid stronger claims to life. When after the passage of time she sees her husband Ramdutt who recognizing her says:

Ramdutt: Ay...Ay...listen (the woman turns).

Woman: My name is Umavati

Ramdutt: Umavati? Oh yes...of course. (*Muffled Voices*, 135).

By articulating her name Umavati the *bahu* for long known only as *bahu* articulates her identity. Ramdutt asks her to return. She refuses. He then asks for the child, but she is adamant. He cannot possess what he has disowned at birth. The child belongs to her and her alone. She walks away firm and calm. Like Shakuntala, she maintains a distance and seeks no reconciliation, but unlike Shakuntala she stakes a claim to the child. We can also draw a parallel of

Umavati with Sita who prefers to be absorbed by the earth rather than return to Ayodhya.

Traditional dramatic structures relied on invisible authors whereas a feminist theatre often brings in autobiographical women's voice. To give a few examples: Usha Ganguli's written/directed/acted autobiographical play *Antaryatra*, Pratima Kulkarni's directed play *Smritichitre*, a one woman performance based on Laxmibai Tilak's autobiographical writings. Feminist theatre focuses on female characters and explores concepts/themes of feminist drama, relationships, sisterhood, sexuality, female autonomy. *Rudali (Funeral Wailer)* is based on Mahasweta Devi's fiction, adapted by Usha Ganguli of the Calcutta Theatre group *Rangkarmee* in December 1992 (it won her the best director award in 1992). The story presents bonding women's empowerment by turning professional mourners. It centers on two women who develop a partnership for survival, several forums have successfully played the theatrical adaptation. The central character, Sanichari is named so because she was born on a Saturday. The society recognizes it as inauspicious to be born on a Saturday- she has been inauspicious for her family as no one survived after her birth. She was abandoned by her mother shortly after her father's death. Bad fortune follows as she marries an alcoholic, who leaves her with little hope of a brighter future for herself and her son. Throughout Shanichari's lifetime of misfortune she has never cried. She never cried, even when her only son Budhwa died. Not cared, nor loved by anybody, ultimately she becomes a wailer, which means woman weeping as a job and getting the remuneration to wail. Sanichari as a character represents sections which do not have the freedom of choice, the absence of means, but it is never crushed. The title is a reference to a custom in certain areas of Rajasthan where women are hired as professional mourners after the death of a male relative. These women are referred to as a 'rudaali', literally translated as female weeper. Their purpose is to publicly express the grief of family members that are not permitted to display emotion due to social status. She happens to meet a Rudaali Bhigni, an experienced mourner, who changes her life. When the *bade thakur* dies and after the arrival of the *rudaali 'bhigni'* the story of Sanichari slowly comes out. Sanichari the happy mother at the start of the story slowly matures and mellows down. The play is a women's journey towards agency and empowerment.

Patriarchal traditions endorsed power hierarchies, main characters, and standard social/artistic roles. A feminist theatre on the other hand brings in communal power structures—devising and collaborating writing process used by many communal/cooperative companies, visual texts, small scale commissions of new works by women authors and collaborative writing.

Feminist theatre is the process of women's awareness and empowerment, theatre has been the primary medium of women's intervention. It employs agitprop techniques in street demonstrations. Feminist theatre is a counter cultural space of their own. 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, using training in theatre as a source of empowerment by articulating the perception and aspiration of groups of women. From creation of the script through improvisation and visualization on to rehearsal, right up to performance and relating to the audience, the emphasis has been on collective function. Hence activist theatre and theatre activism becomes important in their work.

M.S. Swaminathan Foundation's 'Voicing Silence', a gendered theatre's major concerns are: gender, culture and social activism. Three strands of their work are:

- i. Developing plays sharing women's issues from a feminist perspective.
- ii. Organizing collective sharing of experiences or women's theatre festivals, bringing together cultural workers, theatre persons, social activists and NGOs.
- iii. Working with different communities of women – supporting them to use theatre as a tool for self expression and empowerment.

Padma's (Mangai) play *Pacha Mannu* (New Earth) was produced and performed by 'Voicing Silence' on 22-30 August, 1994, with ten participants – five men and five women. The workshop evolved through an exchange of personal experiences, discussions, research findings and a spirit of togetherness. What is shown in *Pancha Mannu* is everyday reality with a subtle critique of the same. The play was later performed in the villages of Tamil Nadu, moving through village streets. Imagery was used in a significant way by using simple props that visually concretized the deep and personal experience of gender socialization.

