

Performing Resistance, Re-dressing the Canon: The Emergence of Indian Feminist Theatre

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“A new world cannot be inaugurated without new words, without new forms”.
Françoise Collen.

Feminist theatre in India is an upshot of an interface between postcolonial debates about language, interpellation, subject formation, representation and forms of resistance (Gilbert 8-9) and the feminist movement in the 1960's. It argues that for over two millennia, since even before Aristotle wrote out his *Poetics* or after Bharata's *Natyashastra* the dramatists, the dramatic text and performances that followed were governed by male ideologies. In response, feminist theatre evolved not only to share the tragically under represented experiences of women, but also to create a theatricality that would subvert traditional theatre's most sacred traditions. In 1980's and 1990's women's question emerged in the Indian theatre scene in a substantial way. A number of tabooed issues found expression and acceptance through theatre. There is a decided connection between the greater number of women authored plays in the Indian stage and the upsurge, especially during the 70's and 80's of feminism as a potent force in society. The postcolonial arguments, the nascent experimental theatre and the agenda of the women's movement shaped the content and form of plays. It sought a definition and found several:

- It was as much a political enterprise as a theatrical one. It was progressive in spirit and it questioned canons and conventions. It questioned phallogocentrism and Phallogocentrism. It was an *avant garde* movement. It deconstructed patriarchal metaphysics. Like the postmodern with which it was closely associated some might say it was but one branch on the postmodern tree.
- Production, script and dramaturgy in which art was inseparable from the condition of women as women; performances (written and acted) that deconstructed sexual differences and thus undermined patriarchal power.
- Scripting and production that showcased transformation as a structural and ideological replacement for recognition and conception of women characters in the subject position.
- A womanist play had dissident potential that would 'open up the negotiation of meaning to contradictions, circularity, multiple viewpoints.' (Keyssar 1996: 21)
- It challenged the notion of representation/focused on the politics of representation and exposed how meanings are socially produced and historically conditioned.

A great fillip to the theatrical aspect of women focused issues was the growth of the IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Movement) effective from 1943, although women's issue was only one among its various social, political and aesthetic concerns. Subsequently a series of theatre festivals, workshops, ideologically obligated theatre clusters celebrating the cause of women burgeoned. To cite just a few examples: *Akka*, the National Women's Theatre Festival held in Mysore, 2001, National Women's Theatre Festival organized by *Yavanika*, a theatre group based in Hyderabad, National Workshop on Women, *Poorva*, Festival of Asian Women, 'Voicing Silence', Gendered Theatre by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation organizes yearly festival and has held four interactive women's theatre festivals, called *Kulavai* or celebration, (*kulavai* is the Tamil name for the ululation sound made by women), Nandipat in Kolkata organized a festival named *Narir Mancha*, of work by women directors, *Samudaya* from Karnataka, *Kalashetra* from Manipur, Prithvi Theatre from Mumbai, *Alarippu* from Delhi (means blossoming, established in 1983), *Rangkarmee* from Kolkatta, *Rangayana* from Mysore and *Koothu-p-pattarai* from Chennai along with organizations/institutions such as the National School of Drama, the ICCR, *Natarang Pratisthan* often stage women centered plays and ideologically motivated theatre and use theatre as a vehicle for social transformation. *Jan Natya Manch* of Safdar Hashmi (*People's Theatre Front*, formed in 1973) performed an agitprop street play *Aurat* (*Women* 1979), which dealt with concerns like violence against women, eve teasing, dowry and spoke in favor for women's education, financial independence and role in decision making. It was stirring because it portrayed diverse representations and explanations of women and it created a new audience for theatre. During nineteenth century many women authors shaped an important place for themselves in the genre of fiction and poetry: the stage remained largely closed to them. The last twenty years or so have seen a significant change in this respect. The Indian theatre is no longer the male preserve it used to be. Women directors, previously a curiosity, have come to the front. Names like Laxmi Chandra, Chama Ahuja, Ipshita Chandra, Usha Ganguli, Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury, Rani Balbir Kaur, Sheila Bhatia, B.Jayashree, Arundhati Raje, S.Malati, Saumya Verma, Gauri Dattu, Nadira Babbar, J.Shailaja, Anuradha Kapur, Amal Allana come easily to mind. Women in their directorial positions now not only amend the play script to suit their aim; simultaneously they show an interest in encouraging new writings and styles of theatrical practice.

