

Introduction

Theatre, being a medium which speaks directly to the audience, among many other things, falls into the public domain; and women, being traditionally considered fit to occupy only the domestic space, were long kept away from articulating themselves through theatre. The same is true of Indian theatre also, which for centuries remained exclusive to men, but with the new surge of 'feminism' in the 1970s, effectively opened up for Indian women wide avenues for expressing their own voice. This newly found voice in theatre not only resisted 'devising' by men but also strove to form a 'feminist' theatre. But feminist theatre, globally, was critiqued for indulging in essentialism and failing to represent women in their contexts. Indian women playwrights and directors struck a different note by starting to construct a theatre which promised to uphold differences that separate women in one context from women in another. A study of Indian women playwrights (and directors), therefore, must be truly rewarding from historical, political and aesthetic perspectives.

Before examining the distinctive dimensions of "Indian" and then Indian women's theatre, let us try to understand why defining theatre has never been easy, especially when it is considered in relation to drama. At best it can be taken as a space where meaning is formed in performance on stage (be it proscenium or not), constituted through a complex interaction of the body, gestures, words and theatrical devices such as costumes, designs, lights, techniques, and affecting the emotion and intellect of the audience. Conventional discussions on drama and theatre have resulted in pronouncing sharp distinctions between the two. It has been generally observed that drama being primarily textual is a more 'serious literary mode' (Knowles 526) which exclusively belongs to the playwright (notwithstanding the poststructuralist notions of the author and the text); while theatre being audiovisual belongs to the audience and is seen as 'either the interpretative enactment of a stable, universal

dramatic text or the translation of that text into different (usually unstable) codes of semiosis of enunciation, gesture, embodiment, design and so on'(526). The play text has often been claimed by drama to be meant for reading, which opens up new vistas of meaning but which suffers constriction when reduced to a particular condition of performance in the theatre.

However to theatre, the play text is just a script to which live dimensions are added when it is performed. Critical understanding of drama/theatre has changed over the years. The play text is not just limited to black marks on white paper but everything that entails knowledge, even performance itself. Conversely, performance brings in the body, which writes itself on the stage. There may be textual dialogues that the body delivers, but then the body itself also has its own language; for a body is never reduced to such a sign which refuses any connotation whatsoever. It not just bears the mark and meaning of its gender being conditioned by socio-cultural perceptions of it in particular locations of performance, but also itself produces meanings on the stage. The body has both an objective and subjective presence on the stage. 'A performance takes one to another level of 'knowing'. What may be lurking within one in an incoherent shape, when echoed externally, comes sieved through a collective experience and changes its dimensions altogether. From the personal it becomes common knowledge – something that exists outside one – and being out in the open can be assuring as well as disturbing, if it challenges even a speck that lies dormant within.'(Subramanyam 146) Hence performance as text has initiated the emergence of a 'post-dramatic theatre', where contemporary theatre practitioners like Maya Krishna Rao perform on stage without any written script. Yet the advantage of having a well written script cannot be discounted. The debate may be settled temporarily by recognizing the 'hybrid existence' of the play text, which is written in order to be read and also performed with multiple dimensions to it and with its difference with other genres.

'Theatre' of 'their own'

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.

Theatre's relation to Indian society (as it is in the case with most societies) has been an intriguing one. It has been so, not merely because of theatre's role in representing the nuances of Indian social and cultural life but also in its scope of being *interventional* in engaging with society's political, economic, ethnical, racial, temporal and contextual aspects. Here 'theatre' must not be seen as a mere form of art that puts the social events into performance, but as a mediator between the social issues and the audience, influencing and sometimes articulating the latter's response. But in such circumstances, theatre is often claimed by some 'performance' critics, as more of the performance studies than of mainstream literature. Being a cultural 'space' in itself, theatre has affinity with its location in a particular culture. This includes the uniqueness of its ritualistic and aesthetic forms. But even when social performances may become the content of theatre, it must continue to convert dramatic texts into performances, which exemplifies most of the modern Indian theatre traditions.

Performance studies free audience from the authority of play texts, and can even inform them of the nuances of performance in ways that liberate them from the control of 'modern stage realism'. Hence the audience may be led beyond the page/stage constrictions. But the real, material conditions of theatre as separate from play-texts cannot be rejected outright because of theatre's location in between the cause and consequence of the society. It is both about being affected by the society and also affecting it. Ashis Sengupta in his book, *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre*, succinctly observes that "theatre in its creative constructedness", engages, "with (social) 'reality' at different levels of affirmation and interrogation, intervention and transgression, imagination and re-inscription. Thus representation in drama and theatre does not always indicate a fixed referent or a determinate position of the object represented. Instead, it can be strategic, exploring, interpretive, creative and redefining. It creates a live, organized, alternative version of a chaotic but dormant reality, past or present, and attributes contemporary, relevant meaning/s to it rather than merely seeking to dis-cover it for the audience." (13). Hence it is worth mapping how it is "as much a representation of offstage 'realities' as a space where 'realities' are equally formed and re-formed through human performance, exploring in the process a complex relationship between world, text, performance, viewing, and reception." (4) The 'human performance' here may take into account the performatives, but that is only to the extent of advancing a suggestion to the audience, who share the knowledge of the same. Performance has its own dynamics, which on stage would not put forward a mimetic representation of the 'offstage' referent, but would mediate with the 'reality', surely constructing reality/ies of its own.

Theatre in its engagement with the social reality may be inspired by issues political or economic, which either disturbs or reinstates its status quo. With its affective power of impressing the audience and even the possibilities of initiating them to action, theatre may

take varieties of forms with multifarious names such as the 'progressive theatre', 'oppositional theatre', 'engaged theatre', 'applied theatre', 'theatre of liberation', 'street theatre', 'popular theatre' etc. , depending upon the purpose it intends to serve. These forms of theatre are popularly known in India as 'political theatre', for it engages not just with the law makers but also with any form of authority, that identifies itself with the domination of the other, be it on the grounds of labor, class, caste, ethnicity, colour, or sex. Such political roles of theatre have often disturbed the authorities in such ways that history abounds with examples where they have fallen heavily upon it, be it the 1887 dramatic censorship act passed by the British Government on Colonial India, or the murder of Safdar Hashmi in broad daylight during the performance of *Halla Bol*, a street play against the exploitations of labor, targeted against both the Government and the Capitalist forces. Theatre, therefore emerges as a site which is both influenced by and in turn influences social and political performance, though, performance may not necessarily be translated into practice each time.

When women playwrights and directors are brought into 'perspective', the social politics concerning women again 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, Irpinder 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. According to Anita Singh, feminist theatre (a term sometimes used for the women-centric productions of the Indian women theatre practitioners) in India, was 'anupshot of an interface between postcolonial debates about language, interpellation, subject formation and forms of resistance and the feminist movements in the 1960's' (Singh 1)

The feminist movement of the 1960s (in the West), which had its roots in the socio-political and intellectual movements of the 1940s, has been termed in the feminist discourse as the 'second wave movement'; the 'first wave' being roughly associated with the post-1880s to the 1920s, during which, among other achievements, the feminist movement across the West won franchise rights for women, making it possible for women to actively participate in the political system. The 1960s 'social revolution' which aimed at producing a 'counter-culture' to the traditional conformist cultures and championed the causes of socio-cultural liberations including the 'sexual' (that began in the U.S and subsequently reached the wider Western world) catalysed the abolishing of censorship in theatre in England. Freedom from censorship allowed theatre to engage with any immediate political struggles of the time. It is in response to the new feminist agitations and its allied movements, that in 1968, Lord Chamberlain's censorship against any 'explicit' heterosexual or homosexual behavior and 'bad language' (Wandor 76) was abandoned in England.

The 1968 impact on theatre initiated arguments to bring theatre out of the closets of the bourgeois, i.e. the performance of plays be discontinued in theatre buildings and instead performed among the common run of people, about and amidst their lives and struggles. Except the agitprop, all other proscenium theatre traditions were discouraged. The self-styled

feminist theatre received the paraphernalia of the socialist touring groups, which used a TV like 'naturalist telling-it-like-it-is' (77) method to come closer to the people, which found a more effective medium in simple easy-to-understand satirical songs, and such visual imageries which were suggestive of certain peculiarities of a class or community. Hence the feminist plays that followed in the 1970s, looked at the woman 'question' from the socialist 'perspective', which was fraught with class consciousness and explicit Marxist connotations, taking into account the on-going reorientations of classical Marxist class analysis too. The scripted agitprop theatre of the time featured live experiences of working class women, and sexism both in public forums like the labor unions and in family at the domestic level. While agitprop theatre set to democratize theatre in all its aspects be it the subject matter, the form of theatre used or the audience addressed to, it initiated an internal democracy within the groups as well who 'wrote and performed their own work, instead of acting as hired labour, as would happen in traditional theatre' (77). But such movements do not really speak for any concrete impact of feminism on theatre for no such theatre which overtly dealt with feminist themes was produced; neither was there any proliferation of women playwrights harping on the feminist themes. It is only in the autumn of 1973 when feminist influence on theatre could explicitly be marked with the birth of 'Women's Theatre Group' out of the 'Women's Theatre Season' held in 'Almost Free Theatre' in London. Women's Theatre Group was a professional, all women's company, first of its kind in England. Such a formation had its impact on other established theatre works as well. In the mid-1970s, 'The Association of Community Theatres' formed by the touring groups, the 'Independent Theatres Council' formed by the small venues, 'Theatre Writers' Union' formed by the playwrights and 'Equity' by the performers' union, provided enough possibilities to the then active women's sub-committees. Those fringe theatres which remained out of these organizations lost most of their women theatre workers to the 'Feminist Theatre Study Group' set up in the late 1970s,

in order to provide space for any independent/self-identified feminists. The Feminist Theatre Study Group became a forum which aimed at networking professionals, promoted feminist ideas and conducted consciousness-raising drives among women. Michelene Wandor notes that 'at one point, the group also demonstrated outside those West End theatres considered to be most sexist in the way they represented women as stereotypical characters' (bracketing mine) (78). Such consciousness drives resulted in increasing number of women coming up and openly voicing their discontent against the limited opportunities they were exposed to. Though much effort on the part of women theatre practitioners did not directly result in increased involvement of women at the 'National Theatre' and the 'Royal Shakespeare Company', both of which were largely male dominated, it increased the demand for more women-centered theatre groups in addition to that of the 'Women's Theatre Group', which would offer more opportunities to the women and other marginalized sexes. This resulted in the formation of 'Monstrous Regiment', a company which provided space to each of the sexes but privileged the women, and the 'Gay Sweatshop', which promoted gay and lesbian theatres along with the mixed theatre productions.