The oil press scene evolved out of the traditional mode of extracting oil; in this scene the girl is structured through a list of don'ts like 'do not walk straight'; 'do not giggle'; 'do not study too much' (Mangai, 2002:215-230). The scene presents the parents as the nodal agency of socialization symbolized by the centre pole and a long rope from their hands is held by a man driving the girl bent like a bullock. However to make the play appealing it is interspersed with song, dances and dialogues in different tones. The play incorporated Frierian ideology and Augustus Boal's techniques. The flexibility of the play demanded that the actors improvise, interact and participate. It also drew the audience into discussion and the onus of decision making was rested on them.

The content of their plays have ranged from re-working of traditional myths to current social issues. Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* (1949) rightly says that "few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of women: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse" Beauvoir expresses a commonly held feminist opinion by arguing that mythology validates the subjugation of women in patriarchal culture. Feminist plays deconstruct the emasculating structures of ancient legends and criticize the feminine myths still operating in Indian society. Mainstream hero centered literature and myth normalize contemporary patriarchal cultural values. It is precisely this process that feminist myth revision seeks to overcome.

Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, so Said Shakuni* (2001) is an ambitious play which deals with characters from two different epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The play elicits sympathy for the 'devils' of the epics. The epical characters are humanized in depth and detail. The play foregrounds the injustice done to these characters. The two characters from two different epics meet as travelers at an airport. Gradually they start talking and reveal their innermost thoughts about the way they have been treated by history. Sengupta explains that she was fascinated by the folktale about Shakuni brothers being imprisoned and killed by the Kauravas when Hastinapur was extended to Quandhar in the northwest, only Shakuni had survived, and he swore revenge upon the Kauravas. His dice was made of his brother's bones. Shoorpanakha, on the other hand, represents all those women who are bold enough to remain single and declare their desire for male companionship without taking recourse to false modesty. Such women threaten the male world and so they are described

as dangerous *rakshasis*, who must be controlled/contained/punished before they can upset the patriarchal set up. A woman who expresses her sexuality/sexual desires is branded as a fallen woman. Society practices double standards - men can express their sexual desires. It is considered normal and natural but for women it is profane, immoral and transgressive behavior that is to be kept in check and control. When the two characters meet in a contemporary situation another crisis begins to threaten the world. Finally, it is Shoorpanakha who dissuades Shakuni from provoking another blood bath.

Madhavi (1984) by Bhishma Sahani is a play that radically decentres the myth and retrieves Madhavi from the margins of the mythical narrative situating her at the centre. In the *Udyogparva* section in the *Mahabharata*, Narad narrates the story of Galav to Duryodhana to illustrate the danger of *abhimana* (pride). On Galav's persistence that he must give *gurudakshina* to his guru, Rishi Vishwamitra asks for 800 *ashwamedhi* horses as *gurudakshina*, knowing full well that the whole of *Aryavarta* has only 600 such horses. The despairing Galav is brought to king Yayati by Garuda, who informs him that Yayati never disappoints any seekers coming to his door. Yayati does not have the horses but he can offer him a 'thing'—his own daughter Madhavi, with the information that she is destined to give birth to four *chakravarti* sons i.e. great emperors. Galav subsequently rents her out for a year to three different kings at the rate of 200 horses, so that each of them can have a son. For the remaining 200 horses Madhavi is offered to Vishwamitra himself. After giving him a son, her function being over, Madhavi returns to the forest and takes to living happily as a doe.

This tale had a complete erasure of Madhavi's humanity—her feelings, suffering and deprivation. The stark injustice meted out to her by the epic led Shahni to rewrite the mythical segment from Madhavi's point of view. Shahni gives Madhavi what the myth denies her, her essential humanity, her motherhood, her bonding with children, a dream of love and freedom. From being a commodity he elevates her to the level of a human being and lowers the great heroes from the stage of heroism and makes us see their self-glorification. In the myth Madhavi speaks only once when she explains her usefulness to Galav that she can regain her virginity after performing a ritual and suggests that he can circulate her among other kings to get the required number of horses. But in this

play Madhavi bluntly expresses her bitterness, ranging from anguish and perplexity to anger, bitterness, boldness and rejection.