All this simmering up of awareness and organizational support generated an upsurge of plays written by women. New women playwrights are not necessarily to be grouped together generally as unequivocally feminist authors. Post 1980's women playwrights are to be found aplenty: Poile Sengupta (English), Varsha Adalja (Gujarati), Manjula Padmanabhan (English), Dina Hehta (English), Tripurari Sharma (English and Hindi), Dr. Kusum Kumar (Hindi), Gitanjali Shree (Hindi), Irpinder Bhatia (Hindi), Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury (Punjabi), Binodini (Telegu), B. Jyashree (Kannada), Shaoli Mitra (Bengali), Usha Ganguli (Hindi), Shanta Gandhi (Gujarati), Suahma Despande (Marathi), Veenapani Chawla (Marathi), Qudsia Zadie (Urdu). Evidence of this recognition of women dramatists and directors in India can be found in the regularity with which the major

journals like *Theatre India*, *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, *Rang Prasang*, *Bharat Rang*, *Natrang* now publish feminist theatre criticism, history and theory. Plays by and about women continue to be written and produced but the most striking development in the domain of gender and drama in the present times has been the emergence of a rich and diverse array of writings in feminist criticism and theory, we have prominent theatre critics like: Aparna Dharwardkar, Maya Pandit, Vasudha Dalmia, Kirti Jain, Deepa Gehlot among many others.

Autobiography in Performance/Storytelling, Self - Exploring and Performing

Traditional dramatic structures relied on invisible authors whereas a feminist theatre often brings in autobiographical women's voice. To give an example Usha Ganguli's written/directed/acted autobiographical solo performance *Antaryatra* (2002). It is an eternal journey of an actress, the sixty-three years old actress/director weaves in autobiographical introspection with the voice of famous women theatrical characters into a rich narrative of feminine consciousness. It is a play in which Ganguli uses herself as a reference point to narrate the story of an actress's struggle through life. The vastness of the stage space unboxed gives us perspective on one thing: the constructedness of our own spaces. Seeing our creations for what they are could empower us to recreate them in more constructive ways. She attempts to explore Indian woman's psyche through a variety of characters like Nora, Himmat Mai, Rudali, Kamala and Anima, her experiences obviously enrich her one-woman show. *Antaryatra* is a tribute to at least a dozen crucial female characters played by her who are representatives of real life women, each one belonging to a distinct social space and yet bound in some way by the virtue of being a woman. A journey within and without, the drama here is not born out of conflict, but rather out of the juxtaposition of characters and the stories, the relationship they share with the performer/director/writer/producer of the play.

Theatre and Television Associates, Delhi, showcased the play *Nati Binodini* (Hindi) under the direction of Amal Allana (Allana has based the script on the English translation of *Aamar Katha* (My Life) and *Aamar Abhinetri Jeebon* (My Life as an Actress) by Rimli Bhattacharya. Nati Binodini was the fifth woman in Bengal to become a professional actor, in the nineteenth century. From the age of twelve to twenty three, Binodini came to dominate the stage with her ability and genius. Her autobiography is about her struggle and encounter with the *bhadralok*. The play was presented with a dramatically inventive conceptual design, scenes moved in a pattern that was based on "emotional memory" rather than hard fact or chronological order. Props were used iconically and poetically, rather than descriptively. For example, the older Binodini holds a white lotus flower in her hand for most of her performance. Not only is the lotus the most common flower of Bengal, but also it suggests her perpetual innocence, her blooming from the mud. In fact, many meanings could be read, giving a sense of ambiguity, a sense in keeping with the quality of memory. Structured in the flashback mode with the telescoping of the present and the past, the play opened