These groups, taken together, addressed two important issues – firstly, the women participation in theatre, which was not encouraging till then, and secondly, the aesthetic development in modern theatre, given the political transformation they had to undergo due to the post 1970s feminist influences. While none of these groups put forward any ideal pattern for theatre works, they did suggest some 'material working conditions which are...conductive or obstructive' to theatre productions 'informed by feminism' (80). The 'Women's Theatre Group' promoted collaborative and collective methods of producing plays, which must feature pro-women issues, even by way of politicizing the male/female relationship. Holding on to the policy of making more spaces for women, it not just employed only women in the company but also 'hired' women directors, stage managers, designers, etc. and produced

plays centering on woman both as part of the past and the contemporary, which consequently entailed a reworking of history itself. Such efforts on the part of the 'Women's Theatre Group' challenged the traditional/ unquestioned contours of theatre, which till then reserved its space only for male performers and man-centric plays. This had an importance of its own, not just from the point of view of theatre but feminist politics as well, for it represented women's control over their own work. In keeping with the radical feminist principles, these women's groups banked on women's experiences and relationships and aimed at building women's autonomous yet organizational existence. This addressed not just the 'class conflicts' in relation to women but also the 'socialist-feminist elements in the way women interact, function, love and struggle with one another'(81). Though 'Monstrous Regiment' was better received by the theatre world because of its mixed sex structure, it underwent its own share of hostility in response to its privileging women over men. Though the intention behind such a formation was to challenge the normative order and provide a stage which is populated more by women than men, 'Monstrous Regiment' never sought to present man/woman relationship in subversion. The case is somewhat similar for the 'Gay Sweatshop' which, 'while being a mixed group, has chiefly challenged the closetness of the male gay...encouraging confidence among the gays in the audience, and linking gay with female oppression'(82).

But a new kind of performance-based theatre work, explicitly informed by feminism, developed from the 1970s. 'In the very early days of feminist agitprop at the beginning of the 1970s, bold visual imagery was used to satirize and question received notions of femininity and masculinity. Sexuality, make-up, fashion, the intimacies of the private lives were dragged out from behind closed doors, taken into the street theatre and exaggerated into visual shock tactics' (82). The decade ended with the basic questions already realized and the agitprop theatre fast losing its relevance. A 'new generation' of women theatre practitioners found their

way into prominence, for whom the 'the climate' (82) was 'more relaxed' (82). 'They' began to 'build a new lively kind of performance theatre, in which the conventional, feminine, passive presence of the woman performer playing a secondary supportive female character' (84), was 'implicitly challenged with an alternative' (84). But given the patriarchal fabric of the society, it was 'not surprising that the more simplistic and unthreatening the feminism contained in a play, the more likely it was to achieve commercial success' (84). Hence,

as a profession, theatre became a microcosm of the discrimination and inequalities operating in society at large. In 1981, feminist playwright and critic Michelene Wandor, published an analysis of theatre and sexual politics which made explicit women's second class, 'understudy' status in a male dominated theatre industry... The lived professional experience of being consigned to the role of 'understudy' is what, in turn, encouraged women practitioners to form 'their own feminist-theatre groups'. (Aston).

Along with 'Monstrous Regiment' and 'Women's Theatre Group', which were 'seminal to the innovation of a feminist theatre tradition', many other groups like Clapperclaws, Cunning Stunts, Beryl and Perils, Clean Break and Mrs. Worthington's Daughters created a 'counter-cultural body of women's plays and performances' (Aston). The feminist groups, opened up more opportunities for women playwrights and 'by the mid to late seventies Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, Bryony Lavery, Claire Luckham and Louis Page were moving the dramatic representations of women's lives and experiences centre-stage as a counter-cultural challenge and alternative to the 'malestream', canonical tradition of theatre'. (Aston)

Thereafter, women dramatists including Sarah Daniels, April de Angelis, Winsome Pinnock and Timberlake Wertenbaker earned recognition in the eighties. Owing to the emergence of a host of women playwrights influenced by Second Wave Feminism, Methuen Drama launched

the *Plays by Women* series in 1982. This included Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*, which, with its stylistic and political innovations, along with other 'women's plays' by Churchill such as *Cloud Nine* or *Top Girls*, proved seminal in defining a 'feminist landscape in British Theatre' (Aston). Hence, when Helene Keyssar seeks to define the feminist theatre in *Feminist Theatre and Theory*, she observes that it is about 'productions and scripts characterized by consciousness of women as women; performance (written and acted) that deconstructs sexual difference and thus 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'.'(1) According to Keyssar, this created a new audience for theatre. Among many other things, what it has most importantly proposed is the idea of a 'women's language' and its possibilities of creating altogether a new kind of narrative in theatre.

In India, the feminist theatre has also brought about a rethinking of plot/character configuration, putting into question the 'meaning and performance of character both on stage and in script' (Kapur 6). 'Direct Action', and consistency in logical building of plot gave way to indirect actions, inconsistencies and disjoints in plot construction. Non-linear plots, refusing any kind of resolution, aided in challenging the socio-political normativity which sustained the artificial boundaries between gender, class, race, culture etc. In her essay 'Performing Resistance, Re-dressing the Canon: The Emergence of Indian Feminist Theatre', Anita Singh conceptualizes the essential characteristics of Indian feminist theatre thus –

- Feminist theatre is a creative theatre that challenges representation of our dominant culture. The goal of almost all feminist plays/ groups is to subvert expectations, to enable or initiate positive changes in women's lives through political and theatrical representations (Singh 6).

- Feminist theatre focuses on female characters and explores concepts/ themes of feminist drama, relationships, sisterhood, sexuality and female autonomy (7).
- A Feminist theatre ... 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 (7).
- Feminist plays deconstruct the emasculating structures of ancient legends and criticize the feminine myths still operating in Indian society. The content of their plays have ranged from re-working of traditional myths to current social issues (8).

Thematically, Indian feminist theatre came to be associated with the plays which dealt with the concerns of women such as the 'dowry deaths', 'eve teasing', 'rape', 'violence against women', 'economic dependency', 'compulsory heterosexuality' etc. But beyond these characteristics, Indian feminist theatre has been critiqued for being 'essentialist', that is, for reducing women to bodies, and for assuming that 'all women are the same' (Kapur 5). Hence, representation of women by way of producing stereotypes has continued in its own way, though the objective was to foreground women as subjects.

In the post-'70s period, we find the emergence of women playwrights and directors, who were initiated not only by explicitly political but also general concerns for gender relations. They drew upon women's experiences and aimed at 'consciousness raising' among women in order to bring about socio-political changes in their material conditions of existence. It is the 'feminine awareness' that is most strikingly aimed at in their plays. Though the Indian 'women's theatre' was initially influenced by the western 'feminist theatre' of the 70s, it gradually matured into a more conscious and confident 'female stage' from the 'feminist

stage' in theatre. The latter, in its pursuit of political aims often appeared to be in absolute opposition to the conventional 'gender structure'.

In foregrounding women's experiences and sexuality on stage, not in opposition to the male counterpart but in focusing on their own exclusivity and uniqueness in perceiving the world at large, women's theatre presents the woman as a "speaking subject". Hence it throws into doubt the private/public divide where the 'public' ceases to be *exclusivemasculine* domain. In presenting women as 'subjects'; as conscious choice and decision makers; women's theatre moves away from 'essentialism' in feminist theatre, for it takes into account multiple contexts of the women all over and the differences in their socio-cultural conditioning that mark off one woman from the other. Hence, women's theatre emerges as an alternative to the conventional theatre even though it was not necessarily taking a political stance against it.

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, fulfillments 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. In *Listen Shefali* (1975), Varsha Adalja situates Shefali's struggle against the backdrop of a caste oriented 'modern' society which has its own political strategies to perpetuate gender subordination. In *Harvest* (1996), Manjula Padmanabhan posits the questions of motherhood and procreation amidst the themes of amputation, body-parts transplantation, reification and economic exploitation. In representing women in their contexts, the Indian women playwrights go beyond the feminist representations of women as 'victims' of socio-cultural, political injustices. They project women as 'conscious' individuals who not only challenge the *status quo* but also actively participate in the social discursive processes in order to produce the desired changes. Azizun Nisa in Tripurari Sharma's *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa* (1996) considers the 1857 'sepoy mutiny' as an opportunity for her to be part of a nationalist struggle (mostly considered to be a masculine affair) and rejects being categorized as a docile courtesan who is 'expected' to remain far from the machineries of war and political struggles. Manasa in Mamta G. Sagar's *The Swing of Desire* (1990) is as much a mother as a woman desiring to establish her career as a successful dancer. 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' (Mukherjee 18). 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. For example, Mallika Sarabhai believes that 'being a feminist and being a feminine are one and the same. "Our strength lies in our being women. The moment we de-sex ourselves and try to be something we are not – men – our defeat is writ large.'" (Ahuja 17). Her theatre aims at making women conscious of their own potentials and at the same time critique their limitations. Sarabhai denies projecting men as responsible for the subordination of women.

Usha Ganguli, too, rejects the label of the 'feminist' and opines that "it is by working with both the masculine and the feminine that we will, at a point, reach harmony" (qtd. by Lieder

F. K. in "Not-Feminism" 608). However, it must be mentioned that even when the women playwrights and directors reject being defined as feminists, they continue to contribute towards the discourse on women's rights to liberation from socio-cultural orthodoxies, religious taboos and the patriarchal *controls* embodied in hetero-normative relations. In an interview given to Anjum Katyal, Usha Ganguli makes her position clear as a non-feminist.

I feel that I differ from the way people tend to use the term feminism. This term has nowadays become a fashionable one, and I don't believe in a particular brand of feminism. Therefore I don't want the play [Rudali] to be labeled as feminist. On the other hand, I believe in the liberation of women and their freedom, and I'm trying my best as a person, as a teacher, and as a theatre worker to work towards that.