The notion of duty is exposed as nothing but a discourse of oppression. Each of the men utilized her for his selfish interest in the name of '*dharma*'. Yayati feels duty bound to live up to his reputation as a man of charity, Galav is duty bound to keep his word with the guru and in such a context of duty, *dharma* and promise, it is Madhavi who is assigned the duty of being the instrument (*madhyam*) who would carry out her father's and lover's respective commitments. Of course, these commitments are nothing but constructs of male ego and patriarchal assumption, regarding a women's place and duty towards her family, natal and marital. Sahani's play is an unremitting attack on patriarchal assumption of women as a function, as an instrument to further the cause of male sovereignty. The play shows how this ideology has so infiltrated women's psyche that she herself believes to be doing all that she does in the name of love.

Madhavi's story may be 5000 years old but one finds that in modern times it is only the name that may have changed but the norms and rules of a society remains the same. Daughter is wedded and father performs the sacred rites of '*kanyadaan*', still a *daan* or donation. Yayati gives away Madhavi because that's what his duty binds him to do. The attitude of Madhavi's first buyer, the king of Ayodhya—king Haryasch is singularly humiliating. She has to stand amidst the keen stares of men at the court, where the kingdom's astrologer weighs upon Madhavi's body—her statistics, shin shapes to ensure that she is the right bargain for the horses. The process of commodification is complete when she is made to stand on a stool and royal astrologer inspects and demonstrates to the court each part of her body. How different is any matrimonial add of today's national newspapers? Lecherous Devodas accepts Madhavi because she is a prolific son generating machine. A son is still considered a choicest choice. Galav markets her professionally and stoically.

In the original epic, Madhavi regains her youth and turns to a doe and lives happily in the forest. But in Sahani's play Madhavi steadily gains self awareness, rejects the notion of women as womb that society has thrust upon her, refuses to take recourse to the boon to regain her virginity and youth and demands Galav accept her as she is, with wrinkles, dark circles, as a middle-aged women, exhausted by repeated pregnancies. Galav, of course, finds her

ugly and urges her to make use of her boon. In the end Madhavi rejects Galav as well as her father's ostentatious arrangements for her *swyamwar*. Sahani has not only rewritten the Mahabharata tale from Madhavi's standpoint, he critiques family, marriage as institution that is essentially unjust to women. Marriage is nothing but co-modification sanctified by the family and the pretext of protection, women are oppressed most within the family. Sahani's play ultimately shows that women have to assert their selfhood and demand their share of human dignity and right to take decisions regarding their persons on their own.

Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari* (awarded the Gujarat Sahitya academy award in 1997) is a dialogue between Sita (Rama's wife) and Mandodari (Mandodari, the daughter of Maya came to be known as the better half of Ravana (Ravana's wife). When Sita is held captive by Ravana in *Ashok vatika*, Mandodari goes to visit her requesting her to tell her husband from challenging Ravana as he was a brave ruler and Rama would surely be destroyed. Sita admonishes her by saying how can you support your husband who is on the wrong. Mandodari's plea was that she was a '*pativrata*' but Sita questions her notion of '*pativarta*' and replies that being a '*pativrata*' means supporting your husband in his good and moral deeds and not being a partner in his evil deeds. The play also contains a long soliloquy of Mandodari where she examines her own fears, nagging doubts, about her husband's abduction of Sita—what if Ram was defeated in the battle and Sita would be the *patrani*? – What would be her fate? Would she then not be ignored by Ravana. She says,

“Lankesh has immense powers and divine weapons. If he wins the war and Rama is killed, then he will marry Seeta. She will become his queen in this palace and I will become her attendant...” (*Staging Resistance*, 112).

This play helped to reveal the innermost recesses of Mandodari, her qualms, her misery that the epic was silent about.

Each of these plays not only debunks myth but also creates a new feminist reading of formerly patriarchal legends. The belief of a feminist theatre in the efficacy of theatre as a tool for conscientization, for critiquing social disparities and for self exploration and expression is at the core. Feminist theatre is a source of empowerment; it enables them to speak out, giving them voice. It is at the intersection of art, activism and social relevance and theatre is seen as an

instrument of real change in women's lives. It is an exploration of women's own unique idiom—their own form, their language and ways of communication.

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