

# Indian drama and women rights

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



The phrase literary canon has come to designate those authors who, by a collective consensus of scholars, teachers and critics are categorized as ‘major’. These authors at any given time are those that are most in circulation, discussed by the literary critics and are most likely to be included in the syllabi of the college courses.

However, at any given time, the boundary of a literary canon remains indefinite and disputable and the membrane surrounding it is porous. My endeavour to re-define the canon of Indian Drama is an attempt to question the politics of power as also the high intellectual and artistic quality of the work as the criteria for canonization. Canons are perhaps rather formed more by ideology, political interest and the values of a dominant class. So, canon formation often excludes the interest and accomplishments of the minority, privileging works that convey and sustain patriarchy, racism and imperialism.

Indian English Drama is an umbrella term which not only denotes Indian Drama written in English but also ‘bhasha’ plays which are translated into English from the regional languages. I propose to examine post-independence plays by women playwrights in India writing in regional languages (and included in the canon of Indian Writing in English after translation), for a particular academic purpose. That is to say, critical appreciation should lead us to ask certain questions and seek answers. Hence, I would like to help in the creation of the demand for the opening up of the canon of Indian English Drama and include alternative writings by women as a part of the canon, and thus judging them on the basis of artistic

capabilities as also success on the stage (acknowledging thus the aspect of performativity) and not merely on their gendered identity.

Modern Indian theatre developed during the period of colonial rule in India under the British Empire, from the mid nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Although plays of this time were full of female characters, often represented as stereotypes, as playwrights, women hardly figure on the literary map. This perhaps reveals the complex web of received assumptions about the roles attributed to men and women in the social sphere. Popular theatre has been increasingly identified as a public space dominated by the masculine and the first female performers who were admitted into it were ‘public’ women – the courtesans and prostitutes. A play continuously interacts with the audience through performance, and hence playwriting demands more from the writer than mere theatricality.

The demands may be doubled for a woman because she will be under the ‘public gaze’ of the spectators. The theatrical performances are accessed by the gaze of the audience and are speculated upon by them. Perhaps the women, who venture into the public space to speak in their own voices about women’s experience, thus become more vulnerable to risks. As Tutun Mukherjee says in her introduction to *Staging Resistance*, “Writing play involves finding a ‘voice’... which even in its most contemplative moment is a social art. While most plays revolve round a conflict or a dilemma and its resolution in some form, women are viewed by patriarchy as resolving conflicts behind closed doors and within relationships between individuals – rather than in public.”( Mukherjee 11) In India, there have been plays about

women and women have also been part of the dramatic performances. Yet, women did not venture into the Indian Theatre as playwrights till the late nineteenth century. It would seem that women were happy and contented with molding themselves according to the male imagination. Doing nothing more than mimicry, they did not try to script their own lines. Men have dominated the economic and artistic decisions in the theatre and the way women are represented as characters in the plays for a long period of time. While male dramatists write lines for women to speak according to their own understanding of women's feeling and expect no reluctance, male actors may not be as willing to speak the lines written for them by a female dramatist. If a woman chooses to challenge the dominant image of women in theatre, the challenge demands immense time and energy without any immediate or foreseeable gain. However, perhaps the bridge between the binary opposition of the public and the private sphere has already started with the representation of women by women play wrights. Drama has not been a genre that women writers have readily chosen. While theatre has been generally regarded as a public space, women are still confined to the private. Trying to fill up this gap, when a woman ventures into the public domain, she becomes a spectacle under ' male gaze'. The ' language' that women uses to be a part of this public sphere is essentially phallocentric and the possessors of the ' phallus or power' have always shaped her according to their own need and desire. Initially it was against the moral code of the society for women of respectable families to paint their faces and act before a group of audience mainly male. Theatre has travelled a long way since then and today we even find all women groups. However, in spite of several

visible dominations and many unseen others; the woman ultimately stands up to share her experience as the 'female' through the act of writing and often also directing plays.