(Katyal 2)

The rejection of 'feminism' as an ideology and denying being identified as feminists, can generally be traced in the nature of feminist discourse in India, which at its inception was spearheaded by male reformists, with women joining the movement only at the end of the 19th Century. Hence, feminism in India had its commencement as part of larger social reformist movements. And it continued to be so in the 1960s and '70s with the contribution of Gandhian socialists and the Ultra leftists.

The formation of women's trade union was the result of one of the political movements initiated by the Gandhian socialists in the post-independence period. However, these unions neither considered them feminists, nor did they encourage any feminist discussions. But women's groups which emerged in Left outfits around 1975 initiated feminist debates and associated feminism with other social movements of the time. With the repealing of 'Emergency' in 1977, several other women's groups were formed mainly in the metropolis,

which did not have any apparent similarity with each other but members of these groups largely hailed from that section of the society which was educated, belonged to the middle or 'upper-middle-class' and was located in the urban. Hence they lacked the authentic sensibility of the underprivileged, rural, poor, lower caste/class women who comprised the majority. But as active participants in the Left political processes, the members of these groups who were oriented in the Marxist understanding of class and society, sought to represent and bring together women from different sections, irrespective of their caste and ethnic identities. By the late 1970s and early '80s, women's groups caught the media attention with their repeated struggles against oppression of women, such as the protests against dowry murders, rapes, not just by the civilians but also by the police/army especially in troubled areas of the country, honour-killings, women trafficking etc. Hence the public and private collided in providing agendas for women's movements. But it must also be noted that in spite of enough enthusiasm in such movements, they did not produce expected results because of the essentially patriarchal structure of the law and administrative institutions in the country. Hence struggles continued against the administration as well, soon to be usurped by the major political parties. This in course led to the drowning of independent feminist voices amidst the loud cacophony of the national parties. From being the sole demand, women's issues became one among the other associated political demands. Demonstrations, street theatres, consciousness raising public campaigns informed by feminist ideologies were almost discontinued and women's centers were formed, with the aim to provide legal, health and counseling assistance. Increasingly influenced by the western feminist movements, women's groups such as the *Saheli* or *Salehi*, took up trans-cultural issues recurring in the daily idiom across India throughout the 1970s: rape, dowry deaths, wife-beating, bride-burning, mothering, housekeeping etc.. Hence the productions of such plays as Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning* or *Om Swaha* by Anuradha Kapur and Maya Rao, presented by

Stree Sangharsh, a Delhi based women's group, in the early 1980s. Also must be mentioned the production of *Mulgi Zali Ho* (A Girl is Born) by the Bombay based women's group, *Stree Mukti Sanghatana*. No less pertinent here is to consider a women's group from Manipur, *Meira Paibi* which was composed of women only above forty-five years of age, who believed that beyond a certain age, women's lives must be spent in the service of the society. These women patrolled the roads of Manipur at night and hunted places where men took alcohol and drugs. Later, the same women protested against the army when they forcibly took away their men. In an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, Tripurari Sharma mentions a few other women's groups from the 1980s which deserve to be mentioned here; *Sewa Mahila* and *Vimochina*, based in Bangalore, *Action India* and *Ankur* in Delhi, *Chattisgarh Mahila Mukti Morcha* in Raipur and *Mahila Manch* in Kanpur (Subramanyam 143).

The women's centers took up such issues which were more intimate with the public and hence met with severe hostilities from the traditional patriarchal institutes of the societies. The feminists were popularly critiqued as the 'latest offshoots' of western capitalism, having no respect for the traditional Indian ethos. They were considered ignorant of the essential social structure in India and were accused of making forays into it by making out false meanings out of witch-hunting, human sacrifice, forcible widow immolation etc. All of these contributed to the discontinuation of women's centers and the resultant vacuum was then occupied by the political parties' women's wings, which were promoted to show solidarity towards women primarily with the intentions of electoral politics.

The feminist debates in India, primarily encouraged by the women's groups, therefore began with demands relating to women's suffering across private and the public spaces. But a definite change can be noticed in the post '80s period where celebrating the strength of the

'new women' supplemented the traditional discussions on women depravity and domination. The camps now gave way to *melas* which initiated large scale discussions of women's issues but ushered in a light mood of festivity too. With the spread of such events, they soon lost their seriousness in mere mechanical imitations of things customary to *melas* and underwent a process of fragmentation which is common to most of the feminist proceedings in the Indian subcontinent. Such fragmentation, which was exemplified in the open display of differences among the feminist organizations (often heavily loaded with different political ideologies), ushered in an inevitable collapse of 'sisterhood'. This led to doubt the very basis of 'feminism' in the Indian context, where fragmentation and multiplicities are operative in such layered ways that they seek to defy any sort of unified organization dedicated to women's issues alone. In the light of above discussion, it seems pertinent to note that Chandra Talpade Mohanty, one of the pioneer Indian feminists, understands 'woman' as a 'cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses' (19), while considering women as 'real, material subjects of their collective histories'(19), and opines that seeking the relation between the 'woman' and 'women' is one of the main objectives of feminist scholarships, though the relationship is 'not of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures' (19). Mohanty argues that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the 'third world' in the context of a world system dominated by the West on the other, characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world.' She further says that 'an analysis of "sexual difference" in the form of a trans-cultural singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I (she) call(s) the "Third World Difference"—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the

women in these countries. And it is in the production of this “Third World Differences” that Western feminisms appropriate and ‘colonize’ the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries (19) (bracketing mine).

But third world feminism in itself is again a monolithic meta-narrative that imposes itself upon the women of colour, irrespective of their social, political, cultural, religious, ethnic and racial differences. The 'third world', conceived in the light of colonial history, has been defined as the non-enlightened, non-white, racially inferior exotic; but with the new surge of feminist criticism from the 1980s, a new sensibility has been vouched for the third world women, whose material conditions have already been ignored by Western feminism in privileging the white women. Julie Stephens however in her essay *Feminist Fictions: A Critique of the category 'Non-Western Woman' in Feminist Writings on India*, voices a transnational unity among women arguing: ‘what unites women...must be something beyond culture. So cultures can be different; women cannot. Sameness, or what links women to each other, is the ‘experience of being a woman’, according to the discourse, because it is the same despite differences in culture. Cultural (i.e. historical) differences are irrelevant to any understanding of this ‘experience’, which is thereby situated in something universal to all human cultures and beyond the pale of history. The concept of ‘universal sisterhood’ or women’s liberation on a truly international scale’ is based on an essentialist notion of womanness beyond history, nation and class.’(Stephens 109) But in foregrounding multiculturalism as a point of departure from the West, traditional feminism may deem ineffectual, for as Susan Moller Okin argues in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, feminism and multiculturalism cannot be reconciled.

South Asia being a mosaic of different cultures is again a break away from the ‘third world’. Though women have sometimes been considered index to the progress or retreat of a society, and the women question has been one of the central political issues in the nation 'building' processes in South Asian countries, it would be a mistake to assume the existence of an overarching feminism in the entire region. Comprehending South Asia has its own complexities, for, though it is a constellation of post-colonial nation states separated by shared political boundaries, they relate to each other on grounds of economic, geographic, linguistic and social realities. Despite similarities, no single perspective can define the ‘enormous geographical space comprising the nation states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.’(Sengupta 1) While for the feminists in India or Bangladesh, ‘anti-colonial struggles and post-colonial nation-making seem to be the point of departure’ (Menon 220), they find no resonance among the feminists in Nepal. The 1947 partition may have had a huge impact on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal had other ‘histories of national and ethnic divisions to deal with’ (Menon 220). Even the practice of religion has constituted and still continues to contribute differently to the national identities in different nation-states in South Asia. Moreover, as Nivedita Menon argues in *Seeing like a Feminist* (2012):

...within the countries themselves, political struggles are inflected by local dimensions, whether of class, religious or caste identities, regional aspirations within nation-states and so on. In addition, relationships among these nation-states are unequal and contested; they are further complicated by geopolitical developments and the differential effects of globalization and imperialist expansion on each country. It is within this variegated terrain that feminist struggles and concepts have shaped themselves and engaged with various formations of power.(Menon220).

The feminists have engaged with most of the social discourses simultaneously, but, 'history' has continued to be the central realm of inquiry owing to the peculiarity of postcolonial politics in South Asia. In their essay, *South Asian Feminisms: Contemporary Interventions*, Ania Loomba and A. Ritty Lukose, observes that the 'spectacular rise of communalism, sectarian violence, and militarism has necessitated a continued feminist engagement with histories of religious identity, community and social memory' (Loomba and Lukose 5). They argue that Urvashi Butalia's exploration into the 'gendered aspect of the communal violence of the 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan' (5) can be considered to have 'catalyzed... the horrific escalation of such violence in the 1980s, and specifically the anti-Sikh riots that erupted in Delhi after the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards' (5). Feminist historians in India were compelled to 'engage anew with the long lineages of Hindu cultural nationalism following the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists, an event that ushered in an era of heightened anti-Muslim rhetoric and practices' (5).

In Sri Lanka, the whole agency of gendered history comes from the ethno-nationalistic struggle that is unique in its own right in South Asia, while in contrast, Pakistani feminists for the most of time remain occupied with their struggles against Islamic orthodoxy, rather than engaging themselves in nationalist debates. Hence, South Asia in its existence as a politically charged postcolonial space is divided into such discontinuities among the constituent nation states that no homogeneous feminism that can uniformly address its trans-cultural women's issues is plausible.

