

Chapter I

Images of Women in Male-oriented Indian Theatre Traditions

Indian Theatre: History, Tradition, Women

Any attempt towards writing the history of India usually confronts the alleged lack of authentic historical documents. India's existence as a non-coherent and fissured political ensemble before the birth of 'modern' India with the advent of Islamic rulers generally ignored the 'historical' documentation of its constitution in any social, cultural, political or academic sphere. In place of a well-defined unitary nation, India in its more than 4000 years' history – right from the days of Indus Valley Civilization to that of the post-Independence territorial settlements with Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Bangladesh—has emerged as a political body, constantly under the process of re-formation with its boundaries shifted and re-shifted under different kings, races, colonizers, and uni/multi party/parties electoral politics, creating spaces for several languages, thousands of dialects, and a mosaic of diverse cultures. But as to the tradition of theatre in this country, it has a long and living history, which is at once diverse in its response to the dramaturgical variety with assortment in linguistic, racial, religious and cultural plurality and 'uniform' in its sharing of the ethno-social specificity and preserving the uniqueness of identity as Indian. Any discussion on woman and her representation in Indian theatre, therefore, must situate her amidst the evolution of Indian sensibilities with respect to women in different contexts.

That Indian theatre has a long tradition which dates back to its obscure and mythic origin. It can be explained through Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*, an exhaustive theoretical treatise on dramatic poetics. This *Shastra* is addressed to playwrights, poets, directors, actors, musicians and dancers, for, in India, drama (Sanskrit, *nataka*) traditionally is a form which brings together poetry, music, dance, and acting (*abhinaya*). All these elements in harmony are

further enhanced by elaborate make ups, designs, costumes, painting, sculpture etc., in order to express the *rasa-s* (emotions) and *bhava-s*(moods). Hence theatre in India, unlike the Greek or the Western Theatres of the antiquities, has been a combination of genres that evolved with the progress of its allies.

Though the Indus Valley Civilization left evidences of dance and music as their mainstay both in entertainment and in performing 'religious' rites, there exists no such confirmation of formal theatre. Hence the earliest form of theatre that can be accounted for is the Sanskrit theatre (1500 to 1000 BCE). However, some of the advocates of ancient folk theatre forms argue that a living theatrical tradition has always been in India. But with the Aryans invading the vast stretches of Indian mainland, conceptualizing, 'narrating' and 'imagining' an essential and unified geographical space, Sanskrit theatre became the definition. It essentially obliterated other forms of theatre, which may have existed in the vernaculars. This was further accentuated by the pride in Sanskrit for contemporary Brahmin scholars. Hence, European historians like Sylvan Levi and H. H.Wilson, who wrote theatre histories of India in the context of Indology (where Europeans were eager to understand India and its past from the native scholars), invariably privileged Sanskrit and essentially advocated Sanskrit theatre in place of theatres in India, ignoring the extraordinary diversity of *bhasha* traditions.

However it must be mentioned that though Sanskrit theatre strictly adhered to the poetics of Bharata and enjoyed privilege on grounds of linguistic superiority, it also provided space for other dialects/ languages for the actors of 'lower' castes. Kalidas's *Abhijnana Sakuntala* may be a masterpiece in Sanskrit theatre but also consists of dialogues in *Maharastri*, *Magadhi* and *Sauraseni*. Playwrights like Bhasa, Shudraka, Vishakhadatta, and Bhavabhuti also followed the same tradition of composing multilingual plays though oriental scholars traditionally projected it as uniform, essential and unilingual. In doing so, they either totally ignored the existence of a strong folk tradition in India or sought a sharp division between the

Sanskrit and folk theatres as elite and non-elite. Having their roots more close to the rural milieu, folk theatre was more simple, immediate and flexible in not being restricted by any conventions. Later, with the decline of Sanskrit theatre around 1000AD, folk theatres gained more prominence, and continued to be so for the next 700 years. Founded mainly on songs, recitations, dialogues and dances of particular regions, folk theatre broadly practiced two forms: religious and secular, which respectively gave birth to ritual theatre and the theatre of entertainment. These regional theatres took different shapes and forms in different parts of the country in relation to the variety of flora and fauna, culture, language, literature, ritual, myth, religion, history, etc. However, they lost their prominence to a great extent with the change in political scenario *a propos* the establishment of British colonialism in India.

The modern Indian theatre refers to the theatre that emerged in the late-eighteenth century and incorporated Sanskrit, traditional and the European theatre practices. 'By and large they borrowed most heavily from European playwriting and staging practices; they also sporadically and very selectively adapted a few features from their region's traditional theatre; and they copied, although sometimes only nominally, some elements from the Sanskrit theatre.' (Solomon 16). The British introduced 'proscenium' to Indian theatre which gradually changed the theatrical discourse and its structure. Though the establishment of the Playhouse (Calcutta, 1753) and Bombay Theatre (Bombay, 1776) was intended to exclusively cater to the British population, they ushered in a new trend of English plays in India, which was 'designed not only to shape artistic activity but to impose on Indians a way of understanding and operating in the world and to assert colonial cultural superiority.' (Mee 1) Hence the modern Indian theatre marked a shift from the traditional, non-textual, performance-based theatre to the West influenced, text-based dramatic theatre, necessitating a shift from Indian theatre's conception as a 'community event' referring to 'annual harvests' and 'religious occasions' to 'dramatic literature' (2). However, to say that dependence on text

did not exist before such developments would be a misnomer, for, theatre forms like Jatra, Bhavai, Tamasha, Kathakali etc. often used literary texts, mythic and religious stories commentaries to be staged before the public, though 'literature that walks'(2) was never encouraged for theatrical performances. But modern Indian theatre is different from the traditional in ways more than one; for as Erin B. Mee observes,

'modern theatre came to be defined in terms of plot-driven plays that stemmed from a single author. It was expected to have human characters, conversational dialogue, behavior that was psychologically motivated, events that were causally linked, and realistic settings that allowed spectators to believe in the present tense reality of the action on stage and to identify with the characters, eliminating anything that would shatter the illusion of the fictional world of the play' (2).

