This chapter explores the transplanting of Federico Garcia Lorca’s Spanish play, *Yerma*, into a Punjabi adaptation directed by the ace Indian theatre director, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry. *Yerma* is a dark lyrical drama revolving around the anguish and frustration of a childless woman called Yerma who is married to a man who seems to have more time for his fields than for his wife. Distraught with want, she dwells in a fantasy world of lullabies. Driven to the brink of madness, she resorts to superstition, pagan rites and religious pilgrimage to make her marriage fruitful. It is a poignant tale which touches on issues as equally relevant in rural India today as they were in Lorca’s Spain of the 1930s. However, the power of the play lies in the nakedness of Yerma’s frustrated emotions and the continual reference to sexuality through which Lorca attacks the moribund code of honour that subjugates women. The play is adapted into Punjabi by Surjit Patar, known as the “Poetic Voice of Punjab” and directed by Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry for her theatre troupe, The Company. Her dramatic re-interpretation of Lorca’s play attacks the senses of the audience with its use of “rang-pattis” (streamers), colourful costumes and live music. The performance is a rich mix of folk imagery and surrealist images. The first section of the chapter discusses the theatrical idiom of Neelam Man Singh founded upon a series of unstructured personal interviews carried out during the research process.
Federico Garcia Lorca wrote *Yerma*, the second play of his tragic trilogy, in 1934, a year when political tensions were running high in Spain due to General Franco’s barbaric policies. The general condition of unrest in Spain is evident in the traumas of his characters. Principally a poet, Lorca was also a painter, musician and director. From 1931 to 1934, he directed a travelling theatre company, La Barraca, whose aim was to take theatre to the remotest corner of the country for the advantage of Spanish peasants. For his group, he designed costumes, collected and set period songs and even arranged dance formations.

Like *Yerma*, his other two plays on peasant life have women as central characters who are also facing the agony of frustrated motherhood. In *Blood Wedding*, three women characters are together in their pain: the Bride; the wife of Leonardo, the lover and a mother whose youngest son is betrothed to a girl belonging to the family that killed her eldest son. *The House of Barnarda Alba* is the story of a tyrant mother of five daughters whom she keeps shuttered up in the house. *Yerma* ran successfully in Spain, Mexico and South American countries. Similar to all his writing, the play covers the extremes of dramatic expression – tragedy and farce. There is a continuous struggle between fantasy and reality in *Yerma*, fused with laughter and tears that form the basis of the play’s popularity across all boundaries of time and space. For the Punjabi adaptation, Neelam Man Singh sees the protagonist torn with a “violent anxiety that emphasises a struggle between fertility and sterility, between life and death”. According to her, this is contrasted with the farcical scene of the nasty and cruel laundresses, revealing the hostility of society towards “pure unfettered spirit”.

Neelam Man Singh is a director of international repute, who, over the years, has played a significant role in reviving Punjabi theatre in India. A product of National School of Drama, she was trained as an actor but, for a career, she opted for direction. While in Mumbai, Neelam Man Singh was inspired by the devotion with which Pearl

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19 Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry regularly organises workshops on folk forms of Punjab like Gatka, Naqqal, Jungams and Dadhi. Also, with Nek Chand, the creator of the world famous Rock Garden, she has designed a new open-air theatre in Chandigarh.
Padamsee, the celebrated Indian theatre personality, worked for the cultivation of artistic values in the younger generation. During her stay in Mumbai, Neelam Man Singh became the founder member of a Hindi theatre group ‘Majma’. Her interest in folk tradition was stirred when, in 1979, she moved to Bhopal and began associating with ‘Madhya Pradesh Rang Mandal Theatre Company’. Though the association was short-lived – for she moved to Chandigarh in 1983 – yet it was path-breaking and gave a definite direction to her theatrical activity.

When she shifted from Bhopal to Chandigarh, Neelam Man Singh suffered a cultural shock. To her, Chandigarh was a modern city with no cultural background and history. She found the city a “let down” as it displayed “unawareness and aloofness towards art” (Interview with Suri). In 1985, she formed her own theatre group, The Company, which, under the aegis of Neelam Man Singh, successfully catapulted Chandigarh on the theatre world map through a series of several significant productions.

**In Conversation with Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry**

Neelam Man Singh deems that 25-30 years ago the director was considered as the ‘author’ of the play. In the present era, all work is collaborative. This also explains her stance that she never visualises how a given play will look on stage. She insists that she works with actors and they, being the individuals that they are, bring their own life in each character they portray. Brushing aside the notion that a director gets a vision of how the play will appear on stage when he/she reads it, she says that the end product is in fact

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20 Pearl Padamsee (1931-2000) was one of the most talented figures of the Indian stage. She was also an accomplished actor who worked in some of the best off-beat movies of the 1970s Hindi cinema like *Junoon, Khatta Meetha* and *Baton Baton Mein*. At the time when Neelam Man Singh met her, Padamsee was doing Children’s theatre in several affluent schools of Mumbai. On Padamsee’s indication, Neelam Man Singh attached herself with the endeavour and since then, has continued the good work.

21 In Bhopal, Neelam Man Singh worked with the best minds of the creative world. In her interview with *The Times of India*, she said that in Bhopal, she worked at Bharat Bhavan, a place where one can witness the growth of art.

22 Some of the plays presented by The Company are *Het Wage Dariya*, based on the myth of Clytemnestra; *Nagamandala*, a play by Girish Karnad; *Fida* a version of Racine’s *Phaedra*; *Shehar mere di Pagal Aurat* based on Giradoux’s *Mad woman of Chaillot*; *Kitchen Katha* based on Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Hot Chocolate*; *Unposted Love Letter* based on a short story by Doris Lessing; *Sibo in the Supermarket* based on an African short story “Supermarket Soliloquy” by Moira Crosbie Lovell; and *The Suit* which is a bilingual play based on a short story bearing the same title by Can Themba.
the result of ‘combustion’ between a text, a director and a good actor; all coming from different backgrounds and adding their own distinct flavour to the work.

