



INTERROGATING PHALLOCENTRICISM: A STUDY OF SELECT PLAYS BY INDIAN ENGLISH WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Indian English Women's Theatre is a genre that came to be widely recognized, practiced and debated in the literary circle in the wake of Women's Liberation Movement of the seventies and the experimental theatre which used to encapsulate issues related to feminine subjugation and inferiorization. Women playwrights like Deena Mehta, Manju Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta and Mallika Sarabhai used theatre as means to subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology working behind conventional representation of women which further establishes, consolidate and strengthen the patriarchal hegemony. The current paper attempts to explore the use of theatre by Indian English Women Playwrights Deena Mehta, Manju Padmanabhan and Poile Sengupta, to augment their own creative idiom which at once critiques the socially accepted norms and presents an alternate spectacle to view the situation.

Key words: women's theatre, subaltern, phallogocentrism, subjugation

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Indian Women's Theatre, fed by the recognition of women's social, cultural, sexual, political and economic oppression and marginalization, gained limelight in the wake of seventies' Women Liberation Movement of the west. Theatre being micro-cosmic mirror reflecting the pulse of the society sought to give voice to the discrimination done to women by lending its space to women playwrights, actors and directors. This is not to say that women's subaltern concerns have been extinct in the writings of the Indian male dramatists. In fact, post-colonial Indian theatre was fraught with concerns of oppressed and marginalized people who tried to resist hegemonic dominations. Almost all mainstream playwrights and directors such as Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, Mohan Rakesh and Safdar Hashmi reflected asymmetrical distribution of power and privileges between the two sexes and its resultant ill effects and disasters in their works. But

the image crafted by these maestros was a distanced mirror image – devoid of the languor, the pain and the suffocation felt by women. Thus, Indian Women's Theatre necessitated itself by its long lasting absence in terms of 'productions and scripts characterized by consciousness of women as women; performance (written and acted) that deconstruct sexual difference and undermines patriarchal power; scripting and production that present transformation as a structural and ideological replacement for recognition; and the creation of women characters in the 'subject position'... It was exciting because it dared to venture to the stage with such diverse and sometimes surprising representations and explorations of women, of their relationships to each other and to men, that it created a new audience for theatre'(Keyssar 9).

Plays written in English by Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, Mallika Sarabhai, Poile

Sengupta and Tripurari Sharma sought to deconstruct the patriarchal metaphysics by questioning as well as challenging both phallogocentrism and phallogocentrism of the Indian writings of the time. In addition to this, they created a theatrical idiom of their own by crafting an altogether new kind of narrative in theatre. Reacting against the linearity of plot proposed by Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata's *Natyashastra*, plays written by Indian women playwrights offered non-linear plots, such as Usha Ganguli's *Antaryatra*, which showcases eternal struggle of a female through famous women characters like Nora, Himmat Mai, Rudali, Kamala and Anima. By superimposing characters from distinct social and historical space, the playwright, Ganguli attempts to foreground woman as a site of oppression, subjugation, marginalization and victimization. Be it eighteenth century Europe, seventeenth century Germany, thirty years' war or nineteenth century Bengal, women's subaltern status is a constant reality that transcends the boundaries of space and time. Using Brecht's dialectics and techniques such as alienation and historicization, Ganguli has attempted to juxtapose different characters, situations and problems to evince a critical response from the spectators in favour of women, be it the actor, character, playwright or director.

Seeking to create a counter cultural space for themselves, Indian women playwrights have resorted to weave narrative around issues describing their subalternity such as subjugation of women, eve-teasing, bride burning, women's sexuality and discrimination against girl child etc. Realizing the potential of what Tutun Mukherjee calls 'public gaze' these playwrights have chosen to combat the dominant powers both on-stage (i.e. male actors) and off-stage (male publishers and spectators). (Mukherjee 2) If not breaking, then denting and questioning the popular norms and beliefs, the plays by Indian English women playwrights offer an alternative to the gendered view of their plight. By talking of their own pain, pangs and paroxysm in their own voice, these playwrights have tried to transform the existing notions of women experience. Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning* is an example of one such

attempt. The play portrays the subjugation of women within household. Oppressed by both parents and her in-laws the gendered subaltern, Laxmi, finds it impossible to cope up with the pressures exerted by those who are actually supposed to love and protect her. Her death is a misnomer since it is not natural or accidental (as projected by her in-laws) but is a compulsive suicide. Forced to leave studies at a tender age in order to take care of her younger brother and sister, Laxmi first suffers subjugation and discrimination at the hands of her parents and then is transferred to the household of her in-laws where also she is oppressed for not bringing enough dowry and not bearing child of her impotent husband. Treated as an 'object' rather than a 'subject', Laxmi's death highlights society's response to the issue of bride-burning through silence that permeates each and every stratum of society (Kumari 1). Both judiciary and society fail remarkably to give justice to Laxmi who suffers without any fault of her own. Dina Mehta's other plays such as *Getting Away with Murder* and *Sister Like You* also deal with women experience and allow readers and spectators a peak into those inner recesses of women's beings which are seldom visible to scrutiny with naked eyes.