Ananda Lal in his essay *A Historiography of Modern Indian Theatre* identifies social criticism as one of the standards for modern Indian drama that precedes the social dramas of Ibsen and Shaw (33).

Traditional Indian theatre, was, as Macgowan and Melnitz observe in *The Living Stage*, the 'theatre of symbolism' (293). The western theatre 'heightened physical reality into an illusion of life', or even when an expressionistic play is taken into account, 'though the settings and lights were usually arbitrary, mannered, bizarre, we (one) could see or sense that this distortion of reality was intended to make the reality more dramatic, more powerful'(293)(bracketing mine). But in India, 'the whole look and meaning of their (Indian) drama is symbolic to the last degree. The acting is either extravagant in its studied violence, or repressed into a masklike repose. Gestures have an esoteric meaning. Voices are usually shrill or pitched in singsong cadences. Scenery is either nonexistent or full of mannered elaborations. If the actor doesn't wear a mask, his face may be painted with extravagant and

symbolic patterns.’(293). However, theatre in India, under the colonial influence, rejected such intricate symbolism in order to stage social dramas which upheld fidelity to fact not just in their themes, but also in their presentations.

Professionalism was another development that accounted for Indian theatre’s ‘maturity’ into the modern, for it essentially transformed the non-commercial Indian theatre into a ‘commodity’. This ‘created a cultural divide between what came to be seen as high/ English/ urban/ modern/ theatre and what was categorized as low/Indian/rural/traditional/performance’ (Mee4), though the ‘divide’ was not as sharp as it appears now. However, in the post-independence period, the ‘theatre of roots’ movement in its assertion of Indian identity defined the modern Indian theatre in its own terms and hence challenged ‘acultural definition of modernity and modern theatre in and on Western terms’ (5). In the conscious attempt to decolonize the modern Indian stage, theatre itself turned out to be not just a ‘theatre of roots’ but also a ‘theatre of identity’.

However, right from the pre-Sanskrit ritual ‘theatre’ to the post-independence ‘theatre of roots’, Indian theatre has never held enough space for women to articulate their voices through it. Be it the dramaturgy, or thematic negotiations with women’s issues, Indian theatre has held a ‘sanctioned’ ignorance in relation to women. This has its roots in theatre’s socio-cultural mediations as well, for Indian society predominantly has been patriarchal and constantly upholding sharp distinctions between the public and the private in relation to the position of man and woman. Hence in theatre traditions of India, be it the non-scripted folk theatres or the Sanskrit theatre and colonial and postcolonial modern theatres, women’s absence in the theatrical trade is clearly visible, even though we find male authored women characters in almost all the forms. In *Natyashastra*, Bharata Muni informs that ancient theatre reserved *samskara* (Muni 327) for learned men, while men from the ‘lower’ class/caste and women were made to speak *inprakrta* (327) on stage. In accounting for the professionalism

of theatre practitioners, Bharata also informs that 'common women', elaborately 'made up', were used to cater to the taste of that audience which wanted 'light' entertainment in place of serious dramatic ventures. Hence classical Indian theatre preserved women only for the 'populist' theatre performances. The same practice continued in the folk theatre tradition as well. For, women were used here as stereotypes, sometimes for the sake of enhancing the melodramatic effect of the stage play. Though often young boys without beards were made to perform women's roles, whenever there were women actors performing, they attracted huge audience. This tradition was exploited by the Parsee theatre and the early 20th century modern Indian theatre as well. The Parsee theatre used women to enhance its commercial value; consequently, early 20th century theatres featured such women actors as Binodini Dasi, Sukumari, Tinkari and Tarasundari, who were looked upon as celebrities and therefore helped project theatres as posh haunts for the *nouveau riches*. Also, behind and off stage, women contributed as script writers, singers, composers and authors, in the likes of Indira Devi Choudhurani, Bimala Sundari Devi, Ashapura Devi etc. Also there are such examples as Arundhati Devi, Angurbala, Banabiharini who at once donned multiple roles of script writing, acting, singing, dancing, and even sometimes performing male roles.

But amidst all these graces, it must also be mentioned that though Indian theatres can boast of having one of the highest shares of women performers in different roles in the early 20th century, they lacked the seriousness of dealing with authentic women's issues and women performers never earned respect in society as they were looked upon as 'public women', meant for entertainment. In being open to the public (male) gaze in theatres, the women performers therefore were reduced to their bodies. The question of honour associated with family and woman therefore emerged as one of the important mores in the redefinition of patriarchal hegemony concerning women. However, this doesn't blind the attempts of IPTA and the Theatre of Roots movement that (re)presented women and their concerns at once in