She criticises the age-old practice where the director makes a set and, inside, places plaster of Paris characters that he/she manoeuvres masterfully. A good play, according to her, is improvisational and how it matures during rehearsals and various shows makes it an original piece of art. She elaborates that at times the ‘unexpected’ comes up during the course of the rehearsals. Additionally, every single rehearsal is replete with ‘surprises’. The text in hand goes through a complete somersault when it finally comes on the floor. According to her, the ‘real thing’ happens on the floor. At that moment, the play gains a life of its own. Therefore, the director is not the be-all and end-all of the production. She equates the work culture and hierarchy of theatre with cinema as both are aural-visual media which work in partnership with other art forms like music, dance, painting, costume-making and set direction. Besides, scores of technicians and backstage hands contribute significantly in the production. It has been observed that a good song can give boost to a film in the music charts and a good actor can bring a certain quality to the work. At the same time, if an actor is exhibiting a fantastic piece of emoting in a hideous costume, the visual becomes an assault on the senses of the audience. So, the triumph of a good theatrical work is possible only with combined efforts of all the specialized areas.

Surjit Patar, one of the highly regarded poets of Punjab, is not only the adapter of all her plays but is also the man who introduced Neelam Man Singh to the world of Punjabi language. She had seen a play, the name of which she failed to recall, translated by Surjit Patar. Instantly, she got besotted by the beauty and poetry of Punjabi language. The language, though she understood little of it at that time, came across to her as special and intensely poetic. However, she admits that there was a resonance in that tongue which led to her immediate connection with the same as she hails from a Punjabi family. Impressed by Patar’s style, Neelam Man Singh approached him and two months later they began working on their first script.

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23 Patar is credited with a number of translations and adaptations including the plays of Euripides, Racine, Giraudoux and poems by Brecht. 
Neelam Man Singh says that she shares a strong creative bond with Surjit Patar and they have worked together for more than a score of years. Their journey together has given the Indian stage a repertory to treasure. Their first venture in 1986, *Heth Wage Dariya*, was a reworking of the myth of Clytemnestra. Neelam Man Singh recalls that she was humbled by the magic woven by Patar in the ‘new’ script and felt privileged upon working with a poet of his stature.

The base of this creative relationship is that Surjit Patar is sensitive towards Neelam Man Singh’s requirements and sensibilities and accordingly transplants the play to the Indian context. Furthermore, he brings in his own personal sense of what the characters are going to say or how they are positioned. When she decided upon staging *Nagamandala*, Patar resisted for he failed to understand the snake image and, disdainfully, called the play “Sapan di kahani” (story of snakes). Neelam Man Singh comments that Girish Karnad has attempted something extraordinary in his play but Surjit Patar took it to another metaphysical level, when she finally succeeded in persuading him.

Interestingly, the scripts on which they work together are called ‘commissioned scripts’ by Neelam Man Singh. She selects a play and then sends the English version to Surjit Patar who transcodes it as per her demands and understanding of the play, at the same time bringing in many more layers to that plot. This consensus is not easy to achieve. Long sessions are held and discussions undertaken before he pens down the final draft. Therefore, Neelam Man Singh prefers to call them commissioned scripts; commissioned, not financially but artistically.

The selection of a play for performance is a “mysterious” and “intangible” process for Neelam Man Singh. It becomes less complicated when one has to put up a play for a certain purpose. In 2008, when she was commissioned to do a play for Delhi Ibsen Festival organised by Dramatic Art and Design Academy (DADA) and the Norwegian Embassy, Neelam Man Singh read Ibsen extensively. She decided upon staging *Little Clytemnestra* was the wife of Agamemnon, King of an ancient Greek kingdom. Aeschylus, in *Oresteia*, portrayed her as a femme fatale who murdered her husband. Clytemnestra plays one of the main characters in Aeschylus’ trilogy *Oresteia* that consists of three tragedies *Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides.*
Eyolf because of its expressionistic bend which allowed the play to lend itself to heavy editing, interpretation and, enabled her to locate it elsewhere.

Another factor that can influence the selection of a work is a previous viewing of the same. Neelam Man Singh had seen The Suit at the Tricycle Theatre in London in 1995. The basic plot is about a love-struck husband, Philomen, who discovers his wife, Matilda, in bed with her lover. The lover flees out of the window but leaves behind his suit. Thereafter, the husband forces his wife to treat the suit as an honoured guest, to feed it and even take it along for walks; serving as a constant reminder of her infidelity. The play had a deep impact on Neelam Man Singh and she began working on it. The original short story by Can Themba is rooted in South African politics and the presence of the suit is a metaphor for apartheid. Neelam Man Singh, on the other hand, made her play apolitical as, more than anything else, she felt the anger of her characters. In her play, the suit becomes a witness to the young couple’s misery and to the wife’s mental disintegration in the end.

Neelam Man Singh feels comfortable with themes which have an echo in her own life’s experience. It is palpable in one of the reasons behind her presentation of Yerma. She believes that because she had a problematic time during child-birth, she somehow connects with and understands Yerma’s pain of being childless. Furthermore, she avoids themes which do not touch her sensibility or which her sensibility fails to accept. When she transplanted the story of The Suit, she did not want to use ‘Dalit’ issues as the Indian counterpart of apartheid for the simple reason that the topic was much outside her own experience. She felt that the rupture in man-woman relationship portrayed in the play is enough to form the central core of her interpretation of the story.

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25 Neelam Man Singh reduced Ibsen’s Little Eyolf of about 90 pages to a concise 28. Ibsen had laboured in details to describe the pulls and tugs of the brother-sister relationship in the play. Neelam Man Singh edited the irrelevant explanations, making the play more suggestive and deleted the heavy Christian jargon that dealt with atonement and guilt, making it more universal.

26 Dalit is a term used for a group of South Asians traditionally regarded as untouchables. The caste system was abolished by the Indian constitution but the wide-spread discrimination against Dalits continues in South Asia.
The Company –

Eight musicians and nine urban performers comprise The Company, in its present form. The group has been together for more than twenty years and has always been a successful confluence of traditional and urban performers. Commenting upon the two different sets of performers, Neelam Man Singh says that the lines between urban and folk actors overlap. They are just two groups of actors who come from different social, economic, educational and political positions. The musicians of The Company hail from Naqqal tradition, one of the folk forms of Punjab. Naqqals are people who sing, dance, play musical instruments, act and, most importantly, become female impersonators. Neelam Man Singh, by making them an integral part of her group, proposes to revive the interest and pride of the traditional performer in his/her own dramatic roots. She reminisces that when they freshly joined The Company – and that was right at the time of its inception – they brought a definite “presence” on the stage because their background as female impersonators followed them closely. But, she categorically states, “They have never been used as ‘cultural signs’.”