Another important idea that is nested in the structure of many plays by Indian English women playwrights is that identity and gender are not static but dynamic and culturally created (Singh Anita 7). Women playwrights have worked over time to break the stereotypical image of women and to remodel women as a breathing, palpating and pulsating being yearning to give expression to her hitherto suppressed emotions, inclinations and predilections. In an attempt to discover and thereby establish her self-identity she goes through a number of experiences which refashion, remodel and at times, recreate her notions of self and society, and this concern has been vividly addressed by the women playwrights. 'No longer content with the portrayal of women's experiences created by the male imagination and being relegated to the few identified tasks or seeing their labour erased from theatre history, women have started to talk in their own voice and to present their own spectacles. One may confidently claim that the feminine

intervention into cultural practice is actually transforming the received ideas about culture, creativity and representation' (Mukherjee 4). Manjula Padmanabhan's *Light's Out* and *Harvest* are canonical plays that encapsulate a woman's attempt to subvert the patriarchal ideology working behind conventional representation of women. 'Theatre has been used to relocate the cultural production of feminine gender and thus to create an alternative canon of female playwrights' (Chakraborty and Purkayastha 7). The play *Light's Out* centres on the response of the male gaze to the entire episode of gang rape of a woman in the posh urban locality of Santa Cruz. The play not only portrays the voyeuristic enjoyment that is actualized by the male gaze but also showcases the vulgar objectification of female body by them and their vicarious attempts to justify the nasty deed. Mohan comes to Bhaskar's apartment only to satisfy his voyeuristic or sycophantic desire to watch a woman's modesty being outraged by four men. Both the men seem to be unmoved by the pleas of Leela and Naina to inform the police. At first they compare it with religious ritual like abhiksham or absolution and equate the pain of the woman to that of Sadhus walking on fire, nose piercing or circumcision but when they find out the women are unmoved by their analogy, they slap the victims with the title of 'whores'. They opine that since the women in question are whores who sell their bodies to such men, they can't be raped. Their sexist attitude comes to the fore as according to the two men only 'decent women' can be raped. Thus, for the men violation or rape of a woman who is not a 'decent woman' is not a case of violence, as Naina questions Mohan in *Light's Out*,

By losing their vulnerability to rape, whores lose their right to be women? Is that what you mean?

(Padmanabhan 32)

Through the four women characters in the play namely Leela, Naina, Freida and the rape victim, the playwright, Padmanabhan, illustrates how silence can be used as a tool to expose the phallogocentric set up of the society. Leela is not bothered much by the rape as she is from the fact that the noise of the victim disturbs her genteel world,

But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and
I can't push them out!...If only they didn't make such a racket,
I wouldn't mind so much!...Why do they have to do it here? Why
can't they go somewhere else?...

(Padmanabhan 41)

Naina is outspoken and bold and thus tries to voice her disgust in the public but she is suddenly subdued by the entry of her dominating husband, Surinder, who silences her by proclaiming, '..you shut up. This is no time for women's nonsense'(Padmanabhan 49). Chakraborty and Purkayastha very rightly say, 'Padmanabhan, in her play, by offering us the opinions of women about the ongoing rape, redirects the gaze as emanating from men, towards a situation where it is elicited from women'(Chakraborty and Purkayasthi 12). The sounds that traumatize Leela and Naina, fail to elicit any response from Freida who keeps on performing her duties in a robotic manner. She is aware of her marginalized existence and uses silence as a camouflage against subjugation. The play portrays how women are classified within patriarchal system of narratology of rape which is enjoyed as a spectacle rather than a crime and normalized by the spectator/reader. Padmanabhan's other play, *Harvest*, though primarily focuses on the abuse of organ transplant but its subtext focuses gaze on women who are treated as possessions by men who harvest future generations from their bodies but refuse some women even a modicum of autonomy in life (Jaysree 3).

