

Surviving Marginalization: Regional Language Indian Women Theatre Practitioners in Perspective

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ABSTRACT : *Theatres in India are multifarious. Regional theatres with all its nuances have resisted the singularity imposed upon them by the 'national theatre'. The present paper reads the articulation of aesthetics by regional language women playwrights and directors, who foreground the women as subjects and defy the representation of women in essential roles. Experimenting with the genre, these theatre practitioners have evolved a dramaturgy of their own, putting into question the subordination of not just women but also the regions, thereby upholding the diversity and identity of the regions at the face of national integrity and unity.*

KEYWORDS: *Drama, Theatre, Marginalization, Nation, Region*

I. INTRODUCTION

Theatre is always local, it's regional, and it's vernacular. From the local, you move to the regional, from the regional to the national, from the national to the international. Unless you are deeply rooted in the impulses that belong to your area, you cannot be truly universal. Precisely in the same way, one cannot be truly contemporary if one doesn't have the sense of one's history. Indeed, as a poet has put it, the fruit does not know what its root looks like, yet there is a relationship between the root and the fruit.

-Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury

Theatre in India has its roots in the mythic past of the country. It has been threatened with extinctions, but has survived them with the ever present enthusiasm for performances. It has proved to be propagandist and even an effective organ of protest down the ages, but it has also been criticized for being conservative to the women. It has never been a medium which would hold enough space for foregrounding the woman as subject. The situation has been such that though we find a number of women authors in different genres and sub-genres such as poetry, novel and fiction, there is an acute dearth of women playwrights making them expressed in the domain of theatre. This absence is more felt in the case of regional language women playwrights for being ghettoized into further ignorance through the politics of marginalization that has an all pervading presence in the Indian context.

Any important book on Indian theatre would speak of a long tradition, which can be traced back to at least Bharat Muni's "Natyashastra". But as theatre has always been an art that spoke of performance in the public domain, the patriarchal influence on theatre made it an exclusive space for the male practitioners, and thwarted women presence in any of the roles associated with theatre, be it acting, playwriting or directing. However with the evolution of theatre practice in India, as it came out of the frames of Sanskrit theatre, and started being performed in 'popular' languages, there was a growing demand for women's roles being enacted by women themselves, since traditionally they were performed by young boys without beards. However the advent of Western theatre in India, which abruptly changed the face of Indian theatre by introducing commerce in theatre, initiated the whole process of bringing women out of their closet and presenting them on stage in full public view. Hence with the growing popularity of commercialized theatre, we began hearing names such as Binodini, Golap, Tara Sundari etc, extremely popular women theatre actresses, who were used to promote theatre as a vital organ of entertainment.

But the irony is such that these women practitioners could never claim 'respectability', on the basis of sheer artistry, for they were being popularly termed as 'public women', though with the emergence of a novae-riche class who had an 'exposure and acceptance' (Bannerjee, 144) to the British culture, it was considered to be a matter of glory in the 'elite' circles, to be able to keep company with these ladies in theatre. This is because the nationalist critics saw the 'involvement' of women 'in the public space of theatre as a stark violation of the moral integrity of the nation' (Anand Mahesh, Rang Dastavez: *Sau Saal*, translated by Bhatia Nandi in performing woman/performing womanhood, xi).

It was believed by the patriarchal reformists that such theatres and presentation of women in them encouraged 'immorality', and it is this constructed institution that kept women out of theatre. To the moral custodians of Indian nationalism, the function of drama was 'to reform society, because of the irresistible force of the educational message made pleasant through entertainment' (Hansen 88). Hence they 'encouraged plays with historical and mythological themes because they were seen as having the potential to bring 'lower caste' women 'upon the righteous path and improve their character'' (Gupta 102). 'It is no coincidence', therefore, 'that by the early twentieth century, historical, social, and mythological drama took on the role of social reform with great fervor and turned theatre into a project that imagined a nation with 'respectable' women in it' (Bhatia xiv). Both the nation and the woman therefore emerged in the male discourses as the ones who are to be 'protected', 'reformed', 'identified' and hence reconstructed.

However in the post-independence period the complex positioning of women with respect to theatre somewhat improved owing to the influence of movements such as that launched by the left oriented Indian People's Theatre Association and that of the all-India People's Theatre Association that flowed from the pre-independence to the post era and then being associated with the western feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s, being coupled with the experimental theatres and the street theatres in India, women's issues got expressions. This association, therefore, as Nandi Bhatia puts in *Performing Women/Performing Womanhood*, 'took up issues pertaining to caste reform, actresses, courtesans, family and domesticity, and the dalit cause, and connected these to decolonization, anti-colonial nationalism, and post-Independence nationhood'(xvi). But what is of critical interest is the fact that both in the pre- and the post-independence era women have been represented in the male theatrical domain as the 'maya'(seducer), 'mata'(comforter), or at best a victim. In almost all their presence on stage, women had to voice roles assigned to them by male practitioners. Hence while performing roles, these women characters, got constructed and identified by the male playwrights and directors, and what got pushed into ignorance was the woman subject.

Woman construction may have featured in a number of plays by male playwrights, but as theatre opened up for women practitioners too with the surge of feminist movements questioning the conventionally assumed normative discourses, we find a number of women playwrights and directors populating the list of Indian theatre practitioners. Hence we find a new kind of theatre emerging in the horizon of Indian theatre, that of the feminist one. While feminist theatre strove towards deconstructing the stereotypical images of women being constructed in theatre by men, and upholding woman centric issues, such as that of bride burning, women being objectified into nonentity and being considered only on the basis of the body or as child bearer or be it the project of 'consciousness raising'(Mukherjee 14) and further going on to construct a language of their own in order to project exclusive women experiences, among all things can be said to be essential if only the women playwrights and directors practicing in English and Hindi is considered, for this again entails the whole politics of marginalization of the regional language, playwrights and theatre practice.