Similar critical issues ensue when feminism is considered in relation to India, for India as a federal nation state essentially unites its regions, politically putting together multiplicities,

disjunctions and fragmentations on the one hand and recognizing the differences among the parts on the other. India as a nation emerges as an overarching narrative that seeks to homogenize the differences in Indian society that is torn on grounds of plurality in caste, class, ethnicity, race, religion, culture, and region. Therefore in a country of such diversity, conceptualizing feminism in Western terms would be impossible but reading the 'local' to frame multiple feminist perspectives based on issues that are unique to a specific locale instead of forming a singular perspective on the entire geography that invariably ignores the differences in women's issues must be encouraged. The term 'local', especially when it is to be mediated through women's theatre, must therefore entail the analyses of the actual empirical realities that contribute to the material conditions of women. Feminist activists have traditionally used theatre as a medium to 'strategically use and create social spaces to generate collective dialogue and critical reflection on issues of patriarchy and violence' (Nagar, 341). 'Activists working at the grass-roots level theorize the interrelationships among their own political actions, their vision(s) of empowerment, and the everyday gendered spaces they seek to transform.' (341). But such activism always has to mediate with the 'socio-economic and political realities that define women's struggles' (342) typical to that region. Though the issues addressed by women's theatre are seldom intimately connected, critical idioms concerning them have evolved centering on violence against women both in their intra and extra-household relations. However, 'the focus has gradually shifted from the relatively narrow concerns of "women's welfare" to the new ideology/program of 'women's empowerment' and the question of individual autonomy' (Sengupta 22). Therefore the women theatre activists put forward 'questions of political consciousness and self-identity', which, for Mohanty, are crucial in defining 'third world women's engagement with feminism'. Hence theatre can directly participate in 'raw activism', where active political struggles may not consider any aesthetic contribution, but women

playwrights and directors responded to this changed social situation, by writing, directing, and producing plays, telling '*their* stories of suffering, resistance, and dreams' (Sengupta 22). Though the increasing enthusiasm for spectacle attracted the audience more towards television rather than theatre, Indian women theatre practitioners innovated their dramaturgy to bring theatre close to people by producing non-linear, anti-realist plays and staging them amidst the orchestra of life, where struggle for existence *co-exists* with desire for entertainment, instead of waiting for people to come to theatre. Although this initially germinated in the form of street theatres of Utpal Dutta, Badal Sircar, and Safdar Hashmi, such innovations on the part of women playwrights and directors brought activism and aesthetics in close proximity with each other. One such example is Sushma Deshpande's *Whay Mee Savitribai*, which was performed in railway platforms, 'under a tree, in the temple, anywhere' (Deshpande) before audience which would require the director's intervention as a story teller, and also in international conferences, before 'elite' spectators. The same is also with her *Teechi Aaichi Ghosta*, a Tamasha play on the living conditions of prostitutes, and *Baya Daar Ugadh*, a play on women saint poets. While each play speaks on women empowerment and has been performed by the women activists to present women as they are (without stereotyping them), they are also brilliant pieces of theatrical and literary values.

The women playwrights and directors must be credited with merging diverse forms of performance and theatre. One of the most important names in this regard would be Mrinalini Sarabhai whose *Darpan Academy*, primarily devoted to training in different classical dance forms, has produced around 150 plays. For Mrinalini, dance and drama are no two separate entities. In choreographing more than 300 dance dramas, Mrinalini has raised choreography to the level of theatre direction. One of her most glorious ventures is the production of *Swapanvasudattam*, a Sanskrit Classic in English for an American audience. Considered one

of the pioneers of experimental theatre in India, Mrinalini's bold innovations, especially in her portraying Gowri, Chitrangada, Shakuntala, Mira, Savitri etc, not only showcases the Indian womanhood but also forms of 'iconoclasm – woman's questioning, challenging, demolishing the values and institutions, created by man.'(Ahuja 17).Mrinalini's daughter Mallika Sarabhai, who has the same knack for experimenting with theatre and dance forms as her mother, 'uses her dances to challenge her audiences and make them sit up and think about women's place in society or about cultural atrophy'(17). Though an exponent of classical dance forms at its pristine purity, Mallika has also showcased 'how to coalesce the classical and the folk, the oriental and the occidental' (17). Chaman Ahuja puts it best:

At best it is creative choreography that rejects the moods and themes of classical dance but draws from it certain elements which are fused with the rhythms of folk dances, the aggressiveness of martial arts, the dramatic material from life, the narrative skill, and the stylized version of gestures and movements from everyday existence, the ultimate aim being to create a community art which may facilitate social change through awareness. (18)

In her role as Draupadi in Peter Brook's *Draupadi*, Mallika discovered herself as an essential fearless Indian woman for whom 'heroism' lies in 'her defiance' (18), much like the Draupadi of the epic, *Mahabharata*. 'Living with Draupadi was a wonderful experience – being forced to find the essential and the fearless in me. With her, my political, ideological and artistic lives merged. And have remained so.'(18).Rooted in the Indian context, Mallika's experience in the context of Indian theatre may be seen as defining the shift in approach of the modern Indian women's theatre (and social) activists, which is characterized by translating experience into activism. 'Mallika believes that being a feminist and being feminine are one and the same. In *Sita's Daughters*, Mallika uses narrative strategies as diverse as the mask, dance, music, mime monologues etc, to question the portrayal of few exemplary women from the

Indian mythology and history. She identifies Sita's example as typical to the traditional Indian womanhood, who can establish their 'voice' only when subjected to extreme male social tyranny. The play however moves beyond Sita and browses through a number of exemplary Indian women including the Rani of Jhansi and Meera Bai, in order to question the patriarchal strategy in projecting women in roles that has facilitated and defined masculine interpretation of women's roles. In her attempts to work with socially relevant issues, Mallika's dramaturgic innovations lend uniqueness both to her dance and the traditional techniques of communicating social concerns with the audience. She takes up the theme of violence in *V for ...* and evolves a drama 'using case histories, video-images, quotations from violators and peacemakers' (19). Chaman Ahuja defines her work as the 'theatre of social purpose' and considers them as representing 'the theatre of tomorrow' (19).

Moving beyond the traditional methods of theatre making, some of the Indian women playwrights and directors discovered playwriting as a collaborative art. The changing socio-cultural position of women in the early 1980s promoted collaboration of women through women's groups and workshops. Reference to Tripurari Sharma's experiences in her formative days as a playwright-director, may exemplify the gradual process of shift towards collaborative theatre. In an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, published in *Muffled Voices Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, Sharma speaks of a theatre workshop at Nagda (Madhya Pradesh) in 1979. She was asked by a trade union to produce a play which would reflect the struggles of their lives without indulging in the political rhetoric. There was no script. Therefore they had to 'evolve' (138) one. She started by picking and choosing with trial and error method from the folk tales, stories, enactments and narrations, suggested by her team. The questions she raised during the process are important in understanding the shift in technique of evolving a play - from the singular to collaborative composition and direction,

substituting the subjective for the objective, yet preserving the preferences and priorities; from text to experience; from the author to the actor; from an organic production of a play to piecing together fragments/ snaps/ shots/ dialogues/ performances/ songs/ dance, etc.

'The question is – can a person or an incident not be the subject of a text, unless a playwright picks it up and places it in a written structure? After all, life exists and any moment in it can develop into a play. But what if a writer does not pick it up? What if one fails to see it or chooses to ignore it? Priorities are different for each person. What may be meaningful to one group may seem mundane to another group. Is it possible to sift and recreate and enact something of your experience? After all, the first play, the archetypal play, was a recount of the hunter's experience to the community. It contained the essentials of the relationship between an actor and audience. Can some such performance not be designed in contemporary times? Theoretically 'Yes' and in practical terms somewhat difficult. The actor would then define and create the content and not be a medium for something that exists beforehand. It also implies that the text would not exist on paper but be shaped as the actor/ actors build upon their ideas, feelings or reactions. The actor no longer learns lines – he simply utters them. Nor does he interpret a text for it is created by him or her. It is a reversal of an actor's conventional training wherein he imbibes a character from the text – here he builds the character and the text simultaneously. The actor's stature is enhanced, but the moulding and remoulding is not without frustration. But we struggled and managed to piece together a performance loosely held together by songs and the theme.'

This was a small simple workshop, but in many ways significant for me. It affirmed my faith in the collective process, in the belief that there are layers of creativity within each person and that talent has no single form. I saw drama being born in the form that it is actually performed – a three dimensional reality. It seemed closer to the oral

rather than the written tradition of expression. It transcended the restriction of reading, (hence writing), skills and thus was not bound by literacy. This further widened the scope and nature of possibilities. (Subramanyam 138 – 139)

Tripurari Sharma speaks of a number of such workshops, where she collaborated with students, trade unions, women's groups from slums and rural areas, to evolve drama texts out of their daily experiences. Sharma's endeavour therefore was to bring into practice a form of theatre which engages with incoherent and living experiences and dramaturgically reproduce them amidst the commotion of daily sprint of life. Theatre evolved as a 'design' suitable to be performed in college compounds, bastis, street squares, market places, terraces etc. Hence, 'the tone of the plays was not didactic but experiential. Often first person accounts were incorporated and hence the narration had an undertone of intimacy. Each play was different and representative of the group. Structurally the plays denoted sharing of experience, composed by exchanging notes – women talking to each other and the audience. Theatre then was also dialogue' (Subramanyam 144).

Evolving scripts out of conversation in groups, is provided a further dimension by Anamika Haksar whose directorial technique sought access to the inner recesses of the participants in a way that the latter is lured directly into confronting himself/herself and rediscovering his/her position amidst his/her socio-cultural condition. (Subramanyam 160). One can refer to her production of *Raj Darpan*, a script that she evolved in congress with a group of young students who were made to face a number of questions that in turn made them question the colonial attitude still prevalent in the matters of language, culture, ethnicity, class structure, administration, censorship, judiciary etc.. Haksar had her training in Direction from Russia, and it is her knowledge of the Stanislavskian school of acting that influenced her work with the actors in India, for whom, Haskar teased out their inner self in a manner that no other director ever did. In her production of *Antaryatra*, Haskar displayed

how dramaturgic adjustments may emerge as metaphor to the thematic aspect of the play. Reworking the Tamil epic, *Silappadhikaram*, for the modern stage has its own challenges, but Haskar made it an opportunity to – 'explore the journey of women – the wife, the courtesan, and the ascetic' (Subramanyam 160).

... as a metaphor for the journey she chooses an open air dramatic space enclosed on two sides by a dome like structure, opened at the back providing a depth that seems infinite. While some primary narrative is being enacted in front, a variety of actions are magically lit up at different distances at the back, for almost 300 feet, almost taking you on a journey into the inner world of these characters. The world thus evoked is full of images, of associations, of dreams, and the inner psyche. In her presentations there is a multiplicity of meanings – in the action, in the blocking, in the use of space, in the characterization and in its open-endedness. Here the narrative is not definitive but exploratory and forms a rich layering of meaning and emotions' (Subramanyam 160).