with the octogenarian Binodini writing out her autobiography. As the old Binodini reads out from her writings, the scene moves back to reveal four other Binodini's of different ages, dressed and made up identically, sometimes narrating the story of Binodini's life, at times enacting scenes from her plays, and at times going into depression born of a shattered life. One of the actresses plays the old Binodini in the present, writing out her autobiography and often entering into a discourse with the ghost of Girish Ghosh, her teacher and mentor, the historic personality of the Bengali stage, on a wheelchair. The wheelchair is a metaphor for Ghosh whose theatre was almost crippled after Binodini left. The focus was more on the emotional and sexual exploitation of Binodini by her mother, by the first man whose mistress she was forced to be, and finally, by Girish Ghosh, than on Binodini, the actress. Ghosh persuaded her to live with Gurmukh Rai, a wealthy Marwari admirer, as his keep so that the theatre, that was about to close down, could be saved. Binodini asked him to build a theatre. He agreed on condition that the theatre would be called B-Theatre, the "B" standing for Binodini, in celebration of her rich contribution to theatre. Yet, when the time came, it was christened Star Theatre as it was felt that a theatre house named after a prostitute would fail to draw an audience. The play highlights that women in public spaces were not considered respectable. Theatre space was a male preserve and circulation, production and consumption was in the hands of men.

A traditional dramatic structure would often hinge on exposition complication/conflict and denouement. 'Herstories' or women centered drama is hinged on revelation and recognition of the assumed perceptions on the differences between men and women. These devices along with a preference for non-linear plots and open-ended conclusions as opposed to climaxes are just some of the elements that comprise feminist theatre. Also embedded in the structure of many feminist plays is the argument that identity and gender are not fixed or innate but rather dynamic and culturally created. *Umrao Jan Ada* (1905), a novel in Urdu by Mohammad Hadi Ruswa was adapted as *Umrao* (in 1993) by Geetanjali Shree and directed by Anuradha Kapur. The play based on the life of a courtesan questions the stereotypical image of the courtesan and therefore of the woman as a sexual object, an embodiment of beauty, of glamour and woman as victim. This is not only achieved through the narrative and the text but also by casting a middle-aged actress in the role of this legendary glamorous courtesan. Kapur also breaks the linearity of the narrative to be able to accommodate different points of view about characters and relationships and deals with great complexity the notions of time, space, memory, gender, sexuality and guilt. *Umrao* attempted to know the life of a courtesan behind the image that gets created—courtesans came to embody the old ideal and could only figure in literature as instruments of sexual corruption or as golden hearted victims of society and object of elite pity. *Umrao* and the courtesan narrative has been constructed by the male gaze this play introduces both a male writer and a modern day woman writer in the play. We see the courtesan as a woman. The character was deconstructed to see—the public and the private face. *Umrao* experiences love, rejection but the novel does not consider what she feels, it ends with a major speech by *Umrao* herself, who is now old. It is edifying in content and it is one of the main statements that

the novel makes. She warns other women not to follow her fallen path for though she had great moments in her life and extracted most from it, she is now old and abandoned and has nobody to love. So she advises other women to be moral. In this play this speech is turned around and another is introduced. Umrao does not see herself as a fallen woman, but is placed in a mixed situation. She talks about positive and negative things in life and defines herself as an intelligent woman not as a prostitute and claims she has handled the vagaries of life intelligently and creatively. For the male writer Ruswa, Umrao's life is over, but the present day women writer looks at her and asks 'what else?' Umrao pauses and then utters a great line: 'but now I will turn over' (*lekin ab to hum karwat badalte hai*) *karwat* has both literal and metaphorical meaning. For Umrao, life is not over. *Umrao* had two divergent meaning—one from Ruswa's ending which was didactic and the other is the alternative ending where Umrao turns around, one phase has finished and another has started.