proscenium and street theatre, both in the pre and post-independence period. Though the IPTA was formed primarily with the aim to politically revitalize the Indian theatre and the Roots movement aspired to revive the elements of ancient Indian tradition in theatre, the woman question gradually got associated with them, for they looked upon women as political constituents of the oppressed parts of a greater 'whole'; woman as part of a class, a society, a tradition, and a state. The IPTA demanded performing in streets, railway platforms, and other public places. This gave a severe jolt to the conservative ideals of 'respectability', for women who were politically aware and motivated by left ideologies, joined the activists who looked upon theatre performance as a vital extension of their political activism in order to make their agendas more visible to the public. To add to this is the very nature of the performance space itself, which demanded transgression of 'social boundaries of caste, class and gender' (Singh, 63). Most of the women who were associated with IPTA came from 'progressive' families. But the liberty granted was based on several parameters which in their own ways were obstacles to be transcended. The accounts of Sheela Bhatia, Dina Gandhi, Reba Roy Choudhury, Shanta Gandhi, Rekha Jain are extraordinary struggles against family and patriarchy that worked together to confine them under narrow domesticity. The narratives of their struggles were uniquely drawn because unlike the earlier women of theatres who primarily hailed from the family of professional entertainers, they arrived in IPTA through 'political journeys' (63). IPTA therefore was a home to the rebels who struggled against class stratifications and diverse forms of patriarchal hegemonies. Organizational works compelled the IPTA to work and live in different socio political conditions which necessitated overcoming orthodox gender separations. In their regular tours of various parts of the country, be it the 'literate villages of Kerala, or politically conscious Bengalees or the illiterate rural folk of Bihar' (Srampickal 154), the actors had to stay in *ghettos, bastis, slums* and share room with both their co-actors and the (often) poor organizers.

Sadly, the IPTA disintegrated in the post-independence period. 'But it spawned smaller units all over the country. Notable among these were: The Indian National Theatre (INT, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya), the Little Theatre Group (LTG, Utpal Dutt), Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC, Thoppil Bhasi) and several other state units of IPTA existing independently, but carrying on the crusade begun by IPTA. A number of playwrights like Habib Tanvir, Lakshmi Narain Lal, Badal Sircar, P. L. Deshpande, Sarveswar Dayal Saksena, Tripurari Sharma and others have faithfully continued the unique tradition of IPTA.' (47)

Though less organized, the people's theatres in India continued political dramatizations and throwing up socio-cultural issues. Some of the most notable performances may include Patna based Gathividhi's *Yeh Natak Nahin*, which was a satire aimed at the aspiring politicians, Janam's (Delhi) *Aurat*, dealing with oppression of women, Theatre Union's *Marzka Munafa* on Multi National Companies' trade with banned drugs in third world countries, the UP based IPTA's *Cricket match*, a political satire on Congress and Janata Dal (now, *Bharatiya Janata Party*), and Alarippu's *Reshmi Rumaal* which dealt with the living conditions of women in cloistered houses. Along with these, several SAGs (Social Action Groups) who work with fringe communities like the tribals, the fishermen, the landless labourers, the slum dwellers and rural women, harp on themes such as 'unity, cooperation, small savings, alcoholism, communal harmony and superstition'(179).

Hence women's participation in Indian theatre follows a trajectory from social invisibility to political visibility. From the non-women theatre traditions of antiquity to the theatres of independence, Indian theatre covers a huge ground to make women visible on stage. The post-independence modern Indian theatre, an organic ensemble that brings together the works of a host of regional language and Hindi/ English male playwrights and directors, primarily focused on social issues concerning class, caste and gender. For, India came into existence as

an independent nation state as a 'collusion of the capitalistic forces of development and the traditional feudal forces', doing 'nothing to destroy the unequal power relations in the caste system and patriarchal order' (Pandit, 39). In their engagement with these issues, the playwrights have offered dimensions which has accounted for the enhancement of these discourses in relation to theatre. But in course to this, several 'images' have been constructed, worshipped and sometimes even deconstructed.

Images: Women and Post-independence Male Theatre Tradition

In his essay, *Rhetoric of the Image*, Roland Barthes notes that the term 'image' is etymologically related to 'imitari' (152). This immediately refers to the idea of 'copying' in the process of image formation, thus initiating the question of credibility for 'analogical representation (the "copy")' in producing 'true system of signs' (152). When looked upon as representation, image, especially in the context of literature, ceases to be a mere reference to the signified, but undergoes a complex process of transformation in mediation with the author's sensibility and technique. Hence an image acquires two referents in the process of its representation; one refers to the surface element which Sonja K. Foss would call 'presented' and the other is the implied element which she would call 'suggested' (147). This may have some proximity with what Barthes refers to as 'denotation' and 'connotation'. The surface element therefore denotes the meaning of an image at its literal level, while the implied element connotes what is available to the viewer only in suggestions. Though the surface element works as a 'signifier' to the implied, the construction of an image is in teleological relation to the author's association with the 'signified'. But in this symbolic relation of the image, the sign may refer to an empty 'signified', for the 'signified' is a construction in itself. But in the present context of analyzing plays, meaning is more critically conceived; for, in

such a production, image is always in a process of construction which mediates between the author's recreation of the process of signification and its acceptance to the readers. But this process of recreation is never disjoined from the association of an author's individual 'pattern of memory, desire, and dream' and 'the ideas of society as a whole, of family, peers, country, the age' (Ferguson, 3). Therefore the 'empty' signified is an assortment of the subjective and objective sensibilities where authentic material existence may give way to essential constructions. Hence, images emerge as figments that find no authentic connotations. They are signifiers that refer to another set of signifiers instead of an unproblematic given.