The National School of Drama was established in the 1970s with the vision of constructing a National Theatre. The term national held the idea of foregrounding a unified identity which would construct itself by subsuming all the other identities. The 'national theatre' came to be recognized as the ones which would include only the metro-based Hindi theatre or the few English theatres which had a very narrow appeal compared to the wide reach of the regional theatres. The national theatre was constructed on the basis of the guidelines set by the NSD, and with the excellence in technical help, it constructed an elevated 'aesthetic and craft' which addressed only the convent educated well bred upper middle class audience. But this was far from being the Indian reality because it aimed at foregrounding such issues which were 'universal' in nature and were practiced in languages, whose acceptance was limited to a few sections of the country.

India boasts of diversity in caste, creed, class, ethnicity, gender, politics, economics, religion, culture and aims at striking a unity among them. However, the country's unity is achieved by dissolving many cultures and numerous sub-cultures, which it essentially discourages. In a federal structure it is true that the parts would at least symbolically go on to constitute the whole, that is, the regions would aggregate to find a window to the whole. But with the whole imposing it on the regions, aims at marginalizing the latter. Thus being othered, the regions have to preserve or construct its identity through either ignoring the whole or by resisting such marginalization. Hence without carefully coordinating the diversity, unity cannot be reached at in the Indian context.

The same is true for the Indian theatre, which is better to be referred to as the Indian theatres, owing to the multiplicities that exist, thanks to the cultural diversity of the country. Every region has theatres of its own, being practiced in the language, which is the most popular one.

This is not the folk theatre, which enjoys an immense popularity of its own, but is the one which subsists on the theatre goes from all sections of society. English though being the lingua franca of the country, and Hindi being the national language, cannot express better the regional sensibilities and also the sensitivities than its own language. The concept of national theatre therefore ignores the nuances of the regional theatres and hence promotes a linguistic hegemony, which the latter strongly resists. When regional theatres are marginalized thus, women theatre practitioners in these languages are doubly so, both because of being part of the regions and also being women themselves. Often it is found that plays written by and theatre directed by women playwrights and directors fail to find production houses and suffer from lack of funds. This may be because of the fear of weak audience response, which still preserves reservations for women. However, the women practitioners have survived the marginalization by constructing a theatre of their own.

From the post 1970s onwards, we find the emergence of regional language women playwrights and directors as a considerable other to the male theatre practitioners in the regions and even in the 'national' level. Playwrights and even some of them as directors in regional languages like Varsha Adalja and Shanta Gandhi in Gujarati, Mahasweta Devi, Nabaneeta Dev Sen and Shanoli Mitra in Bengali, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury and Manjit Pal Kaur in Punjabi, Binodini in Telegu, B. Jyashree in Kanada, Sushma Despande, Malatibai Bedekar and Veenapani Chawla in Marathi, and Qudsia Zaidie in Urdu, Catherine Thankamma in Malayali, Mamta Sagar in Kannada, C. S. Lakshmi and V. Padma in Tamil theatre are to name a few among the many. Through their works these practitioners have succeeded in constructing a dramaturgy, which follows neither the male nor the feminist ones. It has its own paradigms. Exploring through multiple issues such as resistance to gender subordination, repression of desires, stereotypical representations of women, domination on the grounds of class, caste and politics, reduction to the body, their works have renegotiated the concepts of nation, religion, war, family and freedom foregrounding woman as the subject.

A critical understanding of the regional plays and theatre productions composed and directed by women unravel before us the aesthetics that emerge out of them. In opposition to linear plot structure with logical building up of events to approach an enclosed climax, they put forward their plays in open-ended non-linear, disjointed and inconsistent plots so as to refuse any sort of resolutions in challenging the socio-political normative discourses. Doing so they aimed at deconstructing not just the patriarchal hegemony unleashed through objectifying and constructing the woman, but also the linguistic, which entails the disjunction between the national and the regional. Having been othered by the national, these playwrights, express the dense fabric of women's varied experiences through their own languages, empowering regionalization to such an extent that they create their own identity. In doing so, they foreground the multiplicity of women's voices and plurality of contexts, thereby moving away from the essentialism that the national theatre is criticized to promote.

In this context a number of plays like Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's *Fida*, which deals with the proliferation of desires and unconventional love of a woman who wants to have her own step-son as her lover, or Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari*, which reinterprets a section of the epic Ramayana by revealing the deep recesses of Mandodari, about whom the epic remains somewhat silent, emerges as a strategist in the defeat of Ravana, or Kusum Kumar's *Listen Shefali*, which deals with the resistances of a woman from being thrown into caste politics, or Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*, which maps the growth of an apolitical mother into a politically conscious entity (to mention only a few among the many), can be cited, for they not just show the nuanced presence of women as subjects resisting essentiality, but also go on to construct a theatre of their own for the regional language women theatre practitioners in India, which can claim to express better the socio-political and cultural conditioning of the women and is better suited to the diversified nature of the country. However it must be accepted at the conclusion that this has been an area which has never received enough of critical attentions, and hence it leaves a wide scope to be broached by future researchers, for, any modern research on Indian theatre cannot ignore the fact that the demographical, socio-political and cultural disunity of the country resists homogeneity in all perspectives and hence what must be encouraged is the 'theatres' of India, which entails multiplicity rather than a singular monolithic Indian theatre and regional language women's theatre forms a significant part of it.

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