Realising the empowering nature of theatre, Indian English Women playwrights have used this space as a tool to voice their concerns towards gendered subalterns and also to register resistance against those malpractices and transgressions which have been hitherto either neglected or stupendously misplaced by the mainstream Indian playwrights. They have adopted the genre as a practical means to document their resistance and initiate a revolution by crafting their own creative forms and framing their own critical canons. Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam* demonstrates the creative oeuvre of Indian women playwrights by

representing women's issues on stage with a superb experiment of juxtaposing one play over another within the bounds of a single work. The play shows that irrespective of time, place, society, education etc the problem of women's oppression remains the same. The play, dealing with two contrasting milieus, become a common ground where fiction and reality coalesce – one scenario mirrors another as households become hunting grounds for sexual predators. The play suggests that be it father, husband or the molester, a woman always remain an object for them – that of preservation of family dignity, or for venting one's frustration and grievances, or one of sexual gratification (Kaushik 5). The thematic concern of Act II is identical to Act I as the same theme recurs – close relationships or friends become tools for sexual oppression, subjugation and manipulation. The first part of the play portrays the family mourning the loss of the matriarch, Mangalam, who has been the victim of the abuse and violence from her husband all through her life because she was carrying the child of another man (actually her brother-in-law, Pariappa) who had raped her at a tender age as 'she was just a valid, a flower...'. It is revealed in the course of the first Act that Mangalam suffered the ignominy day in and day out as her husband didn't spare either in words or in action to humiliate or hurt her. Mocked, tormented and tortured, Mangalam, suffers all through her life for a sin she never committed. Poile Sengupta presents the plight of both the rape victim and the man who is forced to live with and accept the rape victim. The irony of the whole episode, as aptly suggested by N S Iyer, that the enemy is neither a stranger nor an anti-social element, but a very close mature relative – brother-in-law – her own sister's husband (Iyer 6). The second half of the play, *Mangalam*, shows an educated, sophisticated urban family wherein the mother is discussing a play, she had been to the night before, with her daughter and grown-up son. Incidentally, the play happens to be the first half of *Mangalam* itself. Although the landscape this time is different- modern urban family – yet the problem remains the same. The modern and well-off family is shown suffering from similar evil of abuse, adultery and exploitation by those who are close to

the family. Sumati first faces violence at the hands of her fiancé who was violent with her when she went out with him and later, at the climatic close, her cries can be heard off stage as she screams, 'uncle! No...Appa! Appa!' as Nari molests her (Sengupta 150). As stressed before, the playwright presents both side of the picture – it is a fact that Sumati is wronged but it is upto her to fight her own battles rather than others doing it for her. It is evident that she has been a victim of sexual misconduct but she cannot keep on lamenting the same fact and keep mourning and dissipating in disgust. Sengupta presents a self critique for women as she hints that women have to take cudgels against this age-old malpractice of stigmatizing the victim and hiding someone else's guilt and thus remain imprisoned in dead-relationships. Instead of hiding the dirty linens, women have to book the perpetrators of these crimes, because unless they fight their own battles, nobody is going to do it for them (Singh, Anita 12).

As for the women, the gods said
Let them be strong, rooted like
trees
For it is they who shall hold
The ends of the world together,
And there will be storms
And the winds will blow very
strong
But the women will stay like trees,
They will hold the world together.
(Sengupta 14)

Indian English women playwrights, registering the feminine intervention into cultural practice, chose to address the long suppressed, ignored and under-represented issues through gendered lenses. Expressing their own experiences in their own language, inventing their own techniques and voicing their own concerns – these playwrights penned plays which are at once 'reflexive, honest, often violent and disturbing...It would seem as though these texts demanded to be articulated so that the drama of women's lives that had remained subliminal and/or behind closed doors for so long could come into open' (Mukherjee 2). Not just altering but also redefining theatrical norms and structures, these playwrights seek to

convert the theatre into Brechtian metaspace where art, artist and spectator coalesce to initiate the process of social change. Merging aesthetic imagination with social process their plays choose to question and interrogate those very paradigms which have hitherto remained male preserve under patriarchal hegemony. Traversing the boundaries of art, activism and social appositeness, their plays showcase the predicament of gendered subaltern at the same time critiquing the social disparities amidst which they exist. It acquires the status of a double edged weapon in their hand which succinctly turns into collaborative medium towards creating an egalitarian society and also empowers the women to voice their anguish, pain and grief.

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