The Naqqals are, first and foremost, performers who brought along with themselves the skills from their background which encountered the skills of the urban performers when both the sets entered a common creative space called The Company. As a result of this encounter, the urban actors gained a rich and intricate pattern of hidden skills, texts, musical scores and patterns of movement from their traditional counterparts. Modern stage craft is used in places to highlight the creative elements of traditional art. This fusion has become instrumental in re-establishing pride in one’s regional identity. Neelam Man Singh elaborates upon this harmonious synthesis:

They [urban and traditional performers] come from different systems of training but because they have been together for many years now, the lines have become diffused. The Company is one big pot, in which everyone contributes. A lot of skills of female impersonators have been taken by the urban male as well as female actors.

*Yerma re-located*

*Yerma* has witnessed many productions in India. The first which comes to mind is the theatre guru Ebrahim Alkazi’s 1969 version of the play. It formed a part of the three-
month project initiated by Alkazi in order to open the gates of National School of Drama (NSD) to theatre lovers of Delhi. It was presented on the open-air stage in Rabindra Bhawan’s premises and for many Indians it was their first introduction to Lorca. In 1977, Shiela Bhatia adapted *Yerma* in Punjabi for Delhi Art Theatre as *Yasmine*.

Almost twenty years later, in 1999, the students of NSD, Delhi collaborated with the Yavanika Theatre Group, Chandigarh to present a Hindi version of *Yerma*. The play was adapted by Sewak Nayyar of the Yavanika Theatre Group and directed by one of the final year students of NSD, Suveeran. The cast consisted of the then students of NSD and also a few from the NSD repertory. Although Sewak Nayyar was conscious that his adaptation would involuntarily arouse comparison with Neelam Man Singh’s much-viewed production, yet he did not refrain from “experimenting with time and space” by reshuffling scenes and presenting the play in a contemporary set-up (“NSD students to play ‘Yerma’”). The director of this version was more intrigued by the complexities of a husband-wife relationship rather than the solitary character of Yerma. In spite of a bold and spirited show put up by a team of youngsters, *The Tribune* delicately disapproved of the “physical” nature of the performance and observed that “children should not have been allowed in the auditorium” (“NSD students present ‘Yerma’”).

More recently, in 2008, Kusum Haidar decided to produce *Yerma* when the Spanish Embassy approached her with a programme that aimed at giving impetus to cultural exchange between Spain and India. Haidar, once a student of Alkazi, was selected for the lead role in the 1969 production by Alkazi. This time as a director, her play was performed in India Habitat Centre with Padma Damodaran as Yerma. With an assembled group of theatre artistes, Haidar successfully managed to deliver an energy-packed performance by actors who were also good singers and dancers.

Neelam Man Singh first staged her interpretation of *Yerma* at the All India Drama Festival in New Delhi in 1992. A year later, the play was taken to England by the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) where it opened at Nottingham Playhouse for three performances, before a two-week London season. She, as always, had

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27 LIFT, launched in 1981, is a biennial cultural festival that brings together the best of contemporary theatre from around the world to Britain. It is considered as a major influence on the London and world arts scene. LIFT, while providing fresh outlooks to art professionals, endeavours to bring international contact to the students as well as various theatrical communities.
commissioned Patar to work on the script which was later published. For the present study, I focus on the production of Yerma staged for the audience of Chandigarh at the Open Air Theatre in Rock Garden in 1992.

Surjit Patar’s adaptations of Lorca’s peasant trilogy are published independently, with a foreword about the play and the Spanish author by Patar himself, apiece. Yerma is adapted to the title Saeio Nee Main Ant-heen Tarkalan (Saeio Nee) which means ‘Oh dear, I am an endless nightfall’, implying that Yerma has fallen to the pits of darkness and there is no hope of daybreak in her life as she gradually becomes one with the gloom which follows the dusk.

In the foreword to Saeio Nee, Patar emphatically announces that his play is not a simple translation (“anuvaad”) of Lorca’s Yerma but is, in fact, a transformation, a modification (“roopantar”), and in some places it comes closer to be a re-creation (“punar-rachna”). Inversely, Neelam Man Singh pointedly reiterates how her play is based on a Punjabi ‘translation’ by Surjit Patar. In her interviews and the various brochures of Yerma, the play has been termed as a Punjabi ‘translation’ undertaken by Surjit Patar. The contradictory perspectives of the adapter and the director do not and ought not to become a base for any confusion or impediments in this research project; rather it makes this particular case study unique. The basis of Neelam Man Singh’s belief can be explained in her own words when she says that “there is so much resonance between Lorca’s poetry and Punjabi imagery” that at times it becomes difficult to separate one from the other. The similarities between Indian and Spanish imagery and motifs are very strong and palpable. However, it will be a misnomer to term the play ‘a translation’. The differences between a translation and an adaptation have already been discussed at length in the introductory chapter and the ensuing detailed study of the play will prove the same, eventually; contrary to the director’s stance.

For her production, Neelam Man Singh stays put with the original title of the play. The title, Saeio Nee Main Ant-heen Tarkalan, suggested by Surjit Patar seemed too tortuous to her and appeared to have suspended a layer of depression over the story and the protagonist. Though the play is fundamentally tragic yet her production does not come across as depressing. Moreover, Neelam Man Singh wanted to use a name as the title. Initially she agreed with Patar on the name ‘Soma’. The suffix ‘ma’ is extensively used in
typical Punjabi names like Karma, Nimma and Soma. Further, the word ‘ma’ means ‘mother’ in Hindi and Punjabi and its usage would be apt in a play dealing with the pain of childlessness. While contemplating, Neelam Man Singh traced the Punjabi fixation with the suffix ‘ma’ in the name ‘Yerma’ and she realised that owing to its affinity with the sound of Punjabi names, it does not sound alienating despite its Spanish roots. So, she decided to call her play Yerma. On the other hand, Surjit Patar chose to title his publication Saeio Nee. Furthermore, he opted to rename his protagonist as ‘Soma’.