In literature, images are rhetorical constructions that condense what society identifies as stereotypes and which is recognized as 'archetypes' in popular discourses. Considered inferior to men, women have been traditionally stereotyped as docile silent girls, wives, mothers, sex objects, seductresses, beautiful muses, old maids, vamps, witches and victims. But with stereotypes being social constructions built in order to confine women to certain definitions that supplement patriarchal dominations on them, the images find no real 'signified'. With literature's role in social processes sometimes looked upon as an agency that goes on to 'naturalize' conventions as real, the images of women are crucially conceived as unchallenged representations of mere patriarchal assumptions in place of concrete individuals. Similarly, the male-oriented Indian theatre from the era after independence to the end of the twentieth century has projected an evolution of women characters from representing 'invisible' social existence groping in enforced ignorance to representing confident, self-assertive 'new age women'. The male authored plays in this era, looked at from the perspectives of women, present narratives of subordination either as a subject of engagement or for the purpose of critiquing the hetero-patriarchal social structures that locate women as secondary to men. Such evolution in (re)presenting women probably is a resultant

of the gradual transformation in the measured alterations in the roles performed by women in society. But even in this transformation, images of women, regularly supplemented by socio-cultural political archetypes, continued to be produced in the male dominated Indian theatre canon. Hence, a critical survey of select plays by male playwrights from the post-independence theatre may lend a greater scope for conceptual clarity and serve as a prologue to my foray into the making of women's theatre in India. Selection of plays and playwrights may always be criticized as arbitrary, but given the 'huge' population in the male theatre canon in India I have considered representative women characters of a few male playwrights only to thematically build my argument towards the uniqueness of Indian women playwrights (and directors) in producing new 'images' of women.

Vijay Tendulkar: Silence as narrative 'reality' for women

Having composed plays in the last four decades of the 20th century, Vijay Tendulkar is known for dealing with the socio-political flux of the period with an unsympathetic criticality. In the process, Tendulkar's plays have also engaged with the emerging women's issues as well. But, while projecting the inherent 'gloom' in a discriminatory society, he is often blamed for portraying women as mere victims. His women characters find themselves caught in a vicious circle of narrative reality accentuated by a network of patriarchal, cultural, psycho-social, economic and political 'sutures'. While Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) is 'silenced' by the society's patriarchal shams, Kamala in the eponymous play (1981) being projected a woman slave had no voice of her own. Again, Gauri in *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) is the epitome of silence, who suffers masculine oppression without even making any significant sound.

Silence! The Court is in Session is a play centering on Miss Leela Benare who is an apparent 'deviant' with a zest for life. The spontaneity in her character makes her incur the wrath of a society that reserves its rights against women. She is the one who would not play the 'game' of social hypocrisy, but ironically she is dragged into it in the form of a convict put in a mock trial aimed at laying bare her private life. Tendulkar may seek to evoke sympathy for his women characters, but they find themselves helpless before chauvinistic oppression. Miss Benare is an appropriate embodiment of Tendulkar's conception of 'progressive' woman. She is single, an activist and a member of a theatre group, 'The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association', and hence she is more easily 'claimed' as a public personality. Tendulkar initially projects her as a self-assertive woman who rejects living in the shadow of life:

I, Leela Benare, a living woman, I say it from my own experience. Life is not meant for anyone else. It's your own life. It must be. It's a very very important thing. Every moment, every bit of it is precious. (Tendulkar "Silence!" 61)

As the mock trial begins, Miss Benare is made to face a volley of questions from the accusers. She is charged with infanticide, an illicit relationship with professor Dalme and above all her lifestyle and the decision to remain unmarried till thirty. As Benare remains silent, Mrs. Kashikar, another notable woman in the play questions 'Free! Free! She's free all right – in everything! Should there be no limits to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman? No matter how well she knows him? Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out.' (100). Tendulkar intelligently puts comments in the form of questions. An epitome of social indoctrinations, Mrs. Kashikar is the typical 'vamp' who is opposed to 'granting' social liberty to women. The play therefore is poised between the desire of a woman to be liberated from the 'fixed' socio-normative hindrances and the desperate attempts

of another woman to re-instate the expected social 'habitus'. But in his presentation of Benare, Tendulkar has failed to portray a woman who can defend herself at the face of social criticism. Even though her defense is presented through a soliloquy, it suggests the failure of social articulation for individually lulled thoughts. But, even in her apparent silence, Benare is among Tendulkar's most powerful women characters, for in other plays like *Kamala* and *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the image of victim is more profoundly drawn.

Kamala probably is the symbol of exploitation in Tendulkar's oeuvre. She is presented as a slave who is devoid of any institutional education except that she must be unquestioningly loyal to her master. Kamala grew with the apprehension of being sold someday. When she is brought to the city by Jairaj her sensibilities do not undergo any change. Tendulkar presents socio-patriarchal hegemony in two dimensions in the play. Represented through Kamala and Sarita, the educated wife of Jai Singh both the dimensions invariably project women as sufferers. While for Kamla, the socio-sexual domination is both invoked and destined, in Sarita, socio-patriarchal indoctrination is exemplified in her incapability of asserting her independence. Hence the play hints at the woman's space as of compromise and endurance. Kamla's 'visibility' in her house, especially amidst the entire politics of initially hiding and then broadcasting her to the world, stirs Sarita, as she herself becomes increasingly conscious of her 'invisibility'. This leads to the central question in the play which puts Sarita into an 'existential' crisis: 'How much did he buy you for?' (Tendulkar, "Kamala" II 34). Reduced to an 'object' of male possession and closeted along with Kamala in a patriarchal space, Sarita confronts the 'reality' of hetero-sexual marriage. The two women therefore emerge as 'sisters', who must keep their 'master happy' (35). Waking to the verity of cohabiting in a similar space, Sarita decides to 'speak' up for Kamala but fails to articulate in its entirety the context of Kamala's life and 'desires'. Tendulkar's unproblematised representation of such a

sisterhood only reinforces the stereotyping of women with the contextual differences being surrendered for representing victims of patriarchal subordination.

