

‘Woman’ on Stage: Locating Women in the plays of Poile Sengupta and Tripurari Sharma

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Abstract: The portrayal of women in literature is as old as literature itself. This representation has remained stereotypical and romanticized according to the male perception about woman. Women playwrights with their vivid imagination and artistic excellence have tried to disrupt and dismantle the stereotypical image of woman through the medium of theatre. Refuting the patriarchal norms, women playwrights have represented ‘woman’ as subjects in their women-centered plays. The present paper highlights the aim of feminist theatre and explores the women centered plays written by Poile Sengupta and Tripurari Sharma.

Keywords: women, patriarchy, gender, theatre and women playwrights

Theatre is one of the primary ways through which ideas, attitudes, beliefs and feelings of diverse people in different times throughout history are communicated. Women playwrights have used the platform of theatre to question the patriarchal laws that have been suppressing and marginalizing women in all walks of life. While other mediums of popular culture have been condemned for their regressive themes and stereotypical representations, Indian theatre has often been admired for its focus on women’s issues, with bold narratives and progressive

representations. Women playwrights have dismantled the divide between private/public sphere and discussed about the social issues associated with gender inequity on stage.

Gender inequality is a social construction functioning in a patriarchal society since ages; it reinforces women's subordination. Kate Millet points, "Gender is the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (31). Feminine and masculine gender are not natural but socially learned traits which can be unlearned by spreading awareness and diminishing the influence of socialization. Contemporary Indian women dramatists have chosen theatre as a reliable platform to spread awareness regarding the gender conditioning which produces gender bigotry in society.

In the second half of the twentieth century, feminist movement spread its wings in India and women's question entered the mainstream. Theatre being an active platform, embraced the social change and provided an impetuous and a space to women writers to express their opinion on stage. The collaboration between women and theatre led to the formation of feminist theatre in India. Anita Singh writes about feminist theatre:

- It was as much a political endeavor as a theatrical one. It was revisionist in spirit and it questioned orthodoxy. It questioned – Phallogocentrism; male-centered view of life. It is an avant garde movement. It deconstructed patriarchal metaphysics.
- Production and scripts were distinguished by consciousness of women as women;
- Dramaturgy in which art was inseparable from the condition of women as women; performances (written and acted) that deconstructed sexual differences and thus undermined patriarchal power;

- It challenged the notion of representation/focused on the politics of representation and exposed how meanings are socially produced and historically conditioned;
- Plays that intervened in the fictional space as real people using real experiences, this transformed the theatre space into a liminal space for learning. The knowledge gained becomes the building blocks for action in real life. Prepares and tests the ingredients of resistance against oppression, and rehearses more egalitarian relations. (22-23)

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 to effect social change. The content of the plays have ranged from re-working of traditional myths to concern with contemporary women issues. Feminist plays deconstruct the emasculating structures of ancient legends and criticize the feminine myths that are prevalent in society. Prominent women playwrights who write about social problems are Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta, Dina Mehta, Tripurari Sharma, Uma Parmeshwaran, Gowri Ramnarayan, Ninaz Khodjee, Anju Makhija, Veenapali Chawla, Anuradha Marwah and others.

Poile Sengupta is an award-winning playwright and a well-known children's writer. She also runs her own theatre group by the name, Theatre Club in Bangalore. Her first play, *Mangalam*, won a special award in the Hindu-Madras Players Playscripts Competition, 1993. Her plays reflect on the impact of invisible patriarchal norms on the life of women. In her plays, Sengupta endeavors to subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology which emphasizes the stereotypical representation of women as weak, submissive and sexual object. She projects that women are compelled to accept their destiny with silence; this silence is imposed on them by the rigid patriarchal notions.

In *Mangalam*, Sengupta portrays that despite the social progress and empowering of women, atrocities against women like family politics, dowry harassment and violence, child sexual abuse and marital infidelity are still prevalent in Indian patriarchal society. The play is divided into two Acts; the first Act is play within the play and the audiences are the characters in the second Act. The first Act of the play revolves around the failed marriage of Dorai and Mangalam which results in agony and suffering. Mangalam is a rape victim, trapped in a forced marriage by her father to safeguard the dignity of the family. Mangalam suffers for a sin she never committed and same is the plight of any other rape victim. Dorai feels dejected because Mangalam was pregnant at the time of marriage and he gave her children year after year to make her suffer. Her husband's humiliation and continuous emotional torture compels Mangalam to end her life. Marriage turns out to be a choking experience for Mangalam and subsequently, she invites her own death by escaping the treatment of fever. This play presents the dual nature of suffering; the plight of a rape victim and a man who is forced to live with a rape victim.

Mangalam's daughter, Usha is a victim of dowry harassment who survives under stifling and oppressive atmosphere. In spite of sacks of dowry given to her, the greed of her in-laws is not satisfied and she suffers incessant humiliation at her marital home. Thangam, the sister of deceased Mangalam undergoes emotional torture as she has to live with a man who is the abuser of her sister. Sumati from the second Act of the play, is a victim of sexual molestation who lives with this painful memory and fails to live a normal life. She experiences sexual violence at the hand of her fiancée and Uncle. The female characters in the play belong to different cultures, ages and societies but they all have experienced the invisible force of patriarchy in different forms which has hampered their growth as individuals. Sengupta projects that patriarchy uses various

means to subjugate, subordinate and suppress women, and sexual violence is one of the way to control women.