Yerma has an unusual beginning in a dream sequence. Lorca’s play opens with directions which primarily revolve around Yerma’s sleeping state and the description of her dream rather than the customary guidelines about stage set-up:

When the curtain rises Yerma is asleep with an embroidery frame at her feet. The stage is in the strange light of a dream. A Shepherd enters on tiptoe looking fixedly at Yerma. He leads by the hand a Child dressed in white. The clock sounds. When the Shepherd leaves, the light changes into the happy brightness of a spring morning. Yerma awakes. (103)

This dream is followed by a song that is sung by a voice off-stage. Surjit Patar has not altered this dream sequence in his publication but Neelam Man Singh’s vision is very different from Lorca’s. In her play, the first thing to capture the audience’s attention is the presence of musicians on the stage.

Live music is an essential feature in every Neelam Man Singh production. This particular chorus of four male members and one female singer is kneeling Down Right and provides live music for the performance. Composed by B.V. Karanth, a leading theatre director and composer, the music captures and develops each mood that Yerma goes through in deeply sensitive and carefully stylised sequences. Live music throughout the performance adds a dimension to the theatricality and underlines the immediacy of action. Neelam Man Singh has used a mixed chorus in Yerma which means that it constitutes of traditional as well as urban performers. When the play begins, the stage is washed in blue light and a white figure is seen lying upstage, closer to the black half curtain which serves as the rear wall. This figure is partially hidden by a rectangular cast-iron container and ‘tumbi’ – a stringed musical instrument made of hollowed gourd used in Punjabi folk that is supported by the shoulder and played with fingers – is heard in the background.
A girl enters on tip-toe and looks around. She moves towards the sleeping figure and gazes at it fondly for a second. The girl is holding something in an earthenware bowl which she, then, throws into that cast-iron container and, immediately, it burns to smoke forming a curtain of blue mist between the audience and the sleeping figure. The girl looks relieved and happy, and retreats. The music becomes louder and two men enter from Up Left. They are dressed as herdsmen and the man walking at the back is playing the “tumbi”. They move downstage, towards the audience and cross the stage to join the chorus that has, now, started to hum softly. Meanwhile, the sleeping figure gets up and the audience discovers that it is a young and good-looking girl who is dressed up in the fashion of a young rural bride. Her arms are positioned as if they are holding a baby and her body starts moving to the sound of the music. The humming continues while the girl pretends to talk to the baby, caresses it and dances in order to rock the baby to sleep. This mime show lasts for less than a minute but the look of ultimate bliss on the face of the girl leaves an indelible mark on the viewer. She sits as if to put down the imaginary child who is eager to walk and at that instant, the chorus breaks into a song. The seven-line song about the mother-child relationship makes a befitting introduction to the play. The song ends with the girl’s realisation that the child is not real. Agony is writ large on her face. She turns heavenwards and covers her face with her hands. The moment freezes and two performers, dressed like women, remove the cast-iron container from the stage.

This opening scene of Neelam Man Singh’s Yerma abounds with symbols and suggestions. It is not long before the audience comprehend that the sleeping figure, who later materialises into a girl, is Yerma. Yerma is not only asleep but also nameless when the audience is first introduced to her. More important than her identity is her desire to have a child and it is conveyed to the audience through her dream sequence. In Spanish, ‘Yerma’ means barren. Her unremitting craving for motherhood is, in fact, her true identity.

Yerma’s dream begins when another girl raises a cloud of smoke by burning something in a container stationed next to the sleeping Yerma. Neelam Man Singh insists that no symbolic value is attached to the ‘burning’. It should be viewed only as a mechanism to create a haze and, thus, mark the beginning of Yerma’s dream. The unknown girl and the two herdsmen have theatrical significance. Their presence adds to the atmosphere of the stage without serving any textual purpose. This is a regular device
in the productions of Neelam Man Singh. The herdsmen represent the pastoral imagery of
the play and are a source of live music on the stage. It also provides the alienation-effect,
thus, discouraging complete immersion of audience in the performance. The opening song, "kandan wi gharwawange, mirchan chuleh pawange", is
saturated with the customs of North India, particularly Punjab. It is a common practice
among mothers worldwide to enjoy being teased by their young ones and, in turn, to woo
them with items of their choice. In North India, this practice can be traced to the
relationship shared by Lord Krishna in his childhood with his foster mother, Yashoda.
The tantrums thrown by the child Krishna, Yashoda’s incessant efforts to protect and
pamper him and his attempts to pacify his mother have been a source of inspiration for
countless poets, painters and musicians. Neelam Man Singh’s Yerma plays and fondles
her make-believe child in exactly the same fashion. Though Lorca’s play also has a song
for Yerma’s dream-state, it differentiates from Neelam Man Singh’s on two levels –
presentation and denotation. The song in Lorca’s play is sung off-stage:

VOICE, within, singing.
For the nursey, nursey, nursey.
For the little nurse we’ll make
A tiny hut out in the fields
And there we’ll shelter take. (103)

In Neelam Man Singh’s play, the song is sung by an on-stage group of singers and
musicians. Along with the plot and characterisation, Surjit Patar has also adapted the
songs appropriately to the Indian context. In the opening song, he speaks of little
superstitions, indulgencies and fancies of Indian mothers. In the song, the mother i.e.
Yerma wants to get bangles made for her child, she plans to burn red chillies and apply a
black mark on her child’s face to guard it against the evil-eye. The song also speaks of the
pride that the mother will experience when her child starts walking with wobbly steps and
creates a rattling but pleasant noise in the street because of its tiny ornaments. These
beliefs and customs are immediately recognised by an Indian audience (in this case,

Bertolt Brecht coined the German term ‘Verfremdungseffekt’, loosely translated as “alienation
effect”. Brecht believed that the audience should maintain emotional distance from what is being presented
on stage. His approach to theatre discouraged the audience from getting directly involved in an illusory
world created by conventional theatrical techniques and to “distance” them from the characters and the
action.
Chandigarh audience), which can, therefore, relate to the characters, their situations and their desires.

The song ends with Yerma facing towards heaven in the manner of a person who is beaten by his/her destiny. The eastern concept of destiny is founded on the belief that there is a fixed natural order and everything that happens to us is not under our control. Destiny is all powerful and human beings are but puppets in a preordained plan. This belief contradicts the popular western view that we are in full control of our lives and all the events that occur in our lives are a consequence of our own choice. This slight gesture of Yerma underlines the strong Indian faith in a predetermined course of events. Her posture is an indication of her partially deflated spirit. Simultaneously, she appears to be furious and complaining against the injustice of destiny.