Gender and National Identity

Post-independent and transnational textual and dramatic/cinematic works have revisited the violence of India-Pakistan partition and cross-border migrations with specific attention to the abduction, raping, and mutilation of women's bodies through literary texts and films. We can site an example here of *Aur Kitne Tukde* (How Many Fragments?), B.Gauri's script, directed by Kirti Jain (Performed at Poorva, the Asian Women Directors Theatre Festival, New Delhi (January 3-10, 2003). *Aur Kitne Tukde* looks at Partition through the eyes of four female protagonists. Revealing the horrors of partition, Jain centers on issues of nation making and violence on women's bodies. Here disability operates as a visible marker of women's survival "Jain focuses on the experience of four women (three with real-life models) who survived gang-rape, mutilation, and forced exile under the patriarchal concept of 'honor'" (Donahue, 2003). Jisha Menon in "Rehearsing the Partition" (2006) points out: "Through an analysis of Kirti Jain's 2001 theatre production of *Aur Kitne Tukde*, I consider how Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs appropriate colonialist and nationalist ideologies surrounding the notion of 'woman' as repository of cultural value. The women in Jain's play are not a priori subjects who experience violence but rather the experience of violence makes (and unmakes) them as gendered, ethnic and national subjects. I argue that they come into subjecthood after a violent objectification and are re-constituted by their experience of national and sexual violence" (Menon 29-47). The performance of nationalism—through embodied acts of sexual violence, conversion, martyrdom and state violence—is enacted upon female bodies that are transformed into political artifacts. A heart-rending script, which makes us bear the agony borne by thousands of women subjected to the partition of 1947, *Aur Kitne Tukde* surely challenges the often-quoted Biblical adage: The meek shall inherit this earth.

The fragmentary narrative builds around four women— Sadiya, Vimla, Zahida and Harnam Kaur. As the partition riots gain momentum, Sadiya finds herself being dragged by Raghbir who tells his mother that he had fetched the most

beautiful woman out of the available lot. She is now Sumangala because her new masters want it so. She still strives for happiness, believing that someday her brother will come and facilitate her redemption. But when the final moment comes she has no option but to claim the identity of Sumangala thrust upon her by her callous abductor husband. The so-called patriots who were fighting for their nation's prestige rape Vimala. Following the post-partition agreement between the two governments whereby the misplaced women were to be sent back to their homes, Vimala returns home only to face rejection at the hands of her father and sister Kamal. Zahida is forever caught between love and destiny. At the outset, she is devoid of her first love Javed, whom she must leave following the partition riots. She finds haven in the arms of Kartar Singh, who marries her and gives her a family. Soon after, the law of the land has it that Zahida must return to her country of belonging. The death of her feelings is evident in her refusal to go with Kartar, who reaches Pakistan to bring her back, but finds her swathed in burqua, unable to respond to his love, she cries aloud: "*Main shadishuda hoon, Main is shaks ko nahi pehchanti* (I am a married woman I don't recognize this man)." Harnam Kaur lives in the forced shadow of guilt, for she, unlike other women of her times, had not been able to drown herself in the name of sacrifice. Her son charges her with cowardice. All these personal histories put together reflected the trauma, which women underwent at the hands of politics. The play marks memories, personal history, silences and screams from victims, exiles and refugees. When warring nations agree to restore the abducted women from both sides - these women find themselves in families, which spurn them and a motherland, which scorns them. The worst sequence comes when the men kill women in the name of 'honour' as the fear defilement by the enemy. So we see, here meaning emerges from the collisions of characters; contexts and images, not from the standard plot progression.

Beyond the Doll's House

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. Feminist theatre is a cultural representation and is informed by the perspective of its makers, its performers, its spectators and its critics whose aim is positive re-evaluation of women's role and/or to effect social change.