The image of victimhood is reinforced in Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*, where Gauri, Ghahiram's daughter, emerges as the epitome of silence and gendered subordination. The play revolves around a politics of power that centers on Ghashiram's selling his only daughter to Nana Phadnavis for political gains. Ghashiram, once the victim of the corrupt power structures of Pune, becomes the fountainhead of all corrupt practices. Amidst the entire power sharing between Nana and Ghashiram, Gauri is used as a pawn. She is presented as a mere 'sex object' whom Nana desires but Ghashiram possesses. Tendulkar's critique of woman's objectification can be appreciated at this point but the play engages with building stereotypes in more subtle ways. In the entire play, Gauri speaks only once when Nana makes sexual advances towards her during one of her daily prayers to Ganapati. She amorously complains Nana, 'he will see'. Replete with sexual innuendos, the scene shows Gauri's naive faith in the patriarchal structure and authority.

Gauri's silence is infective – almost all other women in *Ghashiram Kotwal* are silent. The Brahmin wives speak but in no individual voices of their own. Ironically, the only independent woman voice is Gulabi, the courtesan, who claims a separate identity by asserting her body. She claims her separate identity. Hence, Vijay Tendulkar's oeuvre is representative of the narratives of silence for women, who are projected as mere victims in a male dominated social structure.

Girish Karnad: Breaking the 'Silence'

Girish Karnad is one of the few playwrights in Modern Indian drama who are also exponents of the theatre of roots movement. Hence in delineating the contemporary sensibilities relating to the social and cultural life, Karnad took recourse to myths, folklores and historical legends. Recreating episodes from the Indian epics and classic anthologies, Karnad situated man-woman relationship as the nucleus of Indian society. In the process, women are conceived in two principal dimensions – as a symbol of patriarchal domination and as representing resistance against the phallic authority, be it in terms of the social or the psychosexual.

Yayati explores the predicament of women in a patriarchal world of ideal father-son relationship. Yayati, the father of Puru, incurs upon himself the curse of old age as a result of his erotic liaison with Sharmistha even though he was married to Devayayni. Though both Devayayni and Sharmistha undergo sexual subordination to Yayati, it is Chitrlekha who is reduced to a non-entity in the exchange of youth between Puru (Chitrlekha's husband) and Yayati. In sync with the ideal family tradition, the play is a narrative of the loyal son; but at the same time it is also of a failed husband. Puru fails to acknowledge the matrimonial aspirations of a wife while Yayati, in his fit of sexual pleasures, not only destroys Devayani and Sharmistha, but also the conjugal life of Chitrlekha, who eventually commits suicide. Hence, amidst the masculine operations in an essentially patriarchal society, women are generally identified as 'patients' who are acted upon by the male 'agents', performing/acting out their wanton roles. Although Karnad begins with reference to Devayani's attraction towards Yayati in his first play *Yayati*, the play soon shifts focus towards portraying Sharmistha as the traditional seducer and Chitrlekha, as the ultimate victim of patriarchal subordination, who fails to produce any authentic meaning in a male-dominated world. While Sharmistha ushers in domestic turmoil, Chitrlekha is rejected both emotionally by her

husband and sexually by her father-in-law, whom she has offered herself after Puru's willful metamorphosis into old age. The plays that followed situate women in more complex orientations. For instance, in *Hayavadana*, a relationship saga of three – Devdatta, Padmini and Kapila – flourishes, matures and later destroyed centering on Padmini's desire to have a perfect combination of brain and brawns. In an interview with James Burnett, Karnad says 'In Sanskrit, any person whose name you do not know is addressed as 'Devadatta'. Kapila means dark and therefore earthy and Padmini is the name of one class of women in Vatsayana's Kamasutra' (Burnett, 339). Hence, Devadatta even after his marriage with Padmini, remains 'anonymous' to her, for failing to satisfy her carnal desires, and Padmini is irresistibly pulled towards the 'dark' passions symbolized by Kapila. The motif of darkness is also drawn in the presentation of goddess *Kali*, in front of whom, Devadatta commits suicide; Kapila beheads himself and Padmini performs the rites of reinstating head on a body in order to bring back to life. *Kali* being conceived as the custodian of all dark passions, grants magical powers to Padmini, who in a fit of the moment, interchanges heads of the two men, producing her desired combination of mind/intellect (Devadatta) and body/passion (Kapila). Hence the main conflict in the play centers on the complexity of women's desires. Though Karnad can be criticized for drawing stereotypical image of Padmini's (dark) desires, he can also be credited with the portrayal of woman as desiring in place of the traditional 'desirable'. While Padmini's desire is critically negotiated in *Hayavadana* as a subjective wish for producing the hybrid between her husband and his friend, Rani's desire in *Nagamandala* surfaces from the traditional expectations of a conjugal life and a longing for union.

Rani is the neglected newly-wed wife, who is constantly ignored by her husband, Appanna. The social bond of marriage which apparently promises love, protection and togetherness turns out to be a virtual 'prison' which not only cages her body but also

aspirations. Neglected, she has to *suffer* the bond alone, but her 'parched' heart is soothed by a 'Naga' whose show of love towards her in the disguise of her husband gives her the opportunity to enjoy sexual 'liberty'. The Naga here refers to the mythic tradition of *icchadhari* (as one desires) snakes, who could take human forms as they wished. Hence he emerges as a foil to Rani, but this desire of the snake to unite with her is not propelled from within, instead it is brought about by an accidental operation of magical herbs. The play therefore seems to suggest that it is only on magical intervention that a woman's desire is understood, reciprocated and fulfilled. But the Naga becomes a mere contrivance in Rani's achievement of sexual liberation. The *mandala* of *Nagamandala* therefore is not the coil of the snake as it literally suggests, but of woman's desires, which passionately winds around the 'masculine'. However, important is it to mention that when Rani becomes pregnant and is brought before the village panchayat to prove her fidelity, she vows placing her hand on the naga inside the snake burrow (a popular belief that any person lying would die of snake bite) and says that she has never touched any other male than Appanna, her husband and the naga coiled within the burrow. Therefore, the play also suggests that Rani is sympathetically cheated by the naga even when he tries to satiate her sexual passions. In this regard, the play points towards forming an essential image of the domesticated Indian woman for whom her husband remains the be-all and end-all of all desires even when she is ignored by him.