Though evolving texts out of dialogues and conversations with ordinary men and women became regular for various women directors in the 1980's and 90's, playwright – directors like Kirti Jain, Neelam Mansingh Choudhry, Maya Krishna Rao and Veenapani Chawla displayed even more varied ways of theatre production, ranging from the adaptation of contemporary classics to building scripts while acting on the stage. Kirti Jain's *Aur Kitne Tukde* may be mentioned here, for the director shares in *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, the experience of putting on stage Urvashi Butalaia's book *The Other Side of Silence*, which is essentially a documentary that brings together interviews of few women who underwent traumatic violence during partition. For Kirti, it was both an opportunity to stage authentic flakes of history before a generation of audience which was fast losing the painful memory of partition, courtesy the politics of nationalism that survived on promoting hatred against the

neighboring countries, and a challenge to fit the unconventional script into theatre. She had to evolve a form that would suit the staging of 'real life interviews, retaining the sense of the whole trauma that was Partition. The process therefore was naturally full of apprehension, restlessness and excitement of trying to discover a form. This also necessitated full participation and collaboration of the entire team,...' (Subramanyam 161). Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's productions on the other hand reveal the fusion between modern traditions of acting and the age-long Punjabi folk traditions of the Naqqal actors. Though trained in conventional modes of theatre production, Neelam's endeavour was to discover an idiom that would 'synthesise' the rustic and the urban, both in its dramaturgic and thematic aspects. The Naqqals who worship Jawala Mai as their deity, are a community of performers who 'perform in a range of contexts and spaces: they follow Sufi traditions and perform at a dargah every week. They also participate in Ramlila performances and further enact stories of the Sikh Gurus and Sants. This eclectic performance tradition relies on female impersonation for the most part. Importantly, 'becoming female' is a matter of training for traditional actors as well as an instance of 'switching into a gender' (Mangai, 121). Neelam's theatre group, *The Company*, has produced plays where both the urban actors and the Naqqals have simultaneously performed for a range of characters, but for Neelam, the use of female impersonators does not account for the representation of gender on stage. For the Naqqals, however, 'doing' woman on stage is both informed by and continuously fraught with tensions of being men in real life. Neelam's works, however, are not exclusive of this tradition. In a number of plays produced in the 1990s and the first decade of the new century, Neelam has explored facets of women's desire, sexuality, the motherhood anxieties, the reluctance to follow the 'rules' of womanhood, the strategic use and abuse of femininity, passionate emotions in conflict with socio-patriarchal norms etc. In most of these plays, texts have evolved from Western classics, and adapted for the stage. In her *Fida*, which is an adaptation

of Jean Racine's *Phaedra*, Neelam recounts the irresistible passion of a step-mother for her son. The play is a collaborative work where the script has been developed by Surjit Patar for dramatic adaptations and music composed by B. V. Karnath. While producing the play for the Bharat Rang Mahotsav in National School of Drama, New Delhi, Neelam did not restrain herself from displaying passionate love as bearing selfish, and 'negative' results when pitted against the socio-culturally determined forms and dimensions of love. Based on Dorris Lessing's collection of short stories, Neelam's *An Unposted Love Letter* is a bilingual monologue. Set in the green room of a theatre, an artist unleashes layers of her experiences as an actress in the play. Neelam collaborates again with B. V. Karnath as the musician, Sujit Patar as the scripter, and Sumant Jaykrishnan as the set designer. However, from exploring a woman's psyche in *Fida* to an artist's in *An unposted Love Letter*, Neelam's works features her unique style of experimenting with the traditional forms of narratives in theatre. While *Fida* unfolds from the middle of the plot and follows a linear path towards its climax, *An Unposted Love Letter* has no linearity of narrative or situation. Woven as if a continuous process of 'dressing and undressing, creating and wiping off, assuming and shedding', the *letter* gives the audience access to an actress's on-going theatre of the mind. The stage suggests a theatre changing room – a mirror with bulbs fixed to its four sides, is placed at the centre, costume stands are disorderly arranged and 'spaces' discretely marked for last minute rehearsals. The actress gradually strips her elaborate dress on stage evocating a cerebral process of 'becoming' someone, caricaturing the person and finally dissociating from him/her. The official website of *The Company* informs that 'Its productions are characterized by the use of spare props – sticks, fire, rice, washing poles– which evoke the ambience of an Indian village, and incorporates music, ritualistic elements and the presentation of poetic images that communicate as strongly as words' (Chowdhry). *The Kitchen Kathatoo* is an ensemble of such props. Essentially a culinary romance, the play is staged with cooked foods

viz. *pakodas, roti, chutney, jalebis, popcorn* etc. being served before the actors. Scripted by Sujit Patar, the play is based on Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Isabel Allende's *Aphrodite*, but Neelam has brought a unique sensation to the play with her use of vegetables and food, which is suggestive of various moods, 'thoughts and feelings of sensuality, pain, happiness and rejection' (Chowdhry). Neelam's productions therefore feature unconventional settings, elaborate and intelligent use of stage space, props that induce audience's tangible attachment with the action on stage and unique configurations of plot and character which unsettles the conventional portrayals. What is explicit in the works of these Indian women playwrights and directors is that there is a certain shift in the vocabulary of theatre productions. After a recent production of *Nachiketa* in London, in which she experimented with a form of opera, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry spoke about her directorial style: 'I don't do homework or follow any school. For me, the play emerges when actors' bodies move in spaces. I improvise and give meaning to the air in those spaces. Everything has to be instant' (Deepak).

Though the 'instant' is never entirely 'renounced' from its immediate/ gradual past (the context may be suspended but not destroyed); there is a constant attempt to shelve the traditional methods and techniques of theatre direction and production, and embark on improvising not only the dramaturgic but also the thematic. Hence trained in Kathakali, Maya Krishna Rao negotiates the 'instant' in her performances which mixes the classical Indian dance form with modern performance forms like the stand-up comedy, jazz, rap, tap dancing, rock and roll etc. in order to have a nuanced approach to the 'contemporary'. In an event titled SAHMAT in 2002, just after the Gujarat riots, when the communal tensions were running wild throughout the state and country at large, Maya Rao produced a comic piece structured on a popular cookery show in television. During her performance, she planted a

mixer-grinder on the stage and exactly demonstrated the process of making chutney as a t.v. demonstrator does. 'As she puts chillies and adds turmeric and lets the mixer-grinder run, the chutney changes colour and emerges saffron in colour!' (Mangai, 2005). This is only one amongst many instances where Maya explores the moment in a way which teases out her propaganda from an extremely different setting and technique that the audience is almost walloped over. In another instance, where Maya works on the mythical story of Ravana, *Ravanama*, she takes the kathakali dance form to a different level of performance where dance and theatre collaborate to form a new vocabulary. With a minimum amount of props, viz. a table, a lamp and newspaper, she creates a narrative that questions the mythic past, the politics of history/ the history of politics and the immediate contemporary that defines the popular *Indian* approach to Ravana, the 'ten headed monster' from *Ramayana*. Performing solo in most of her performances that range from comedy on 'serious' issues such as the Hindu – Muslim riot in Gujarat to extempore that not only questions but comments on more-than-tragic events like the gang rape of Jyoti Singh on a Delhi bus in 2012, Maya in a way completes the trajectory of Indian women theatre practitioners from being 'women alone' to 'woman alone'. However, being alone on stage does not necessarily isolate the performer from any sort of collaborations on and off the stage. In almost all her recent performances, she has mixed music and film in order to produce plays that synthesize spectacle and social activism. In *A Deep Fried Jam*, she weaves a comedy in collaboration with film maker Surajit Sarkar and sound designer Ashim Ghosh to produce a comedy that combines humour with nostalgia and makes subtle commentary on contemporary Afghanistan and Gujarat. Notable here is Maya's profound understanding of theatre as an art form in making comedy out of serious political events. In her solo productions such as *Khol Do*, *A Deep Fried Jam*, *Heads are Meant for Walking Into*, *The Non-Stop Feel Good Show*, *Hand It Over*, *Perspectives on Masculinities*, *Are You Home*, *Lady Macbeth*, *Ravanama* and *Walk*, Maya, as

an actor, has explored the 'tension' that is inherent both in the performance and in the content of drama. In a conversation with Anuradha Kapur and Navtej Singh Johar, Maya says that going beyond the conventions of kathakali as a classical dance form that requires the performer to be absolutely ready to *receive* the traditions as they are, is not merely about improvisation – it is about 'creating a space between performance and non-performance; of being just there... It's about stepping into the unknown... It's not even there – it's going to be' (Rao). It's about not knowing the immediate future but at the same time preparing for it right on the stage. Exploring this 'unknown' has its own freedom, because of the absence of the director to lead the actor through it. The immediate historico-political condition lends the actor the present, which may produce an extempore-theatre creating a performance space which accommodates the present along with the immediate future. The actor (without the director), according to Johar, has to be open to the mind of the body. The body resists the traditional techniques. Hence there is always an element of discovery in and during an extempore theatre. Maya refutes the whole idea of *making* theatre; for according to her, 'making' is nothing but entering a 'precentered box'. One has to conform his thoughts and ideas according to a 'given' which is somewhat different from the true nature of being and is essentially uncouth, obscure, outlaw and all about sensations and seeking. The body therefore creates an intense personal moment in an extremely public space.

Exploring the body has been the forte of Veenapani Chawla too. In almost all the productions of her theatre group, Adishakti, Chawla strives to create an aesthetics that primarily focuses on relooking into the ancient Indian texts through performing arts involving extensive yet subtle use of breath. For Chawla, it all started with the explorations of the Indian classical form of Koodiyattam, a physical craft that has kept the aesthetics of Indian Sanskrit theatre alive. Trained at the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, and having

learnt in India art forms like the Mayurbhanj Chhau, Kalaripayattu,, Koodiyattam and Dhrupad singing, Chawla was asking herself, 'Why are we doing Western texts and what is the language of theatre? What is this realism in representation? ... What about us? What about historical India? Where are we culturally? Are we going to be constantly thinking derivatively or referring to Europe?' ("Theatre: Classical Meets Contemporary").