It is very interesting to contemplate as Virginia Woolf does, in "A Room of One's Own" what would have happened if Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister named Judith. According to Woolf, 'exploited, pregnant and disillusioned, she would have killed herself one winter night'. Perhaps, men would have laughed at her face and in the theatre no player could have been expected to speak her lines. Thus, as the ideology of gender is inscribed in talking and writing, it is inscribed perhaps even more in enacting. According to the interview given to me by Samik Bandhopadhyay, Tripti Mitra, a famous Bengali theatre actress who has worked in the theatre group Bahurupui almost all her life, was never given her due credit. Many theatre critics overlook her directorial works and categorize her merely as an actress in Sombhu Mitra's group. Perhaps it was still easy to accept women as actresses playing the 'dream' role created for them through male fantasy than allow women to play their own minds. Tripti Mitra herself once said that only while performing as Benare in Tendulkar Silence! The Court is in Session, did she realize that much had been left unsaid by her as a women theatre practitioner. Her voice is echoed in Shaoli Mitra when she said that she was not satisfied with the type of performance she was doing in the contemporary theatre and hence she took a break. Later, when she decided to work again and was inspired by Iravati Karve's reading of the great Indian epic, she chooses the medium of kathakata to express herself.

Women had an immense role to play in Indian theatre. Women's writing for the stage gave theatre that extra depth and long suppressed dimension of life which only women feel through their 'lived experiences'. Perhaps it is high time that the plays written by women demands elucidation so that the drama that continuously goes on in a woman's life comes out in the open from closed doors. Women narrative styles are mostly different and it does not look forward to establish the author as the 'God'. Rather, it invites the readers and the spectators' participation in dealing with the raw emotions evoked, the otherness of everyday beings, and the questioning of stereotypes. There has always been a tradition of belittling or marking women's contribution to social and cultural history as inconsequential. However, now perhaps is the perfect time when women should gain their significance and much required recognition. There is hardly any domain of life which has remained untouched by these women playwrights. They offer a variety of analysis and examinations of women's subjectivity and proposes different ways of social change. The work and voice of these women ask for reformulation of conventional archetype and demands meaningful social interference. It is perhaps high time to reconsider the historical knowledge provided to us by patriarchy and to re-examine the basic premises of traditionally organized systems of knowledge about social and literary dynamics. In shaping their story in their own words, women contour a new dramaturgy – a feminist theory of theatre that finds unacceptable the notions of Aristotelian catharsis and Bharata's rasa as the feelings aroused in viewers. Theories of drama have always been male centered, be it Aristotle's Poetics or Bharat's Natyashastra.

Thus, the womanist theatre arises not only as a representation of the oppressed female as characters but also in providing an alternative dramatic theory. Unlike classical realism, which allows a 're-inscription of the dominant order' and hence presents a single undisputed reality re-inscribed after a short crisis, Women's dramaturgy could perhaps make use of the Brechtian mode of theatre. The plays by women upset the equanimity, instigate, and demand response from an audience that will not expect entertainment but will participate in the dialectics since the issues concerning women and children are of the kind that have invariably been and continue to be bypassed and brush aside by society. Fortunately enough, apart from the women playwrights, the Indian stage is also blessed with the coming into view of women directors as individual cultural producers with gendered perception, innovative semiotics, and sensitive treatment of social issues, which has opened up the field to accommodate women's experiences and viewpoints. This is of utmost importance as far as the repercussion and amalgamation of women-centered theatre in India is concerned because theatre as a patriarchal hegemony is quite capable of absorbing female texts, nullifying their cutting edge, and even turning "feminine concerns" into new commodities for male consumption. Thus, the women's texts establish a theory of drama that would disclose the attempt of the drama to present a homogeneous worldview, where inspite of theatre being a public space, the dialogue would not end up being monologic.

My research is concerned with post independence women playwrights writing in the regional languages which are then translated to English for a pan Indian readership. Since it is theatre we are talking about, the new