While Rani attains her 'subjecthood' at the end of the play, Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain* (originally composed in Kannada in 1989), becomes the 'object' of possession and she is used as an instrument of vengeance under a ubiquitous patriarchal control. Karnad draws Vishakha in the image of a 'failed' wife by the Indian standards but an ideal beloved who allows herself to be exploited by her lover. Vishakha is married to Parvasu without her consent. Considering her a misfit in the public and competitive realm of intellect, she is left

alone by her husband, Parvasu to be neglected in his absence for seven years, when he is to head the team of priests performing *yajna* to appease *Indra*, the god of rains. Bereft of Parvasu's companionship, Vishakha is subject to her father-in-law Raibhya's lust which confronts the 'sacrosanct' conventions behind the father – daughter-in-law relationship. Desperate in her desire for a companion, Vishakha is seduced by Yavakri, her former lover, and makes her bait to wrought vengeance on Parvasu and Raibhya. Karnad juxtaposes caste issues with women oppressions, for in the Indian context gender coercion go beyond caste divisions. Vishakha, though an upper-caste Brahmin girl, suffers from patriarchal subordination similar to a tribal woman, Nittilai. Though representing extremely opposite socio-cultural contexts, Vishakha and Nittilai share a common identity of being 'woman' and are equal subjects to male authority. However, Karnad goes a step ahead in presenting Nittilai as a stronger character to Vishakha, for she evinces larger growth than the latter. Her caste experiences make her less critical of the gender bias and the repressions of desires appear commonplace to her. Throughout the play she evinces enormous growth in her character. Her questions, 'Why didn't Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers?' (Karnad 10); 'What is the point of any knowledge, if you can't save dying children' (11) echo her response to the contemporary Brahmin scholarship. The play therefore is a narrative of two contradictory worldviews in Vishakha and Nittilai. Vishakha remains confined within the essential framework of a gendered society, but Nittilai goes beyond being ghettoized into an extremely backward community in order to establish herself as a 'subject' in her own right.

Karnad's women characters therefore acquire various dimensions as they take on different roles in different contexts, but stay rooted and responsible to the socio-cultural, ethnic, racial and sexual realities. His presentation of women follows a marriage between the traditions of

staging archetypal women and an individual honest attempt of projecting images of women, who undo their anatomical definitions to produce a meaning of their own.

Mohan Rakesh: Closeting Resistance

If Vijay Tendulkar recreated the image of 'ideal' woman on modern Indian stage in portraying women as mute sufferers, Mohan Rakesh, a contemporary of Tendulkar, is important in presenting strong, determined women who are capable of fighting against patriarchal conventions and asserting themselves. In *Mallika*, *Savitri* and *Sundari*, Rakesh has sought to draw such extraordinary steadfastness that their male counterparts seem irresolute, weak and hesitant. But even in his portrayal of women characters in such positive lights, Rakesh has been criticized for being driven by stereotypical assumptions of women, for in spite of their vitality, his women loved to remain confound within the traditional social expectations. They can be epitome of sacrifices, emotional and affective to the extent that they fail to move beyond the definitions of their biology.

In love with Kalidasa and his art, *Mallika* in *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (1958), is conceived as a 'free spirit', who is reluctant to bind Kalidasa to the social and domestic realm of marriage. For *Mallika*, marriage is just a convention that socially identifies a private commitment. *Mallika*'s progressive ideals are brought into relief by her mother, *Ambika*, who was a widow herself. *Ambika* knows society's response to a woman who has no husband. Hence she is unsure of *Mallika*'s predicament in her refusal to marry. In the process, Rakesh is critical of a society, which seeks to subject single self-assertive women to the masculine sexual desire, imagination and abnegation. However, in spite of the social stigmatizations, *Mallika* emerges as a 'liberated' woman who defies the 'social' in favour of the 'personal'. Her decision to

remain unmarried is also brought to test by Kalidasa's surrender to the lure of marriage when he marries the Gupta princess. With Mallika unmoved by such news may claim audience's admiration but the play also provides for a sense of sacrifice and deception in Mallika's fruitless and patient wait for Kalidasa to return. 'Mallika is neither passive nor self-effacing, but paradoxically yet typically, her self-assertion takes the form of self-sacrifice' (Juneja 182).

The play also reads *ashad* (rain) in a different light, where rains are symbolic of Kalidasa's return to creativity. As Kalidasa awakes to the influence of rain, he also recognizes that Mallika is his ultimate desire and inspiration. The association of fertility with Mallika is obvious here. The separation of art and love in Kalidasa is figurative of the divide between culture and nature, where intellection of culture invariably is associated with Kalidasa himself and the emotion of nature with Mallika. But culture's recognition of nature cannot stay for long. Kalidasa leaves Mallika the moment he comes across her 'child', the symbol of her fecund creativity. For Kalidasa, Mallika's image as the 'mother' therefore is a stronger denotative image to Mallika, the defiant lover. Hence the play is a brilliant reading of archetypes, which ironically goes on to show Rakesh's unmediated imposition of stereotypes in presenting Mallika as a woman who traverses from self-sacrifice to motherhood.