Koodiyattam provided her the answers she was seeking for. Watching the performances of Usha Nangiar, an exponent of the Koodiyattam she discovered that Usha uses her breath not only to animate her face during the performance but also to 'essentially create the satvika, which is the psychological state or emotional state from which this expression would come. It would come spontaneously' ("Theatre: Classical Meets Contemporary"). Veenapani's productions henceforth came to be characterized by the extensive use of breath which created a different language of the body. However, along with the modulation of breath in order to make the body behave in particular ways, her performances also derived *movements* from the Marshall Arts. To Chawla, the Marshall Arts provide the fundamentals of bodily movements but when performances are created out of it, 'you have to start putting in breath which is very different from the functional breath that they use ... The moments of silence, the transition, the quick changes, evocation of emotion which it does essentially' ("Theatre: Classical Meets Contemporary"). Produced out of elaborate body movements, postures and modulation of breath, Chawla-directed performances synthesized the classical and the contemporary. In *The Hare and the Tortoise* Chawla uses the popular story of the hare and the tortoise competing with each other to win a race, in order to explore the 'contemporaneity' of time on the one hand and comment on the competing pairs from mythology to classics – Ganapati and Kartik, two popular siblings from the Hindu mythology, Ekalavya and Arjuna and Hamlet, the former a Pandava prince from the Mahabharata and the latter, the prince of Denmark from Shakespeare's classic dramatic work, Hamlet. The director herself comments:

Adishakti's *The Hare and the Tortoise* is a dramatic meditation on the ethical possibilities inherent in the notion of contemporaneity. All too often our lives are over-determined either by the past or by the future, by the strictures of tradition, on the one hand, and of progress on the other. In this battle between the condition of nostalgia and the desire for achievement, the present is forgotten or, worse, left unthought and unconsidered. Yet it may be the case that it is only in the recurring stillness of the present, of the moment, of what is now, that we can encounter ourselves as we truly are, untrammelled by the burdens of the past or the distorting pressure of the future. So too, it may well only be in the stark integrity of the present time – when we are not concerned about falling behind or getting ahead – that our relationships with others achieve a new equity and companionability. Thus, being contemporary, of the time, is linked to the notion of being coeval, of the same time, or, thence, of being together in the same time, or, of keeping time together, and so on. So too, being of the present carries within itself a kin set of etymological resonances, in this case, of being present to both oneself and to others. (Chawla)

Staged in consonance with mizhavu drums (as is traditionally done with Koodiyattam), her production of *Brhannala* is characterized by building a rhetoric that puts the human anatomy as the site of exploring time while preserving the main storyline at the same time.

'The answer is in being the hybrid, to nurture old knowledges but also to always be pluralistic – not to be conditioned by positions and ideologies' ("Theatre: Classical Meets Contemporary").

Explicitly then, there has been a shift in theatre making for Indian women theatre practitioners from the late 1990s onwards. The authority of the play texts has gradually receded in order to focus exclusively on performance oriented theatres. The history of Indian

women's theatre from the 1970s onwards reveals that initially women playwrights like Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Varsha Adalja, began to compose plays on women's issues but from the mid-1980s onwards the stress on collaborative 'theatre making' saw the emergence of playwright-directors like Tripurari Sharma, Usha Ganguli, composing/ devising plays to be performed on stage. The final turn however, was provided by the women directors like Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, Maya Krishna Rao, Veenapani Chawla whose primary focus has been *performance* on stage. But categorizing women theatre practitioners as playwrights, playwright-directors and directors is not about rejecting the evolution that most of the practitioners have undergone and are still undergoing. It is also not about denying the fact that composing plays, devising them out of conversations, directing the male/female authored texts for stage have coexisted and still coexists with resistance towards the primacy of texts for theatre performances. For example, Anuradha Kapur has initially co-scripted, devised and directed street plays like *Om Swaha*, *The Rape Bill*, *Amba* in the 1980s for Theatre Union, Delhi; later as a member of 'Dishantar', she acted in plays like *Adhe Adhure*, *Kanjoos*, etc. and with *Vivadi*, directed numerous plays, which include Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghar aur Bahar* (1989) and *Gora* (1991), Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1905) Dinesh khanna's *Sundari: An Actor prepares* (1998) and Bertolt Brecht's *The Job* (1997).

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 *Prolegomena 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' (Mukherjee 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. But, most of the time, plays are associated with single authors, which generally goes against the grain of theatre making. For example, in her anthology of plays by Indian women playwrights, *Staging Resistance*, Tutun Mukherjee credits Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, a Punjabi director for the play, *Fida* (adapted from Racine's *Phaedra*). But in an interview with K. Francis Lieder, Chowdhry's lead actress, Ramanjit Kaur insisted 'Chowdhry had simply commissioned an outside translation of Racine's *Phaedre* into Punjabi and that the text in *Staging Resistance* was simply a translation of a translation, from English to Punjabi and then again into English (Lieder 599). Therefore, the question arises, who must have been credited for *Fida*: the translators, the author of the source text or the director who presented it on stage? According to Lieder,

The texts of plays like *Fida* are not direct representations of their "playwright" speaking; rather, one must view the performance as a whole – the collaboration between text, director, actors, designers, and so on – in order to

understand how Chowdhry uses *Fida* to invoke not just her own aesthetic and political stances, but also those of her collaborators. Chowdhry obscures her own voice within the translation and the collaborative devising process. (Leider 599)

Therefore, when a play-text is printed, 'playwright' may not always be an adequate term for referring to its 'author'. Leider suggests Aparna Dharwadker's use of the term 'auteur' as 'one who did not write the text on which the play is based but who has substantial control over how the story is told in the performed play (Leider 597). Though 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. Even contemporary play anthologies, such as Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Modern Indian Plays* (NSD, 2000) ignore women playwrights altogether, while G.P. Deshpande's *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (Sahitya Akademi, 2000) gives space only to a male translated version of Mahasweta Devi's *The Mother of 1084*. Only Erin B. Mee in her *Drama: Contemporary India* (PAJ Books, 2001) presents two women playwrights among the six she selected for her anthology. However, some recent publications such as *Women, Centre, Stage* (Routledge, 2010), *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (Seagull Books, 2000) and *Staging*

Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation (OUP, 2005) exclusively deal with plays written by women, although they are far from being adequate. The increasing popularity of women directors too has not redressed the problem, since much of their success has depended on adaptations of plays written by male playwrights. Critical explorations in this field, such as Nandi Bhatia's *performing women/performing womanhood* (OUP, 2010) or Tutun Mukherjee's 'Prolegomenon to Women's Theatre' in her book *Staging Resistance* are far from being adequate for they do not as such address the issue of constructing 'a theatre of their own' for the women theatre practitioners in India. Nandi Bhatia's *performing women/performing womanhood* 'looks at women's relationship to modern Indian theatre and how that relationship has been articulated in twentieth-century India' ('Performing women/Performing womanhood'). She examines 'representations of female actors, housewives, dalits, and courtesans in literary, cinematic, and autobiographical texts and in plays and performances. By tracing the effectiveness of theatre in foregrounding women who publicly challenged familial, nationalist, and reformist ideologies and confronted caste biases, the book demonstrates the radical potential of this genre in modern India. The book engages textual analyses alongside examinations of archival documents, political statements, reviews, interviews, and journalistic debates, to demonstrate the deeply intertwined links between gender, colonialism, nationalism, political dissent, and theatre' ('Performing women/Performing womanhood').

In her 'Prolegomenon to Women's Theatre' in *Staging Resistance*, Tutun Mukherjee probes into the problematic relationship of women and theatre both in the eastern and western contexts. 'Drama and theatre are two...cultural products', she argues, 'in which the bias of gender generics and sexual difference are in evidence as social and psychic reality. Placing the forms within the discourse of 'gender as genre' reveals the way [the] sex-gender system

operates in the art and practice of drama and theatre and controls their cultural reproduction'(4). “ Unlike the autonomy and comforting privacy of print, the public, performative, collaborative, and materially demanding medium of theatre places women at a distinctive disadvantage, especially in India, where the vast majority of them are still circumscribed within the domestic sphere. However, while acknowledging the virtual absence of women from ‘the documented history of modern Indian theatre as a cultural process and drama as a literary genre’ (7), Mukherjee also recognizes new strides in women’s theatre since the 1970s”(Dharwadker 155,156). Hence the aim of her 'collection', is ‘to explore the imbrications of gender in the history of Indian theatre... [and] to explore the relationship between theatre, society and gender’(156).

Denial of women’s role in Indian theatre has also been taken up by Lakshmi Subramanyam’s *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* (Har-Anand 2002). The book provides an insight into the image of women in the written and performance texts in post-Independence theatre of India. The first section interrogates this image in the written or dramatic text of mainstream male playwrights while the second section articulates the diverse voices of women playwrights/directors and foregrounds the performative elements. In *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India, 1979 Onwards* (LeftWord, 2015), A. Mangai has explored how issues such as class, caste, ethnicity, myths, nationalities, etc. contribute to the intersections of gender and theatre in the works of Indian women theatre practitioners. However none of these texts go on to elaborate the aesthetics of Indian women’s theatre, thereby leaving unaddressed the issues of constructing the women’s dramaturgy which in theatre, voices women’s resistance to stereotypes, provides space to articulate their desires and explores the varied experiences that contribute to their lives.

My 'argument' in this thesis is to address *these* lacunae 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 of select plays, some originally written in English and others in regional languages. Since Indian theatre cannot be said to be a coherent body which has a singular, monolithic national theatre, the presence of multiple theatre traditions, pluralities of language and differences in appeal and reception must be addressed by any research undertaken on Indian theatre. Though English has with time become an 'Indian' language, in public life as well as in writing, theatre in English finds its acceptance only to a limited 'urban/cosmopolitan, socially advantaged, educated individuals' (Mukherjee T. 21). Regional language theatre, on the other hand, not only finds a wider acceptance but is also richer at times in presenting the complex location of women amidst the multilayered and densely textured Indian society. However, it is to be mentioned that the present study takes into account English translations of regional language plays due to convenience of understanding and lack of general 'access' to the widely different languages of the country. Although translations into an 'alien' language may lack 'vernacular experiences' and 'linguistic nuances of the 'bhasa' (21), it is important to use them so that the regional works find a medium to transcend the 'regionalism' they are usually subject to. However, it is important to see that the translation of women's drama from regional languages into English, involves knowledge of the language of the source-text as well as sensitivity towards gender issues concerning the region.

