

Abstract

In an age where academic curriculum has essentially pushed theatre studies into 'post-script', and the cultural 'space' of making and watching theatre has been largely usurped by the immense popularity of television and 'mainstream' cinemas, it is important to understand why theatre still remains a 'space' to be reckoned as one's 'own'. And to argue for a 'theatre' of 'their own' for the Indian women playwrights (and directors), it is important to explore the possibilities that modern Indian theatre can provide as an instrument of subjective as well as social/ political/ cultural articulations and at the same time analyse the course of Indian theatre which gradually underwent broadening of thematic and dramaturgic scope in order to accommodate the independent voices of the women playwrights and directors.

When women playwrights and directors are brought into 'perspective', the social politics concerning women loom large. Though we come across women playwrights like Swarna Kumari Devi, Anurupa Devi or Bimala Sundari Devi in the pre-independence colonial period, it is only from the 1970s onwards that we find a significant population of Indian women playwrights and directors regularly participating in the process of 'theatre making'. Sushma Deshpande, Shanta Gandhi, Dina Mehta, Iripinder Bhatia, Manjula Padmanabhan, Varsha Adalja, Poile Sengupta, B. Jayashree, Shaoli Mitra, Tripurari Sharma, Usha Ganguli, Anuradha Kapur, Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury, Kirti Jain, Amal Allana are among many other women playwrights and directors who are not only composing/ devising plays/ dramas, but are also striving to produce a vocabulary of their own in theatre. But the accommodation of women's 'voice' in the 1970s Indian theatre was not an abrupt phenomenon. The 'event' may be placed in the context of the global and local ramifications of 'feminism' and feminist movements in theatre and an urge to go beyond the limitations of feminist theatre conventions.

In the Indian context, the role of women's theatre is more crucially conceived than in the West because of the complex locations of women amidst the cultural diversity of the country. Plays by the women playwrights who gradually populated the landscape of Indian theatre from the 1980s, strive to present the varied women experience which is not devoid of their struggles against socio-patriarchal domination, their hopes and aspirations, fulfilments or frustrations, subject to the conditions they live in. These can be further correlated with lived experiences of the playwrights and directors themselves. In order to dramatize these issues effectively, they use history, mythology or ancient accounts of life and society by way of reinterpreting them from women's perspectives. They have consistently used folk themes and motifs to their own advantage, and used drama as an effective medium to analyze socio-cultural differences and issues concerning gender discrimination. Hence, the Indian women theatre practitioners seek to enhance the scope of theatre in Indian in order to produce a more inclusive dramaturgy that can accommodate the interests of the 'people' living in the fringes as those in the centre of socio-political discourse. Thematically, women's issues remained the primary focus but were heterogeneously dissolved with other socio-political concerns. With the enlargement of thematic scope in women's drama, the dramaturgy too gradually evolved as the women dramatists experimented with the forms and techniques of dramatic compositions and theatrical representations. Borrowing from Alice Walker, Tutun Mukherjee calls this 'inclusive' dramaturgy as 'womanist dramaturgy', which is neither the outright rejection of traditional forms of theatre (because they also can be renovated to present the nuanced locations of Indian women in diverse, and by that means, more complex frameworks), nor is it the merely experimental theatre forms and non-linear plays exemplifying feminist theatre. It rather projects the 'consciousness' of women as women and what it means to be in the position of the 'subject' while being constantly made aware of the socio-sexual otherness. Tutun Mukherjee argues that in representing women as subjects, the

womanist dramaturgy is interstitially located 'between realism and Brechtian non-realism'. She explains that 'by its very nature ... womanist dramaturgy would find itself incompatible with unproblematized depiction of realism because realism tends to naturalize the status quo of the patriarchal system and covertly positions the reader/ spectator within that ideology'(18). A womanist drama-text therefore seeks to disrupt the equilibrium, create tension in the minds of the audience and deny the 'sacred' tradition of providing emotional purgation at the end. Hence, a play by woman playwright often weaves together threads of contradictions and engages multiple viewpoints in place of producing 'compulsory' narrative unity and closure. Such dramaturgical innovations and thematic concerns of contemporary Indian women theatre practitioners have constructed a theatre of their own that speaks of women in wider perspectives. Hence the 'in perspective' in the title of this thesis is not about imposing and then exploring a single perspective on the works of Indian women playwrights but perspectives that emerge from the plays composed (and directed) by Indian women playwrights (and directors), who not only deny being branded as feminists but also consciously construct an identity of their own.

In this thesis, my primary focus is concentrated on the contribution of women playwrights in producing a canon separate from their male counterparts. The main proposition behind choosing play-texts over critically engaging live performances is that in order to produce and sustain an exclusive 'space' for women theatre practitioners, playwrights must continue composing plays and directors translate the play-texts into performance. Theatre may have the best possibilities of asserting its significance in live interaction with the society but plays composed to be performed on stage and read in print has its own importance. Tutun Mukherjee argues in her *Prolegomenon to Women's Theatre in Staging Resistance*, 'Playwrights in any culture or society form the backbone, the muscle, and the fibre of its theatre movement and without their creation a theatre can be neither born nor sustained'. (22).

Though Mukherjee piles metaphors to define the playwright as a 'creator', I consider playwrights as authors for whom the socio-cultural, political, ethnical, national and gender consciousness provide the 'backbone', 'the muscle' and 'the fibre' for the plays they compose. However, in considering the Indian women playwrights as authors, I do regard them to have authority over how the 'story' is presented before their readers. But this does not deny the directors their 'authority' over how the play is presented before their audience. Therefore, when a play is composed by a playwright or devised in collaboration with other playwrights/ authors (of source texts) and directed by a different director/ group of directors, the authority is shared. Though, in the thesis, I have considered in detail the collaborative role of women playwrights and directors, I use 'playwright' for the authors of the texts I chose mainly because most of the texts are translated versions of the plays composed by playwrights alone. Also pertinent is to mention that the plays mostly appear in anthologies like Tutun Mukherjee's *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translations* (OUP, 2005), *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (Seagull Books, 2000) and *Drama: Contemporary India* (PAJ Books, 2001), where each play-text is attributed to a particular playwright.

The texts that I have chosen, range from the 1970s to the early 2000s, for, in these three decades may be traced the major shifts toward 'theatre of their own' for Indian women playwrights (and directors). However, these shifts have not been documented well. My 'argument' in this thesis is to address this lacuna through an examination of plays, thematically clubbed together in couples. It explicates women's theatre's engagement with issues like nation, war, class, caste, body, abuse, desire and freedom through critical discussions on select plays, some originally written in English and others in regional languages.