The removal of the smoke-emitting container by two unknown performers implies the end of Yerma’s dream. The arrangement and removal of props in full-view of the audience is Neelam Man Singh’s signature. It disrupts stage illusion and generates attention of the viewer towards the process of theatrical art. The blue light on the stage gives way to a yellow one, indicating day-break. Change in light brings a change in Yerma’s expressions. She looks happy because, perhaps, the thought of a new day fills her with fresh optimism. Yerma picks up a pitcher and, dramatically, pours water from one to the other. This other pitcher is placed on an ornate low stool. The distinct sound of water fills the silence and produces music of its own. Half way through, she stops and pours the remaining water over her face, drenching the front of her costume in the act. This little episode featuring water contains a ritualistic strain. Water is an important leitmotif in the play and signifies Yerma’s thirst. Moreover, a child is born in a water bag and civilization also takes place on the banks of a river. By soaking herself in water, she might be trying to get rid of her alleged barrenness. It also points towards the rural practice of filling and storing water to be used later in the day for cooking and drinking. When the ritual is over, she speaks the first dialogue of the play by calling out to her husband.

The sight of Yerma under the yellow spot-light, standing elegantly to her full height, her elbows straight, focusing intensely on water being dispensed from one pitcher to another accompanied by the melodious echo of water is spectacular. There are many
other frames in *Yerma* which provide similar audio-visual delight to the viewer. The
directorial worth of Neelam Man Singh can be gauged by the simple fact that right from
the onset of the play till Yerma utters the first dialogue, Neelam Man Singh manages to
provide the spectator with a galaxy of ideas, motifs and symbols to work upon. Within a
meagre span of four minutes, Neelam Man Singh addresses directly to all the senses of
the audience without hypnotizing them into a state of numbness. In addition, it plunges
the audience straight into the core of the play – Yerma’s longing for a child.

Most significantly, Lorca, unlike other playwrights, has not supplied detailed
descriptions of characters, costumes and props in his play, focusing more on the poetry
and the agonised soul of Yerma. In this respect, Lorca is in stark contrast with Shaw and
Duerrenmatt who give extensive accounts of the stage-setting and the physical attributes
and mental make-up of their characters. In Lorca, the stage directions are limited to the
movements and positioning of the characters. The characters gradually reveal their traits
to the reader through their dialogues. This ambiguity becomes one of the factors
responsible for the multifarious presentation possibilities of *Yerma*. Each director can
transport the play to a different setting without being hindered by a previously prescribed
image and can visualise a new world for a fresh production of *Yerma*.

The Punjabi version depicts Yerma as a young, energetic girl with long, black
hair. Her eyes are expressive and she has a pleasant smile. Neelam Man Singh has
dressed her women characters in long, flared, frocks of different colours teamed with
“churidaars” (traditional Indian slacks which collect in layers near the ankles). In
addition, a lot of multi-coloured “dupattas” – long scarves – are used, some around the
neck and others around the waist. Yerma is similarly dressed in layers of black, white and
terracotta red. Though the costumes designed by Neelam Man Singh look aesthetic, they
do not represent the traditional dress of an ordinary village-woman of Punjab, which is
pre-dominantly ‘salwar-kameez’.

As a character, Yerma has many folds. She has layers of latent emotions which are
opened one at a time and are simultaneously dropped like onion peels till the core is
reached which forms the basis of her life. She is dutiful towards her husband, she is
friendly with the village girls, she has motherly concern for children in general, she can
be flirtatious and she is also superstitious; but, it is her unending and unquenched longing
to have a child which forms her nucleus, beyond which nothing exists or is meaningful. The other facets of her personality are completely submerged in that one desire for motherhood and surface temporarily, as and when the situation demands.

For such a demanding role, Neelam Man Singh decided on Ramanjit Kaur who has been working with The Company since 1986. Ramanjit had done a cameo in Neelam Man Singh’s *Heth Wage Dariya* when she was barely sixteen years old. In her very first performance, Ramanjit left such a strong impression on Neelam Man Singh that she was immediately signed in the lead role by Neelam Man Singh for The Company’s Punjabi production of Girish Karnad’s *Nagamandala*. Since then Ramanjit has become the prima donna of The Company and has played stellar roles in all their plays.

Despite more than twenty years of professional theatre with Neelam Man Singh, Ramanjit comes afresh in every ‘avatar’. This is partly due to the manner in which Neelam Man Singh prepares for every production that, in turn, allows no space for complacency. In an interview with *The Tribune*, Ramanjit says, “Each time she [Neelam Man Singh] breaks me to start all over again from the ashes. Repetition will just not do for her” (Dutt). This explains how Ramanjit plays a brutalised bride in *Nagamandala*, a village-woman torn between family honour and her craving to have a child in *Yerma* and a city-bred girl who is guilty of adultery in *The Suit* with equal amount of conviction.

As discussed, the name Yerma is retained by Neelam Man Singh. All the other characters are re-christened with Punjabi names. Yerma’s husband, Juan, is called Jeevan. Jeevan is a middle aged man who belies his name for ‘Jeevan’ means life in Hindi and it is later revealed that Yerma is childless not because she is barren but because Jeevan is sterile. Her friend, Maria, is named Mita and Victor becomes Sarwan.

The very first scene of the play introduces us to the household of Yerma. She is a young girl who, when the play opens, has been married to Juan for two years. This information is transmitted in a manner which subtly tells a lot about their strained marital relationship. In the opening scene, Yerma observes, “Twenty-four months we’ve been

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29 Ramanjit Kaur has worked with the famed Ariane Mnouchkine of Theatre du Soleil and Firenza Guidi during various international workshops and training programmes. In 2003, she won the Charles Wallace Award and became the recipient of the prestigious Sanskriti Award for Theatre and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar for Theatre in 2006. Presently, Ramanjit runs a theatre organisation, The Creative Arts in Calcutta, while continuing her work with The Company.
married and you only get sadder, thinner, as if you were growing backwards” (104). Neelam Man Singh’s introductory scene is devoid of the gloom that is to follow subsequently. It is only in little flashes that the audience pick up that their marriage is treading a tight-rope.