This thesis studies the images of women as constructed in the male dominated Indian theatre in Chapter I, and in the following four chapters focuses on exploring themes and issues Indian women playwrights have broached in their plays, making a select study of

women-authored plays. Appearing at different points in time, the plays have been brought together here on the basis of their theme/s that foreground women as the subject resisting stereotypes, questioning the legitimacy of gender neutral pronouns and voicing their desire to articulate life of their own.

Images of women: male and female playwrights (and directors)

Right from the inception of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) in the 1940s to the consumerist 'neo-liberal' society in India in the 1990s and 2000s, women have been one of the subjects of playwriting for male practitioners of the modern Indian theatre. But the three dominant images – maya (seducer), mata (comforter) and victim -- have remained central to their presentation of women in their theatre. Initially women's problems were seen as the problems of the family, identifying woman only in relation to man, either as his mother or sister or wife or 'kept'. Hence the frame of reference was essentially the domestic space. With the left politics in its heyday in both immediate pre and post-independence times, and the formation of a new political nation-state with redefined territories, women's issues came to be looked upon more as part of larger social issues than gender trouble in particular. In the post-60s, gender perception became political, with women being located at the interlock of social, political and cultural forces. However, sporadic representation of women as active participants in the socio-economic political structure appeared in the works of playwrights like Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar. But wherever women were presented as strong, individual subjects, it was made sure that it spoke of patriarchal legitimization too. Though popular theatre still continued endorsing and encouraging stereotypical representations of gender relations rather than countering and annihilating them, attempts at least were made to recognize women as 'conscious' individuals. Though the image of woman as loyal,

sentimental and self-abnegating was done away with, exclusivity of women's experiences in the Indian context still remained to be explored. Though male theatre activists like Utpal Dutta, Badal Sarkar, Safdar Hashmi, and other mainstream male playwrights and directors like G. P. Deshpande, Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar addressed the women question in their plays, the works of Indian women playwrights and directors claimed better recognition. For, women in their plays are not merely constituents of a category to be taken up for question but emerge as makers and movers of family and society on the one hand and on the other, sites of struggle between conventional socio-cultural constructions and the desire not to be undone by such institutions.

The Indian women playwrights avoided drawing 'images' of women (either stereotypical or iconoclastic), presenting them as 'living' characters, responding to life as it comes to them. But this is neither about a stoic acceptance of what comes sieved through patriarchal and socio-conventional mores, nor is it about politically subverting the institutions so as to project a discourse opposite to the male. Instead, these playwrights located women amidst the varied socio-cultural contexts, studying the uniqueness of their lived experiences, struggles, resistances, frustrations, fulfillments, forced recognitions, liberations, and empowerments, to arrive at a critical distance both from the Indian male theatre practitioners and the West informed feminist traditions. This chapter serves as a prelude to my foray into the making of women's theatre in India.

Nation and War

Virginia Woolf's lexis in *Three Guineas* '...as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'(99) may have heralded a new

feminist approach in the early 1920s, but women's struggle in relation to the idea of 'nation' has never been restricted to vouching against acquiring political rights to citizenship. Such a 'conclusion' would require ignoring not just the history of the suffragette but also the Second Wave Movement's proposition of identifying the 'personal' as the 'political'. Women have continued their struggle for greater and more relevant spaces in politics and the public. In the South Asian context, women's role in politics is of greater significance; for in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, electoral politics has for most of the time revolved around issues concerning women and continues to be periodically spearheaded by women leaders. Hence, when I study the role of Indian women's theatre in meditating on 'nation' in chapter II, I critically look into the constructions of woman and nation in relation to each other, especially at the behest of pre-colonial history of the Indian subcontinent, British colonial rule in India, partition and the post-partition nation building processes. In doing so, I locate 'war' at the intersection of nationalism and fear of cross border sexual atrocities. *Aur Kitne Tukde*, scripted by B. Gauri and directed by Kirti Jain, is a seminal play on this issue, for it looks at partition from the perspectives of four women. 'Patriarchal nationalism' has usually performed itself on women, by ways of sexual violence, religious conversion, and 'martyrdom and state violence', transforming their bodies into 'political artifacts' (Mohita). Unlike traditional feminist focus on women's victimization during war, the chapter takes up two women who actively participate in the politics of war and rise above the common run. Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari*, a play based on one of the most ignored characters of Indian mythology, reinterprets the Ramayana myth and explores complex dimensions of the character of Mandodari, who apparently attempts to end war even at the cost of sacrificing her conjugality. The play in itself is a narrative against the conventional image of meek and possessive Indian wife who would compromise with the moral standards in order to hang on to her husband even when he ignores her. She emerges a woman whose sensibilities

are not limited to personal 'benefits'. In the self-devised game of pawn she apparently loses to Kaaldevata. Her attempts of stopping the war go in vain, but at the end of the game, she reveals that her real intentions were to get Ravana killed: 'No, I was waiting for my lord's death... Well to read a woman's heart one has to be a woman perhaps! How could you understand the agony of being the wife of such a lustful yet blind man? ... Through Seeta's abduction and the ensuing war, I sought redemption of my clan. The arrow that killed Ravana actually released his soul and gave the egoistic man his salvation. Though I am widowed now, I am a happy woman. I succeeded in what I set out to do...' (Adalja 14). Hence she comes out both as an avenger (to a 'lustful man') and a protector (of her 'clan', 'country'). Presenting one of the most 'insignificant' mythic characters as a politically aware strategist, Varsha Adalja renegotiates the question of woman and nation, portraying an oppressed and objectified woman triumphing in a trade which is essentially masculine. Though the play ends with an indictment against war, as Mandodari questions its credibility and argues that it is the hunger for 'power' which is central to the reasons behind such a 'needless violence' and 'destruction', she herself comes out as a political woman, who defies the traditional images of the victims of war.

The chapter also takes up for critical discussion, Tripurari Sharma's *A Tale from the Year 1857*, which is developed around the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It is a reading of how a courtesan moves beyond the limits of her art and sexuality, and emerges a soldier for the sake of her country. The play brings together multiple parallel developments, projecting the growth of an apolitical woman Azizun into a politically aware rebel alongside Zubaida who is happy to remain sheltered within the 'feminine' indoctrinations. The play also invokes debate on arts as a mere means of entertainment or as an effective instrument for specific political purpose. Amidst these, remains the presentation of war, which affects each and every

character in the play. While war transforms Azizun into a political rebel, it prepares Sarwar for a noble death and proves Md. Ali resolute only in his loyalty to Nana Sahib. Harping on the essential temporality of the event, the play subverts master-slave dichotomy between the Indians and the British to such an effect that after being staged for the first time in National School of Drama in New Delhi in 1999, further productions had to be suspended on the charge of misrepresenting history (Sharma Interview).

Class and Caste

Having accounted for the intersection of woman, nation and war, the next chapter gives critical attention to woman in relation to class and caste, which is fundamental to the complexity of social framework for a large section of South Asian Society. In the Indian context, it is difficult to understand class and caste in isolation from each other, for there are numerous points of convergence, which overlap in the two apparently different social systems. Having its inception in the *varna-system*, caste is fundamental to ‘status groups’ (Weber186), which is defined essentially in terms of ‘styles of life’ (Betille 188). But I look at caste here as a *performative* – codes that have come into being through regular practice of subordination on one section of the society by the other based chiefly on entitlements, duties, access to even the minimum of necessities/opportunities/ benefits, producing a clearly defined hierarchy that has predominantly brought forth the pure/polluted matrix in the Indian society. Though class has never been decisive in caste identity of an individual, it has surely influenced his/her caste experiences. Within the traditional caste structure, class proliferated itself in such ways that class-caste association proved to be the most vicious hindrance for the empowerment of the Dalits (a popular terminology for the ‘lower’ caste sub-humans in India), but with economy increasingly shaping the social structure in India (especially in the

post-neoliberal society of the 1990s), elevation in class has emerged as one of the escape routes for people under caste oppressions. Hence, when perspectives on caste in class where 'class structure has cut across the caste hierarchy forming new alliances and antagonisms' (Mukherjee R. 338) are taken up in order to study the experiences of women, they appear as cultural sites where socio-economic changes are played upon in mediation with politics.

The two plays that the chapter discusses: Usha Ganguli's adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's novella *Rudali* and Kusum Kumar's *Listen Shefali*, question the class-caste nexus in subordinating women and developing narratives of resistance at the same time. *Rudali* deals with the pathetic condition of poverty-stricken women who have no choice but adopt 'untoward' ways of survival. Some adopt the profession of crying at the demise of rich people in villages, while the others are ready to embrace prostitution for which they are 'well paid'. The play is also a reading of a woman, namely Sanichari whose struggle against economic oppression is coupled with caste discrimination. It is primarily about resisting against economic and sexual dependency. With her long lost childhood friend Bikhni, Sanichari takes up a rudali's job. Though initially dependent on her grandson for economic support and companionship, she learns to earn by her own. Having found a true partner in Bikhni, with whom she shares a richly textured emotional relationship, she ignores male dependency in all forms and emerges a free agent in her own right. The play abounds in stereotypical images of women, but they are only used as backgrounds to emphasize Sanichari's gradual surfacing as an empowered entrepreneur.

Rudali is dealt with in relation to Kusum Kumar's *Listen Shefali*, which speaks of resistance on the part of a lower caste girl, Shefali, against being married to Bakul, the son of an influential politician, Satyamev Dikshit, who wants to marry his son to her, only to accrue political gains by earning himself the title of protector and emancipator of the Dalits. The play

is about the frustrated desires of a woman, who valued self-respect over sanctioned material benefits. The play highlights questions of caste and the complex social position of Dalit women and exposes the politics surrounding them. The play informs that Shefali has continued resisting against being identified a Dalit, right from her childhood, but, ironically, her own mother marries off her sister to her erstwhile 'lover' Bakul, on the ground of a 'better future' at least in terms of their class positions. Though aware of the objectification that would follow, such a compromise only refers to the wretched Dalit experience that prepares for subordination in one form or the other.