With *Lehron ke Rajhans* (1963) Rakesh returns to the same conflict between man and woman but in a different context. The conventional associations with feminine and masculine that even relate to the separation between woman and man is again found in Rakesh's response to characters like Nand and Sundari. The man, Nand, is in a spiritual quest, while the woman, Sundari is bound to the domestic, assigning more importance to the body and its coordinates than on the mental faculties. 'Rakesh's archetypes are rooted in familiar

stereotypes about men and women' (184), hence, the play begins with Sundari preparing for a *Kamotsav* (festival of love), to hold back her husband Nand to the domestic chores of life. Nand is conceived as a man who is in a 'higher' intellectual pursuit, while Sundari is busy in her emotional and corporeal works. Sundari represents the typical seductress when she tries to lure Nand at his return in the 1st Act, disturbed in his philosophical conflict. Rakesh portrays in her a seasoned actor who is trained in the art of *shringara*. She conforms to the 'societal definitions of the feminine' and is 'subjective and immediate in her apprehension'(185).

Rakesh projects women as an obstacle against renunciation for men. Essentially conceived, attraction towards a woman makes him more masculine, 'while her repulsion makes him enlightened'(185). Rakesh presents this in relation to the similar suggestion made in the Buddha legend. But what makes him more vulnerable, is his unproblematic representations. Even in Yashodhara, Rakesh invokes the audience's sympathy but never really endows 'life' in her. Yashodhara is seen to follow her man, waiting years for his return, but never asserting her existence. Rakesh also brings in the motif of jealousy through the portrayal of Sundari, who is propelled to resent Yashodhara, for allowing Buddha to carry on his renunciation. But it must be appreciated that Sundari conceives the 'higher' masculine quests as subject to women's discretions in allowing them to be gained.

Sundari was initially instrumental in Nand's consistent failure to resolve the conflict he was in, but it is she who sends him in the pursuit of Gautama, for she rejects living with Nand's irresolution. But the appreciation gained now is lost in the last act again when she turns away Nand, who remains indecisive even under the direction of Buddha. The audience is propelled to question Sundari's consideration of a trouble-torn Nand and her failure is seen

as typical to her. In her final reproach to Nand she reduces herself to the archetypes of impulse and emotion that goes on to define her. Hence the play draws end with the sexual instead of psychological limitation of Sundari being exploited to covertly refer to the conflict between Nand and Sundari.

In Savitri of *Adhe Adhure* (1968), Rakesh portrays a 'half feminine' woman, who loses all her personal relations because of her defiance against the traditionally prescribed gender roles. But even in his depiction of a woman who has the potential to transform the gender matrix of the society, Rakesh has allowed himself to be limited by the 'contemporary' stereotypes. In the traditional Indian context, it was held ideal for a woman not to go outside to work, but even if she has to go for the economic necessity of the house, it must not be for her own career but for the sake of assistance to the male. In Savitri, we find a woman who seeks to balance the work and family, though she is the lone bread earner of the family, she must fulfill her feminine 'duties'. Rakesh therefore portrays Savitri in a double bind, where both the domestic and the professional commitments must be balanced.

Incapable of earning livelihood, Mahendranath is a foil to Savitri. He complains of an assumed disrespect in his household and, in his self-pity and conceit makes a show of male authority – an inevitable outcome of the fear of loss of control. Dominated and abused by her husband, Savitri, on the other hand, is an image of domestic violence and frustration. She is even bullied by Mahendra's friends, who consider her to be the reason behind Mahendra's failure and separation from his family.

Though mistreated by friends and family, Savitri lacks the courage to move out of her marital relation with Mahendra. In itself, this may suggest the vulnerability of women in a

strict social structure which compels them to continue their marriage even when the entire love's labour is already lost. Savitri is never a self-effacing woman and the play also reports of an illicit relation with her boss, Shinghanian. She uses her lures on him to produce enough economic opportunities for the family. She even wins a job offer for her son from Singhanian. But with his self-pride being 'compromised' in his mother's attempts to get a job for him, Savitri's son criticizes her of having an insatiable thirst for wealth and status. Savitri therefore has a multi-layered presence in the play. She evinces the potential to go beyond the general limitations of the fixed gender roles but resists herself from doing so.

Hence, women characters in Mohan Rakesh are essentially self-assertive but suffer the lack of choice in a gendered world and finally end up conforming to their stereotypical image. As Renu Juneja puts it, his 'gallery of strong women has added a new dimension to modern Indian drama'. (191) 'In some measure, his portraits are responsive to the changes now taking place in Indian society. He handles his women with a sensitivity and awareness far beyond that of the average man. Yet his perceptiveness is limited by his reliance on somewhat archaic and stereotypical assumptions of the feminine. The unresolved quality of these images is, indeed, typical of the divided reality of women in contemporary India'. (191)

G. P. Deshpande: The 'social' woman

G. P. Deshpande, one of the noted playwrights of modern Indian theatre perceived gender as a product of social, political and cultural forces. Hence, gender in his plays emerges as a construction that is interlocked within the boundaries of class, caste and state. Deshpande looks at gender as a site where other forms of social structures unfold their power. Therefore, his reading of gender relations is always grounded on the social situations of his characters. Even when depicting personal relationships, he located them in the socio-cultural and

political space. Hence in his portrayal of women characters, he chose the public over domestic spaces, thereby making their case more complex and politically stimulating. Unlike the preceding images of women portrayed by the pre and post sixties male playwrights, Deshpande's women are 'intelligent with an incisive sense of humour and sharp wit' (44). They are women of ideals, who value independence and in their affiliation to the left wing politics, attempt to dissolve both class stratifications and the public/private debate.