The opening scene has a stereotypical setting of a rural Punjabi household and is designed by Neelam Man Singh. When the stage is fully lit after Yerma ends her water ritual, it is seen that a combination of earthen red colour and black is used for the decor of Yerma’s house. A black sheet on the floor in the centre of the stage serves as bed. There is a ‘pidhi’ (a traditionally carved square low stool with short feet), a couple of brass pitchers, a box covered with a red cloth and an antique mirror. Neelam Man Singh prefers to use half-curtains to portray a change of scene instead of using different backdrops for varied settings. For Yerma’s house, a black curtain with red and golden border is used as the background. The setting is not intricate and some clothes carelessly hang on the half-curtain giving a homely effect.

An interesting detail is added to the setting by Jeevan’s entry on stage. Jeevan enters holding a length of red cotton and Yerma helps him to stretch out the fabric. Then he sits down in front of the mirror to tie his turban.

Fig. 21. Ramanjit Kaur as Yerma and Kuldeep Sharma as Jeevan in the Punjabi adaptation.

There is no reference in the play to his religious beliefs, but there is a possibility that he is a Sikh as most agriculturalists of Punjab are followers of Sikhism. Usually some help is required by the man who has to tie a turban and, most often than not, it is the wife who
assists her husband in the procedure. Neelam Man Singh has very minutely captured the essence of a Punjabi household by featuring such routine preparations and items in her production. These items, even if sparse, surprise and impress the spectators with the details of their colour, make and the material with which they are made.

The opening scene shows Yerma fussing over Juan alias Jeevan: “... Now you’ve got a face as white as though the sun had never shone on it. I’d like to see you go to the river and swim or climb up on the roof when the rain beats down on our house...” (103-4). On sensing his irritation, she says: “But you don’t let me take care of you” (104). On the surface, Yerma is worried about her husband’s health but her mothering has other connotations and is rich with subtext. She needs an outlet for her maternal instincts and, at the same time, is gently critical because she feels that he lacks the energy to persist in his efforts to give her a child.

Yerma of the original play comes across as a sombre person. No stage directions are provided by the playwright hinting at the youthful mirth of the protagonist. She does take initiative to express love to her husband but fails to leave an impression of sparkling youth on the readers. In contrast, Yerma of the Punjabi adaptation is very comfortable with her physicality. She dances around her husband, teases him, pillow fights with him and even applies make-up on stage. Enticing her husband, Yerma lies down on bed and excitedly recalls the events of their wedding-night. Jeevan is visibly suffocated and uncomfortable, may be, because he doubts his own virility. In spite of a charming and smiling Yerma, there is a frisson of alarm as she tries to hug him and he stops her midway in the act. Further, in the source play, when Yerma learns that her friend, Maria, is carrying, she immediately starts sermonizing Maria about the precautions she should take during the course of her pregnancy, assuming the role of a mother herself: “Don’t walk very much, and when you breathe, breathe as softly as if you had a rose between your teeth” (107) and “Don’t run on the cobblestones” (109). She is eager to know how an expectant mother feels: “But, how does it make you feel” (106). In the adaptation also, Yerma experiences mixed emotions of joy, sorrow and concern when Mita breaks the news of her pregnancy to her. But, in contrast to her Spanish counterpart, this Yerma is vigorous and full of spirit on Mita’s arrival and she even greets her friend with a pillow-fight. In the conclusion of this episode also, Neelam Man Singh differs from Lorca and Patar, both of whom show that when the friend is leaving “Yerma lovingly presses her
hands against her [Maria a.k.a. Mita’s] belly” (109). After Maria leaves, Yerma “takes her scissors and starts to cut” the linen brought by Maria (109). In Neelam Man Singh’s Yerma, the friends depart happily and, on being left alone, Yerma plays with lace and ribbons brought by Mita. Imagining her child wrapped in the silken fabric, she rubs it fondly against her cheek. This behaviour of Yerma serves as a reminder of her innate desire for motherhood and the optimism with which she nurses this desire. Moreover, it is in contrast to the later depression which will gradually swallow her life.

In the adaptation, Jeevan is portrayed as a tall, thin man, sporting a moustache. The character is portrayed by Kuldeep Sharma. Jeevan is wearing a “kurta” – a knee-length loose shirt – and a “lungi” – piece of cloth wrapped around the waist – in the typical Punjabi style (fig. 21). He wears red for better part of the play. Where Yerma tries to reduce the growing distance between them, her husband appears to have lost interest in their marriage altogether. Juan’s/Jeevan’s detachment can be ascribed to his awareness of his own sterility, the intensity of which is aggravated by Yerma’s repeated mention of children.

The play explores male-female relationship by highlighting the division of roles in a patriarchal social set-up. Men look after the flocks and the fields. Both Juan and Victor take their livestock to pasture personally. Juan’s material wealth grows throughout the play. In Act I Scene 1, while Yerma contemplates the years stretching ahead without any change, Juan joyously looks forward to increasing prosperity and comfort, with no children to drain their finances: “YERMA. Each year. You and I will just go on here each year . . . / JUAN, smiling. Why, of course. And very peacefully. Our work goes well, we’ve no children to worry about” (104). Women look after their men. They take food to their husbands out in the fields, wash their clothes and keep the house tidy. Most importantly, the women are responsible for the continuation of the line. They give birth to babies, care for them until they too are ready to take their place in the community. Yerma is unable to contribute to this system of continuation and, as a result, feels alienated and frustrated.

Juan alias Jeevan is an archetypal jealous husband who gets influenced by the village gossip revolving around Yerma and Victor aka Sarwan and lays restrictions on his wife. The first instance occurs in the opening scene: “If you need anything, tell me, and
I’ll bring it to you. You know well enough I don’t like you to be going out” (105). Later, in the second scene of Act I, Juan meets Yerma on the way to home: “Still here? What are you doing here? . . . You should be at home” (118-9). Furthermore, in the laundresses’ scene, it is reported that Juan has invited his sisters to act as spies on his wife:

FOURTH LAUNDRESS. Well, it’s certain enough that her husband’s brought his two sisters to live with them.

FIFTH LAUNDRESS. The old maids?