There was often the dearth of substantive female roles; the western and Indian theatre had perpetuated a masculine perspective of the world at the expense of the feminine. Written by Jyoti Mhapsekar's *Mulgi Zali Ho! (A Girl Is Born!)* (1983) is a play with an all-female cast and it deals with women's issues of the Cultural troupe of *Stree Mukti Sanghatana*, an autonomous women's groups.

A traditional dramatic structure presented a slice of life/realism. Feminist theatre presents an empty frame inhering an ability to question reality and assumptions and to portray/practice/question social norms. Tripurari Sharma's *Bahu* (Daughter-in-Law 1979) the first play she ever wrote deals with the subjugation

of women. It is about a woman known throughout the play as *bahu* (daughter-in-law). *Bahu* leaves her marital house to not only get away from the oppressive *haveli* but also a refutation of the beliefs that go with it. In rejecting the patriarchal world/and her claims to the house she has in fact laid stronger claims to life. When after the passage of time she sees her husband Ramdutt who recognizing her says:

Ramdutt: Ay...Ay...listen (the woman turns).

Woman: My name is Umavati.

Ramdutt: Umavati? Oh yes...of course. (*Muffled Voices* 135).

By articulating her name Umavati the *bahu* for long known only as *bahu* articulates her identity. Ramdutt ask her to return. She refuses. He then asks for the child, but she is adamant. He cannot possess what he has disowned at birth. Like Ibsen's Nora closes behind her the door of her doll's house and opens wide the gate of life for herself.

Female Bonding

Feminist theatre focuses on female characters and explores concepts/themes of feminist drama, relationships, sisterhood, sexuality and female autonomy. *Rudali* (Funeral Wailer) is based on Mahasweta Devi's fiction, adapted by Usha Ganguli of the Calcutta Theatre group *Rangkarmee* in December 1992. The story presents bonding women's empowerment by turning professional mourners. It centers on two women who develop a partnership for survival, several forums have successfully played the theatrical adaptation. The central character, Sanichari is named so because she was born on a Saturday. The society recognizes it as inauspicious to be born on a Saturday - she has been inauspicious for her family as no one survived after her birth. Her mother abandoned her shortly after her father's death. Bad fortune follows as she marries an alcoholic, who leaves her with little hope of a brighter future for herself and her son. Throughout Shanichari's lifetime of misfortune she has never cried. She never cried, even when her only son Budhwa died. Not cared, nor loved by anybody, ultimately she becomes a wailer, which means woman weeping as a job and getting the remuneration to wail. Sanichari happens to meet a Rudaali Bhigni, an experienced mourner, who changes her life. When the *bade thakur* dies and after the arrival of the *rudaali* 'bhigni' the story of Sanichari slowly comes out. Sanichari, the happy mother at the start of the story slowly matures and mellows down. The play is a women's journey towards agency and empowerment.

Voicing Silence

Patriarchal traditions endorsed power hierarchies, main characters and standard social/artistic roles. A feminist theatre on the other hand 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. Feminist theatre is the

process of women's awareness and empowerment; theatre has been the primary medium of women's intervention. It employs agitprop techniques in street demonstrations. The major concerns of M.S. Swaminathan Foundation's gendered theatre, 'Voicing Silence' are: gender, culture and social activism. Three strands of their work are:

- i. Developing plays sharing women's issues from a feminist perspective.
- ii. Organizing collective sharing of experiences or women's theatre festivals, bringing together cultural workers, theatre persons, social activists and NGOs.
- iii. Working with different communities of women - supporting them to use theatre as a tool for self-expression and empowerment.