English text could perhaps then be accessible to many theatre groups as performance text which could as a result improve the chances of the canonization of these plays. It is quite unfortunate that even after having some tremendously talented women playwrights writing in the regional language and whose work have already been translated to English, we fail to see them in the canon of Indian English Drama. In my thesis I have tried to read few such translated works of regional women playwrights with an endeavour to understand the reason behind the lack of inclusion of these playwrights in the canon. I have consciously chosen to read the translated text and not the regional ones because I would like to raise a demand of the inclusion of these women playwrights in the canon of Indian English Drama. So, I am mostly concerned with texts which are already translated to English. Tutun Mukherjee pointed out during our short interaction while in a seminar in Hyderabad that, it is a vicious circle and I completely agree with her. The deficiency of interests of publishing houses in these play texts by women appears as a major setback in their canonization and since these plays are not quite canonized so they do not seem materially viable to the publishers. Thus, the lack of publication obstructs them from being canonized and since these are not canonical texts, the publishers are not very much interested in publishing them. The same is heard from Tripurari Sharma as well when I interviewed her. She said that publishers are more interested in publishing works of famous personalities even though the work may have very little literary or at all worthy content. According to her, publishing houses should at least try to be out of this trap of capitalism. It is quite unfortunate if the publishers print only for monetary profit. Being a theatre worker herself,

Tripurari Sharma feels that with the coming forward of new theatre groups who loves to do unconventional works, there is a demand for new play texts. But due to the lack of publication, the regional texts fail to reach its desired destination of all India readerships.

The articulation of gynocentric concern and values comes when a woman rejects her dependency upon patriarchy and instead focuses on the female experiences. And hence with the gynotext have been established a womanist dramaturgy that would seek to establish its own horizon of expectation. “ Womanist scripts and productions are characterized by the projection of the ‘ consciousness’ and the condition of women as women.”(Mukherjee 17) The effectiveness of such an enterprise would inevitably impact upon spectatorship. Though urbanization and industrialization paved new vistas, after independence a period of political and social unrest begins. Aggressive demands of rights by the downtrodden helped to reveal to the literate public the hitherto neglected corners of Indian society. Along with the landless peasants and the dalits and the tribal people, women too begin to speak about their existential problems. Thus, women have perhaps been able to claim for themselves yet another space that offers them great potential for initiating social change.

A strong parallel could also be found between post colonialism and women writing because they both are fundamentally concerned with the politics of ‘ othering’ by colonialism or by patriarchy. Women writing for the theatre could then be seen as an act of decolonization of the ideo cultural space ruled by men, by raising questions like identity formation and refuting the

notion of inferiority in the case of the performative women. Thus, trying to establish the 'marginal' or rather the doubly marginalized against the 'dominant' playwrights would be my initial task.

It is interesting to notice the wide vistas of ranged covered by the women playwrights. It is like a parallel world which has been existing ever since, waiting to be discovered. The only necessary thing we need to decode this world is 'a pair of women's eyes'. We have been made conscious of this password for discovering the new world by Nabaneeta Dev Sen in the foreword of Saoli Mitra's *Five Lords Yet Not a Protector and Timeless Tales*. However, the angle though unusual, is not exactly new. It is a vision borrowed from Iravati Karve's *Yuganta*, which gives a stunning feminist-humanist reading of the patriarchal epic *Mahabharata*. The writing of women playwrights talked about in my thesis ranges from socio political issues like Independence and the freedom struggle and reformation of Hindu marriage law and untouchability to complex interpersonal relationships. While on one hand there is biographical writing, where a woman dramatically talks about other influential women in her life through performance, on the other hand there is re-interpretation of myths. It is quite unfortunate that even after writing about such varied issues, these women playwrights have failed to receive a place for themselves in the canon of Indian English Drama. Thus, through my reading of these women playwrights, I would like to suggest probable reasons for the exclusion of these women playwrights from the canon and to try and create a chance for these women playwrights to be read as a part of 'mainstream' theatre. I personally believe that women playwrights must also be given a chance to be read. If women writing needs

to be defined by its 'Other' then the reading could be compared to the other male writers so that we may understand where the female writers fall short of the male ideal ( if it is at all the case) and why such texts miss being a part of canonical literature.

I choose three representative male authors of Bengali, Hindi and Marathi theatre belonging to the central of the canon of Indian Drama to read them alongside women playwrights to find out what is it that prevents women dramatists from being read. I would like to prove through my research that in no way are they inferior to their male counterparts. In fact, their gendered personalities are a gain to their genius, not a loss, for having been marginalized for so long, they bring to their writing a sensibility honed by deprivation, pain and suffering, thus allowing them to side with underdogs in society and culture.