FOURTH LAUNDRESS. Yes. They used to watch the church, and now they watch their sister-in-law. . . . (120-1)

This report is confirmed in the beginning of Act II Scene 2 when Juan chides his sisters, “She’s [Yerma] probably at the fountain. But you’ve known all along I don’t like her to go out alone” (127). He continues: “That woman’s [Yerma] still not here. One of you should go out with her. That’s why you’re here eating at my table and drinking my wine. . . .” (128). When Yerma returns from the fountain, he confronts her: “Don’t you know my way of thinking? The sheep in the fold and women at home. You go out too much. Haven’t you always heard me say that?” (128). Yerma, on her part, has been an obedient wife who adheres to the rules set by the male dominated society: “. . . I don’t offend you in any way. I live obedient to you, and what I suffer I keep close in my flesh . . .” (129). Martin Lamm opines that Yerma has been “fulfilling all the desires of her jealous husband, and allowing herself to be guarded by his sisters, two silent old crones. She had married Juan on her father’s orders, and had faithfully carried out her wifely duties, but only because she wanted a child . . .” (348). The character of Jeevan is retained in the Punjabi adaptation with all its insecurities and exhibition of male dominance because its absence would have weakened the cause and impact of Yerma’s tragedy.

Another significant woman character is introduced in Act I Scene 2 who is vaguely identified as ‘First Old Woman’ in the source text. She, upon introduction, first of all acts as a medium to notify the passage of time to the audience. On being questioned by the old woman whether Yerma has been married for long, Yerma replies that she has been married for “three years” (111). This illustrates that a year has passed since the opening scene of the play and there is no change in Yerma’s situation. The old woman speaks brazenly about love-making and of the pleasure one derives out of the act; but her ideas are more poetic than vulgar: “. . . I don’t know anything about it. I laid down face
up and began to sing. Children came like water. Oh, who can say this body we’ve got isn’t beautiful? You take a step and at the end of the street a horse whinnies . . .” (112).

This woman is Yerma’s sole confidante in the play. Yerma opens her heart to the old woman and confesses her teenage infatuation for Victor:

YERMA. “He [Victor alias Sarwan] took me by the waist and I couldn’t say a word to him, because I couldn’t talk. Another time this same Victor, when I was fourteen years old – he was a husky boy – took me in his arms to leap a ditch and I started shaking so hard my teeth chattered. . . . (113)

Yerma also confides that she feels no love for her husband and had married him at the behest of her father. Though she tries hard to be a ‘good’ wife and make their marriage a success, it is only the thought of her child that brings her closer to her husband: “My husband’s something else. My father gave him to me and I took him. With happiness. That’s the plain truth. Why, from the first day I was engaged to him I thought about . . . our children [ . . . ]”. A little later Yerma says: “ . . . I gave myself over to my husband for his [child, especially a son] sake and I go on giving to see if he’ll be born – but never just for pleasure”. The old woman, in contrast, relishes the pleasures of marriage bed: “It was just the opposite with me. Maybe that’s why you haven’t had a child yet. Men have got to give us pleasure, girl. They’ve got to take down our hair and let us drink water from their mouths. So runs the world”.

The old woman is in the know of the real reason why Yerma has no children. She deliberately brings up the topic and then, after arousing Yerma’s suspicions and hopes, eludes the matter: “Oh, what an open flower! What a beautiful creature you are. You leave me alone. Don’t make me say anymore. I don’t want to talk with you anymore. These are matters of honor. And I don’t burn anyone’s honor. You’ll find out. But you certainly ought to be less innocent” (113-4). Apart from the Machiavellian streak, the old woman is pagan to the extent of becoming blasphemous: “Not God; I’ve never liked God. When will people realize he doesn’t exist? Men are the ones who’ll have to help you” (114). This is spoken by her in the context of Yerma’s childlessness, insinuating that only a ‘man’ can help her and that Yerma’s husband is not ‘man’ enough. She, further, states: “Though there should be a God, even a tiny one, to send his lightning against those men

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of rotted seed who make puddles out of the happiness of the fields”. More so, in Lorca’s list of characters the old woman is termed as ‘Pagan Crone’ (102).

In Neelam Man Singh’s play, the pagan woman enters singing a song in a carefree mode. The old woman’s approach to life and marriage is in striking contrast with Yerma’s parched marital life and Yerma of the Punjabi adaptation, despite her youth, looks insipid and lifeless in comparison to the vivacious personality of the old woman.

This comparison speaks volumes about the ongoing physical and mental deterioration of Yerma as a consequence of her continuous pining for motherhood and feminine dignity.

The old woman sits down to open her bundle of food. With the force of her fist, she breaks open an onion. Her bundle contains some chapattis (Indian bread). She starts relishing her onion with a chapatti. The custom of carrying dinner to the husband toiling in the fields is common to the villages of India and Spain. It is a common habit in rural areas of India to eat a raw onion with chapattis as a complete meal. This is done out of compulsion by the poor farmers and, sometimes, out of habit by their wealthier counterparts. The onion is unceremoniously broken with the fist exhibiting the much celebrated strength and prowess of the Punjabis. This modest eating habit of rural Punjab steals its way into Neelam Man Singh’s rendition of Yerma, thus, bringing the play closer to the experiential realm of the ‘new’ audience.

Neelam Man Singh has altered some facts about the pagan woman in her production of Yerma. In the source play as well as Patar’s adaption, the woman regrets...
not having a daughter: “... I have nine children, like nine golden suns, but since not one of them is a girl, here you have me going from one side to the other” (111). But Neelam Man Singh’s version not only grants a name to the old woman – Shivdevi – but also a daughter called Narangi, who is married: “... I have nine sons, tall like cypress and all of them are unmarried. I have a daughter who has been married off...” (translated from Punjabi). The daughter is introduced in the same scene immediately after the pagan woman exits and this information is reiterated in Narangi’s conversation with Yerma:

YERMA. Isn’t your paternal house at the top of the village?
NARANGI. Yes.
YERMA. Isn’t your house near the well?
NARANGI. Yes, near the well.
YERMA. Isn’t she your mother who was just talking to me?
NARANGI. Yes.
YERMA. What is her name?
NARANGI. Shivdevi. Why, what’s wrong? (translated from Punjabi)

A similar conversation takes place in Act I Scene 2 of Lorca’s Yerma between Yerma and ‘Second Girl’:

YERMA. Doesn’t your mother live at the topmost door in the village?
SECOND GIRL. Yes.
YERMA. In the last house?
SECOND GIRL. Yes.
YERMA. What’s her name?
SECOND GIRL. Dolores. Why do you ask? (116)

‘Second Girl’ in Lorca gains distinctiveness in Neelam Man Singh and is reborn as Narangi. Moreover, Shivdevi is shown to be the same sorceress, Dolores, whom Yerma visits in the first scene of Act III. In the Spanish play and its adaptation by Patar, the pagan woman and Dolores are two different characters but in Neelam Man Singh’s interpretation, both the characters are merged into one and played by a seasoned actor of The Company, Gick Grewal. This alteration is undertaken because of two reasons. First, Neelam Man Singh is of the opinion that good actors are entitled to more meaty roles so as to justify and commend their devotion to theatre. The second reason has more practical value. Neelam Man Singh is in favour of reducing clutter on stage. She prefers to have as few of main characters as possible. In this manner, the audience is less confounded and
the focus of the play remains intact. Though The Company boasts of a good number of performers, most of them form a part of the ‘chorus’ or of the ‘crowd’; both of which are intrinsic to a Neelam Man Singh production.