Padma's (Mangai) play *Pacha Mannu* (New Earth) was produced and performed by 'Voicing Silence' on 22-30 August 1994, with ten participants - five men and five women. The workshop evolved through an exchange of personal experiences, discussions, research findings and a spirit of togetherness. What is shown in *Pancha Mannu* is everyday reality with a subtle critique of the same. The play was later performed in the villages of Tamil Nadu, moving through village streets. Using simple props that visually concretized the deep and personal experience of gender socialization used imagery in a significant way. The oil press scene evolved out of the traditional mode of extracting oil; in this scene the girl is structured through a list of don'ts like 'do not walk straight'; 'do not giggle'; 'do not study too much' (Mangai, 2002:215-230). The scene presents the parents as the principal agency of socialization symbolized by the centre pole and a man driving the girl bent like a bullock holds a long rope from their hands. However, to make the play appealing it is interspersed with song, dances and dialogues in different tones. The play incorporated Friirian ideology and Augustus Boal's techniques. The flexibility of the play demanded that the actors improvise, interact and participate. It also drew the audience into discussion and the onus of decision-making was rested on them.

Recasting Mythical Women

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. Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* (1949) rightly says that "few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of women: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse." Beauvoir expresses a commonly held feminist opinion by arguing that mythology validates the subjugation of women in patriarchal culture. Mainstream hero centered literature and myth normalize contemporary patriarchal cultural values. It is precisely this process that feminist myth revision seeks to overcome.

Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, so Said Shakuni* (2001) deals with characters from two different epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The play elicits sympathy for the 'devils' of the epics. The two characters from two

different epics meet as travelers at an airport. Gradually they start talking and reveal their innermost thoughts about the way they have been treated by history. Sengupta explains that she was fascinated by the folktale about Shakuni brothers being imprisoned and killed by the Kauravas when Hastinapur was extended to Quandhar in the northwest, only Shakuni had survived, and he swore revenge upon the Kauravas. His dice was made of his brother's bones. Shoorpanakha, on the other hand, represents all those women who are bold enough to remain single and declare their desire for male companionship without taking recourse to false modesty. Such women threaten the male world and so they are described as dangerous *rakshasis*, who must be controlled/contained/punished before they can upset the patriarchal set up. A woman who expresses her sexuality/sexual desires is branded as a fallen woman. Society practices double standards - men can express their sexual desires. It is considered normal and natural but for women it is profane, immoral and transgressive behavior that is to be kept in check and control. When the two characters meet in a contemporary situation another crisis begins to threaten the world. Finally, it is Shoorpanakha who dissuades Shakuni from provoking another blood bath.

Madhavi (1984) by Bishma Sahani is a play that radically decentres the myth and retrieves Madhavi from the margins of the mythical narrative situating her at the centre. In the *Udyogparva* section in the *Mahabharata*, Narad narrates the story of Galav to Duryodhana to illustrate the danger of *abhimana* (pride). On Galav's persistence that he must give *gurudakshina* to his guru, Rishi Vishwamitra asks for eight hundred *ashwamedhi* horses as *gurudakshina*, knowing full well that the whole of *Aryavarta* has only six hundred such horses. Garuda, who informs him that Yayati never disappoints any seekers coming to his door, brings the despairing Galav to king Yayati. Yayati does not have the horses but he can offer him a 'thing' - his own daughter Madhavi, with the information that she is destined to give birth to four *chakravarti* sons i.e. great emperors. Galav subsequently rents her out for a year to three different kings at the rate of two hundred horses, so that each of them can have a son. For the remaining two hundred horses Madhavi is offered to Vishwamitra himself. After giving him a son, her function being over, Madhavi returns to the forest and takes to living happily as a doe. This tale had a complete erasure of Madhavi's humanity - her feelings, suffering and deprivation. The stark injustice meted out to her by the epic led Sahani to rewrite the mythical segment from Madhavi's point of view. Sahani gives Madhavi what the myth denies her, her essential humanity, her motherhood, her bonding with children, a dream of love and freedom. From being a commodity he elevates her to the level of a human being and lowers the great heroes from the stage of heroism and makes us see their self-glorification. In the myth Madhavi speaks only once when she explains her usefulness to Galav that she can regain her virginity after performing a ritual and suggests that he can circulate her among other kings to get the required number of horses. But in this play Madhavi bluntly expresses her bitterness, ranging from anguish and perplexity to anger, bitterness, boldness and rejection. The notion of duty is exposed as nothing but a discourse of oppression. Each of the men utilized her for his selfish interest in the name of '*dharma*'. Yayati feels duty bound to live up