Body and Abuse

Simone *de* Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that 'woman is her body as man is his, but her body is something other than her'(42). What is central to such an understanding is that women's experience of their bodies is different to men, for, women lack control over their bodies and is instead managed by men. Traditions, customs, rituals, marriage, religion, history, literature, science and other socio-cultural artifacts and discourses have conventionally put the female body under male subordination. It has therefore emerged as a site which is at once the location of male desires and fantasies, and vulnerable to violence. Hence the feminists have looked upon violence as gendered. Sexual harassment, rape, pornography, prostitution, sati, dowry deaths are some of the forms of violence that women have traditionally suffered. Theorists have defined violence as force (physical/sexual/emotional/psychological/spiritual/cultural/verbal/financial), which a person/community/race/nation uses to control the other's actions and cause fear, which may amount to the latter's death/destruction.

Though 'violence' is associated with use of force to control, 'abuse' (the term that I use in place of violence in chapter III) minutely focuses on the victim as a subject. I argue here that when women's living experiences are taken into consideration, psycho-sexual abuse may lead to more varied and unexplored areas of critical understanding. These may account for the anguish of being 'misused' on the one hand and on the other, argue that based on the socio-cultural location the abused psycho-sexual condition may or may not have the 'potential' to change the situation s(he) is pitted into. The narratives of abuse would project women as victims, but at the same time account for the complexity of their experiences, struggles and even survival.

This chapter discusses two plays – Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*, which delineate women's abuse in two different contexts. Both the plays examine questions on sexuality and explore the vulnerability of women in situations where even sexual abuse is made to seem 'normal' and 'commonplace'.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* builds on a real incident of routine abuse of women in a colony in Bombay. The plot follows the disturbance in a domestic household while being exposed to the brutality. Leela, the lady of the house is constantly agitated with the hapless cries of women from the under-construction house opposite her; Bhasker, her husband, however, prefers remaining passive. Leela's agitation develops into anguish as her repeated appeals to Bhasker and Mohan, the guest (male) for dinner, to help the victims are frustrated by the pseudo-rationalization of their inactivity in the face of 'sexual torture': 'unless they actually call for help, is it our business to go?' (20) 'After all, it may be something private, a domestic fight, how can we intervene? Personally, I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives' (20); 'unless it is murder. I don't think anyone should come between

the members of a family' (20). But Leela is empathetic towards the victims, for she is transformed into a helpless victim as herself. With Naina's arrival on the scene, Leela finds a partner, but they are persuaded by the men in believing that the women molested outside may be prostitutes and that, "a whore is not decent, so a whore cannot be raped" (40). The question of rape being applicable for only 'decent' women and not for those in the flesh trade disturbs the audience. Padmanabhan here throws light on the patriarchal ideas of the 'decent' and distinguishes them from the 'whores' in order to project patriarchal understanding of rape as the act of violating the 'dignity' of an individual, and ignoring the claims of those who are considered 'undignified'. Rape is also seen from two different perspectives in the text: for the men it is only about violence which can have domestic, ritualistic, or moralistic dimensions or can be unquestionable religious taboos etc, while for women it is about the gross violation of a woman's body, psyche and freedom as they are forced to inaction and sought to be controlled by the men folk.. Hence, for women, rape emerges as a gendered violence that is organized socially to fracture, control and subordinate women to men. However, the play ends with Nina's husband Surinder making his appearance on stage and the three men finally deciding to act, suggesting again that women's liberation is possible only through the agency of men.

This chapter further takes up for discussion Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* which presents the life of three friends as they journey through their own 'private hells'. The play throws up issues like 'childsexual abuse', 'discrimination', 'infidelity', 'insecure relationships', 'incest', 'female infanticide' and 'harassment at the work place'. It begins with Sonali's fear psychosis tormenting her: 'someone indoors is watching me' (Mehta 59). The play traces it back to her childhood experiences of being repeatedly watched naked by the uncle and being inflicted countless sexual abuses. Instead of sharing her pain, her mother

made her 'run her errands, mouth her opinions, feel her feelings' (59). But Gopal escaped all 'because he was born with an extra set of accessories' (59). Sonali further confides that she is pregnant and wants amniocentesis done, and that she had already aborted once when she found she was going to give birth to a girl. This is because her past experiences left memory of discrimination and deprivation and she had been indoctrinated with the idea that 'a woman's failure to bear a son is just retribution for the misdeeds in her past life' (63).

While such is the condition of Sonali, Mallika has to deal with her own 'private hell' on being compelled to keep office with a male chauvinist, Mr. Pingley, who sexually harasses and deal with the insecurity of a relationship with Gopal, who is younger to her because only a "man has the right to the body of a woman younger than he" (78), not a woman. The third friend, Razia, who is apparently an empowered woman in being a doctor, is in an even worse condition. Her husband Habib is all set to marry a nineteen-year-old girl in the hope of having a child. The situation seems absolutely 'normal' to Razia, for she finds "an ancient tyranny at work within me (her) that man's desire for children must be satisfied"(78). Though she acknowledges that it is only patriarchy which is to be blamed for this, she tells Mallika "don't fool yourself that you and I are so different Malu! Or that by identifying man as villain we have won our fight for equality! The enemy is within, don't you see? It's in our minds, Mallika that we are underlings!"(78) However, the play ends with Sonali succeeding in getting over the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, as a "bad human experience", and Mallika defying patriarchal reduction in her own way.

Desire and freedom

Chapter V revolves around the questions of desire and freedom as probed by the contemporary Indian women playwrights (and directors). Traditionally women have been

identified according to stereotypes constructed by patriarchal projections of myths, socio-cultural institutions and literature. Accentuated by such media, women's desires have always been conditioned by repressions. Hence, the freedom of being 'desiring' has generally been glossed over by the patriarchal productions of women as 'desirable'. Indian women's theatre engages with the idea of new age women who desperately hold on to their desires even if socio-patriarchal thought in family and society at large continue frustrating them. The chapter locates freedom as a state of being, where authentic human existence, is mediated by both individual and collective experiences of desire. Dealing with Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's *Fida* and Mamta G. Sagar's *The Swing of Desire*, the chapter critically looks into the norms of complex Indian society which has traditionally preserved 'desiring' only for men. The two plays coupled together are actually contrary to each other: while *Fida* speaks of the frustration of the desires of a woman ending in the tragedy of almost all the characters, thereby reinforcing the idea that woman's desire may lead to an obvious tragic end, *The Swing of Desire* is about a woman's success in attempting to break free from the shackles of womanhood and fulfill her own desire, even at the cost of her own family. The play speaks of the conscious efforts of a woman to attain subjecthood by rejecting the reification imposed by stereotypical gender roles.

Basing on Surjit Patar's adaptation of Racine's *Phaedra*, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry presents Fida's unconventional love and desire for her stepson, Harsan. She finds it difficult to shelter her passions within her tormented mind. With the news of the king's probable death, Fida finds a temporal liberty to foster her desire and confide to Harsan only to be left confused by his silence. She continues to lure him with promises of throne and kingdom, for she is drawn into believing that desire for power is inherent in man. However, the news of the king still alive makes Fida conscious of the social expectations and she is anguished with the

guilt of betraying her husband for the sexual desire of possessing Harsan. The play ends with the death of Harsan, after being falsely accused of trying to sexually possess Fida. Hence, the play deals with 'matters of convention and tradition, transforming the lustful desire of a woman into a negative experience, for society and its deep rooted attitudes seek to determine whom she should desire and to what extent' (Chowdhry). Fida's love, combined with her moral conscience and her superhuman efforts, are powerless against the fatality of passion.'(Chowdhry)

Mamta G. Sagar, on the other hand, presents a different reading of female psyche and sexuality in *The Swing of Desire*. It explores parallel complexities in the relationship of two couples. Manasa, once a dancer, wants to regain her status as a dancer, but is bound by the patriarchal desires of an extremely nagging husband, Pratap. An autocratic husband who wants her to be an 'object of your (his) wanton desires'(Sagar 233), Pratap has been trying to stifle the desires of his wife by branding her dance as a prostitute's art used only in order to seduce men, but the equally strong-willed Manasa refuses to remain a "child-bearing machine"(233). The other couple - Bhava and Pratap's sister, who remains anonymous throughout the play, is caught in a different crisis. Bhava regards his wife a misfit for him and expects her not just to 'satisfy' him 'in bed', but his 'intellectual needs as well' (239). In a brawl between the two, Bhava complains that "You have suppressed yourself so much that I can't see you as my companion at all" (239). While the 'feminine' wife frustrates Bhava, the 'lack' of femininity in Manasa irritates Pratap. However, Manasa transcends social constraints and re-establishes herself as a professional dancer, leaving Pratap in a terrible anguish of knowing that one of his two children is not his own without being told which one. Defeated by his own false masculine institutions that continue to torment him, Pratap approaches Manasa with the promise that he is ready to 'forgive and forget' (247), if she

decides her return to the family. Manasa is quick to recognize Pratap's intentions which hide his male ego. However, that the play ends in Manasa rejecting Pratap's proposal and asserting own choice in deciding her life thereafter. Putting two entirely different characters (viz. Fida and Manasa) in the same frame, the chapter therefore explores the critical nuances of women's relation to desire and freedom.

The thesis concludes suggesting that women's theatre in India has opened up new vistas at the thematic as well as aesthetic level, where woman ultimately emerges as a speaking subject. It is not only about achieving personal freedom through theatre but also about the responsibility of voicing the socio-cultural and political 'reality' of the condition of women in India. This is not only about creating a sisterhood against oppression but about recognizing and celebrating the differences that contextually distinguish one woman from another and show their complex positioning in the family, institutions and society. "The social relevance of a play, as well as its aesthetic appeal, depends largely on the intersection of several factors such as issues of address, the dynamics of representation, the historical time and locus of performance, and the orientation of the audience potentially affecting its reception" (Sengupta 13 - 14). The plays discussed stand testimony to women practitioners' endeavour to redefine the Indian theatre traditions from the perspective of women playwrights and directors, as they take an insider's look into issues which subjugate women socially, culturally, physically, psychologically and even historically. The study therefore questions the traditional place of woman in Indian theatre and tries to find out a niche for women theatre practitioners, contributing towards the formation of a canon of their own.