Sengupta in her play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* has taken the mythological character of Shoorpanakha from the *Ramayana* and placed her in the subject position. Shoorpanakha is considered as a villainous character but Sengupta shows that she is a woman ostracized and punished by the society for expressing her desire and blunt behavior which is against the strict moral dictums that patriarchy imposes on woman. Patriarchal society is based on gender divide and women are at the receiving end of injustice and oppression in such society. Shoorpanakha expressed her love and sexual desire for Rama, but in return she received humiliation and her nose was chopped off. A sexually expressive woman is considered as a threat to patriarchal society, thus woman is conditioned to suppress her sexual desires. Shoorpanakha acknowledged her sexual desires but she was punished for being immoral by Rama and Laxmana, who represent patriarchy. Anita Singh describes:

Shoorpanakha 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 behaviour that is to be kept in check and control. (38)

Sengupta also compares Shoorpanakha with the mythological character of Sita, who is considered as an epitome of chastity and womanhood. Shoorpanakha is conferred as a devil woman on account of her physical appearance and expressive nature while Sita's charm and docile nature makes her a perfect woman. Sengupta has thrown light on the stereotype of beauty, created by dominant groups to subjugate and humiliate the marginalized section of the society. Thus, patriarchy not only victimizes woman but restricts an individual to choose a different path. Shoorpanakha does not fit among the standards of patriarchy, she is an expressive woman and therefore looked down and brutally scrutinize by men in power. In her plays, Sengupta projects the voice of the underrepresented that are harassed, killed and ostracized by the oppressive forces of patriarchy.

Tripurari Sharma is a playwright who works at the National School of Drama and runs her own theatre group, Alarippu which means blossoming. She is the recipient of many prestigious awards like Safdar Hashmi Award, Sanskriti Award etc. Social themes, relevant issues and local problems have formed the basis of her plays. Her characters range from lepers in *The Wooden Cart* to working-class women in *Daughter-in-law*, courtesans in *A Tale From the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa* and Anglo-Indian women in *Traitors*. Through her visionary plays, she attempts to dismantle the accepted gender norms which keep women at margins.

Sharma's *Daughter-in-law* is a socially acclaimed play which raises question on woman's identity in a male-dominated society. Umavati is the main protagonist of the play who stands out of queue in order to strengthen her own standing in society. After the demise of her husband, she forms a clandestine sexual relationship with her brother-in-law. He refuses to marry her and leaves her alone to carry the badge of pregnancy. Her mother-in-law humiliates her and doesn't consider her the member of the family. Umavati shows resistance by leaving the

claustrophobic house and rejects the values associated with it. Umavati is called as 'Daughter-in-law' in the whole course of the play but at the end, when Ramdutt pleads her to come back, she reclaims her identity by pronouncing her name loudly.

Ramdutt: Listen. Listen please. Look here . . . You

Daughter-in-law: My name is Umavati.

Ramdutt: Umavati? Yes, yes of course . . . (Sharma 363)

She shows resistance against the humiliation and insult, and begins her journey towards freedom and dignity.

In *Azizun Nisa: A Tale of 1857*, Sharma portrays the story of a courtesan from Kanpur who fought against the British in the mutiny of 1857. Azizun quits her conventional role of a courtesan and joins the rebel soldiers in their struggle. When a British official stigmatizes her 'Kotha' as brothel, she clears her stance that she doesn't deal in flesh trade and she is an artist who does rigorous training and practice to perform dance or to sing. She is inspired by the stories brought by her lover Shamshuddin, who works under the British army and resolves to fight for the freedom of nation. After the demise of her lover, she enters the battleground by wearing male attire and thus ruptures the dominant patriarchal ideology. She shows resistance against the dominant discourse which prescribe different roles to men and women on account of fixed gender roles. Azizun transforms into a warrior and chooses to fight for the freedom of the nation which is exemplary for a woman living in nineteenth century.

In her play, *A Tale From the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa*, Sharma shows how the foregrounding of a courtesan in the public-political space creates cracks in the way in which

social, political and national life is manipulated by emerging trends. By exploring the ways in which Azizun claims political subjectivity, this play significantly engages with the issues of citizenship for women, their exclusion and inclusion and other such questions that continue to animate the women's movement today. Sharma's female characters are conscious of their milieu and act in a defiant manner to handle any complicated situation. Her women characters do not surrender before the discrimination; they show resistance and fight for their rightful place.

Theatre uses stage as a platform for moral and social action and thus strikes a universal chord between stage and audience. Women playwrights have experimented with novel techniques and handled the sensitive women's issues on stage that have been neglected since centuries. They have interrogated the repressive role of culture, religion and society that diminish the individuality of women. By focusing on women characters and placing them in the subject position, women playwrights have given a new shape to Indian theatre and thus widened its scope and approach.

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