Saraswati in *Udhhwasta Dharmashala* is a political activist who has high ambitions. She marries Shridhar Vishwanath Kulkarni because she finds in him a person who shares her political views and commitments. But she leaves him realizing that her political dreams may get frustrated in continuing the relation with him. She is intelligent enough to attract the attention of a senior party leader, Prayag, in order to rise higher in the party ranks from where she can influence and manage its activities. While Saraswati denies the traditional notions of soft, docile domestic woman, Madhavi, in the same play appears as a muse inspiring revolutionary words in Sridhar, the poet. She is impressed by his words but rejects the idea of putting them into practice; for, she refuses to be dominated by their political content. Finding Sridhar uncompromising in carrying on with his revolutionary creations, she manipulates Vitthal to render him companionless. Hence both the women, surface as virtual 'destroyers' of Sridhar, and are politically operative in their own ways to move beyond traditional images of women in the Indian context. But Durga in *Raste* appear as a foil to these women. In Durga, Deshpande portrays a true revolutionary leader for whom there is no separation between word and action. Unlike Saraswati and Madhavi, Durga is a non-scheming woman who goes by the ultra-left ideologies and dies in an encounter. With respect to the enormity of her death, the other members of her party seem dwarfish with their ideological standpoints lacking action and depending upon words to bring forth a sociopolitical change.

While Durga meets a tragic death as a result of her steadfast commitment towards the left ideology and her resilience against socio-political injustices, Vasundhara in *AndharYatra* arrives at the same fate even in her silent acceptance. She remains inactive and isolated and never in the entire play does she appear to bind herself with those who are attracted towards her. Daulat Rao, a politician; Shripad, an intellectual and Aswaththa, a revolutionary- all fall in love with her but she refuses to partner anybody. Her fundamental belief has been to live life and not share it. Hence, she rejects any relation that comes her way but in the process isolates herself. Even in her marriage, when she is sexually exploited by her husband; she refuses to protest and learns to overcome her anguish. The only political question that she asks is as to why are all political movements failing, when each try to change the world. The answer to which is probably she herself, 'all movements of social and political transformation are working in isolation from each other' (Deshpande, 17).

G. P. Deshpande is also in league with such playwrights and directors as Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, and the like in renegotiating Indian history. In *Chanakya Vishnugupta*, he not only reads the historical story of the Mauryan Empire but also identifies Chanakya as a patriarch who uses Suwasini, a woman in love with Chandragupta, as a pawn in his scheme of things. Even though Chandragupta loved her, Suwasini is compelled to marry Nanda, after whose death she accepts the life of a Buddhist Bhikshuni. However, she is not drawn as a conventional tragic character because she overcomes it with her spirituality thereby projecting herself as an antagonist to Chanakya who represents materiality in the play. Hence Deshpande's women are fierce individuals who defy being measured by traditional paradigms. In moving away from the established images of women in male oriented Indian theatres, Deshpande heralds the emerging women in his plays, who are not

only politically educated but also ready to challenge male authority in political and social institutions.

Though any survey of post-independence Indian theatre is not complete without discussing Mahesh Dattani, I deliberately keep him out of this list because gender and not woman remains the main focus of his works. For Dattani, patriarchy as a set of conventions that impose on women and men alike is an object of criticism but he refuses to hold any essential feminist conclusions in projecting the vague hypocrisies of socio-cultural institutions. *Tara* may be a story of deprivation for a girl child whose one leg is amputated for her twin brother; but, as Dattani himself says in an interview with Erin B. Mee, 'I think it's a play about the self, about the man and woman in self, but a lot of people think of it as a play about the girl child' (21). Though his other plays deal with diverse issues, situating the woman question as one among the many, *Final Solutions* projects in Hardika, woman's 'non-independent' experience of India's independence. Reflecting on the gendered experiences in post-colonial India and questioning the hetero-normative social and cultural institutions, Dattani avoided framing woman as the only sex to suffer discrimination in terms of social, political, cultural, racial, ethnical and religious participation.

Deviations: Indian Women Theatre Practitioners

The treatment of women in the male canon (of course with few exceptions), as it follows from the above discussion, has revolved around the images of women, be it the stereotype of the traditional voiceless or of the roaring, self-assertive or the relatively 'free.' However, the post-1980s period saw the crowding of Indian stage by women theatre practitioners across the country. This led to a gradual establishment of what can be called a theatre of their (women

playwrights' and directors') own. But the formation of canon for women theatre practitioners could only be after a gradual progress from imitating the male theatre counterparts in the 1950s to the confident self-assertion in the 1970s.

In conscious attempts to build an exclusive niche for themselves in Indian theatres, women playwrights and directors deviated from the traditions of their male predecessors and contemporaries both in terms of dramaturgy and content. Even with respect to image formation, they arrive at a critical distance from the male practitioners as they altogether do away with the images, be it stereotypes in the traditional sense of the term or not. Their women are living characters who face life as it comes to them. But this philosophy of life does not refer to any stoic acceptance of what comes sieved through patriarchal and socio-conventional mores; neither do the women make conscious efforts to politically subvert the institutions that traditionally privilege the men. Instead, the playwrights sought unique socio-political, cultural, economic and racial loci for their women which would go on to shape their lived experiences, struggles, resistances, frustrations, fulfillments, earned recognitions, liberations, or empowerments. Hence the 'images' that emerge from their works do not essentially remain confined to a certain class of women. At its formative stage, any canon permits reworking of the traditional. Hence images of women as victims remained an important category for the early Indian women playwrights writing mainly in English. Dina Mehta's *Brides are Not for Burning* or Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* deals with gender oppression across the social, cultural, class and caste arrangements. However, with the regional and linguistic turns in Indian Women's theatre or theatres in India at large, the post-90s theatre productions focused mainly on women with respect to their contingent locations and renegotiated with issues unique to them. Varsha Adalja, Kusum Kumar, Usha Ganguli, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, Mamta G. Sagar and a host of other playwrights, some of

whom are even directors and have private theatre troupes as well, speak of women, situating them amidst the experiences of nation, class, caste, race, culture and sexuality. Hence, they present contemporary authentic women by avoiding their ghettoization through essentialising and stereotyping and by making them indeterminate and evocative.