to his reputation as a man of charity, Galav is duty bound to keep his word with the guru and in such a context of duty, dharma and promise, it is Madhavi who is assigned the duty of being the instrument (*madhyam*) who would carry out her father's and lover's respective commitments. Of course, these commitments are nothing but constructs of male ego and patriarchal assumption, regarding women's place and duty towards her family, natal and marital. Sahani's play is an unremitting attack on patriarchal assumption of women as a function, as an instrument to further the cause of male sovereignty. The play shows how this ideology has so infiltrated women's psyche that she herself believes to be doing all that she does in the name of love. Yayati gives away Madhavi because that's what his duty binds him to do. The attitude of Madhavi's first buyer, the king of Ayodhya-king Haryasch is singularly humiliating. She has to stand amidst the keen stares of men at the court, where the kingdom's astrologer weighs upon Madhavi's body-her statistics, shin shapes to ensure that she is the right bargain for the horses. The process of commodification is complete when she is made to stand on a stool and royal astrologer inspects and demonstrates to the court each part of her body. Lecherous Devodas accepts Madhavi because she is a prolific son-generating machine. Galav markets her professionally and stoically. In the original epic, Madhavi regains her youth and turns to a doe and lives happily in the forest. But in Sahani's play Madhavi steadily gains self awareness, rejects the notion of women as womb that society has thrust upon her, refuses to take recourse to the boon to regain her virginity and youth and demands Galav accept her as she is, with wrinkles, dark circles, as a middle-aged women, exhausted by repeated pregnancies. Galav, of course, finds her ugly and urges her to make use of her boon. In the end Madhavi rejects Galav as well as her father's ostentatious arrangements for her *swayamwar*. Sahani has not only rewritten the Mahabharata tale from Madhavi's standpoint, he critiques family, marriage as institution that is essentially unjust to women. Sahani's play ultimately shows that women have to assert their selfhood and demand their share of human dignity and right to take decisions regarding their persons on their own.

Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari* (awarded the Gujarat Sahitya academy award in 1997) is a dialogue between Sita (Rama's wife) and Mandodari (Ravana's wife). The play contains a long soliloquy of Mandodari where she examines her own fears, nagging doubts, about her husband's abduction of Sita- "what if Ram was defeated in the battle and Sita would become the *patrani*? - What would be her fate? Wouldn't Ravana then ignore her?" She says, "Lankesh has immense powers and divine weapons. If he wins the war and Rama is killed, then he will marry Seeta. She will become his queen in this palace and I will become her attendant" (*Staging Resistance* 112). This play reveals the innermost recesses of Mandodari, her qualms and her misery that the epic was silent about.

Each of these plays not only demystifies myth but also fashions a new feminist reading of formerly patriarchal legends. The belief of a feminist theatre in the efficacy of theatre as a tool for conscientization, for critiquing social disparities and for self-exploration and expression is at the core. Feminist theatre is a counter cultural space. Theatre as a mode of intervention on women's behalf has meant

departing from the conventional way of producing and staging plays. It has also meant addressing modes of performances, idioms of expression and representation of women, using training in theatre as a source of empowerment by articulating the perception and aspiration of groups of women. From creation of the script through improvisation and visualization on to rehearsal, right up to performance and relating to the audience, the emphasis has been on collective function. Hence activist theatre and theatre activism becomes important in their work. Such a theatre practice is at the intersection of art, activism and social relevance and theatre is seen as an instrument of real change in women's lives. It is an exploration of women's own unique idiom – their own form, their language and ways of communication. The ultimate purpose is to present to the audience, through the art of their own theatre creations, other imagery, alternative points of view, different thoughts concerning reality, in order to alter people's sensitivity and to instill the need to transform the social relationships, behavior and in short the world we inhabit.

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