Narangi is accompanied by Mita when they meet Yerma in the same scene. In Lorca, the stage directions announce that “Two Girls appear” (114). They are, further, identified as ‘First Girl’ and ‘Second Girl’. Lorca has refrained from giving too many names in his play maybe because he does not want to lose track of the primary characters and, as a result, jeopardize their magnitude. Neelam Man Singh, on the other hand, wants to give the actors their due and has reduced the dramatis personae by making the key actors play multiple roles or by giving them overlapping identities. This has been proved in Shivdevi’s case and, likewise, Mita and Narangi engage in many roles throughout the play, either as themselves or as a part of the ‘crowd’ in the laundresses’ scene and the scene at the pilgrimage.

The role of Narangi is essayed by Taranjit to perfection. Taranjit as Narangi comes across as a jovial girl who is without a worry in the world. There is a lilt in her voice and her body language is uninhibited. Her name, Narangi, means ‘orange’ in Hindi and Punjabi. True to her name, she is tangy, refreshing and colourful in her personality.

Fig. 23. Narangi played by Taranjit in Neelam Man Singh’s Yerma.
The devil-may-care attitude of Narangi is suitably translated in her costume by Neelam Man Singh. Her style of dressing is same as that of Yerma and other women of their village but her accessories make her conspicuous on stage. Like others, she is also taking food for her husband in the fields but she is not carrying it in a basket or a bundle. Instead, she has tied the pack of food around her waist. In one of her hands she holds twigs of leaves which she sways rhythmically, now and then. Besides a number of coloured scarves hanging over her shoulder and knotted around her waist, she adorns her hair with miniature oranges and leaves. During the scene, she plucks one of the oranges and chews upon it. Once in the scene, even Yerma teasingly pulls at Narangi’s hair trimmings. Long wisps of hair kiss her cheeks and her face is painted a shade of bright pink, reflecting a naughty young girl.

Narangi, the daughter of Shivdevi, acts as a complete foil to Yerma. She is childless like Yerma but she is far from miserable in her situation. Her ideas about motherhood and marriage are totally at variance with Yerma’s. Narangi delights in the freedom she has achieved on account of not having a child. It is, in fact, Narangi’s mother who is taking measures to make Narangi conceive:

SECOND GIRL. Anyway, you and I, not having any [children], live more peacefully.

YERMA. Not I.

SECOND GIRL. I do. What a bother! My mother, on the other hand, does nothing but give me herbs so I’ll have them [children], and in October we’re going to the saint who, they say, gives them [children] to women who ask for them eagerly. My mother will ask for them, not I. (115)

Narangi, in her slipshod fashion, implants the thought of going to the saint’s pilgrimage in Yerma’s mind. The idea was not intentionally conveyed to Yerma and Narangi herself was not too keen on going; but the idea was, nevertheless, off-handly tossed in the air by Narangi and caught in the sub-consciousness of Yerma.

Another minor character which demands attention is Victor because of his association with Yerma’s past. He first appears in Act I Scene 1, after the exit of Maria. It is revealed through Victor that the financial standing of Juan is improving with time since Juan has bought more sheep from him: “...Tell your husband to think less about his work. He wants to make money and he will, but who’s he going to leave it to when he
dies. . . . Tell Juan to take out the two [sheep] he bought from me . . . (110). This excerpt also informs about Juan’s obsession with his fields and flocks, thus, indicating his growing estrangement with Yerma. Victor is not simply Juan’s friend. It is later disclosed in Act I Scene 2 that Yerma has childhood fancies for Victor but due to social restraints, they could never come out in the open about their feelings for each other. The undercurrent between Yerma and Victor is hinted at by Yerma’s behaviour when Victor leaves:

Yerma, who has risen thoughtfully, goes to the place where Victor stood, and breathes deeply – like one who breathes mountain air. Then she goes to the other side of the room as if looking for something, and after that sits down and takes up the sewing again. She begins to sew. Her eyes remain fixed on one point. (110)

In the stage adaptation by Neelam Man Singh, this latent attraction between Yerma and Sarwan/Victor is depicted through Yerma’s action when Sarwan enters. After Mita leaves, Yerma becomes absorbed in the thoughts of her imaginary child once again. Music is heard off-stage and a man enters playing a flute. He walks the edges of the stage and goes upstage, his back towards the audience. Yerma is attracted by the sound of music and looks in the direction from where she hears it. Finally, he comes to stand near her and stops playing. Yerma, then, addresses him as Sarwan. Furthermore, in contrast to the source play, Neelam Man Singh ends the first scene of Act I with the echo of the song “Maye Meriye”. In her play, Sarwan leaves and Yerma recommences her fanciful dialogue with her child. She wraps the lace around her face and shoulders and is joyous at her child’s response: “Mother, do not close windows / and do not allow the boughs to dry / Next year when spring comes / I shall come for the first time” (Translated from Punjabi). The director is concentrated on Yerma’s longing for a child and has shown Yerma growing oblivious to all the other relations and emotions. Yerma is so engrossed in her imaginary world of motherhood that she is not much stirred by Sarwan’s visit. In the adaptation, Sarwan’s presence does not serve as a temptation to Yerma. Rather, he becomes a relic of her past who had the potential to give her the desired happiness.

Later in the play, these dormant emotions threaten to break forth. In the second scene of Act I, Yerma initiates physical contact with Victor:

YERMA. [. . .] What have you here?
She points to his face.

VICTOR. Where?

YERMA, she rises and stands near Victor. Here . . . on your cheek. Like a burn.

VICTOR. It’s nothing.

YERMA. It looked like one to me.

Pause. (118)

In the Punjabi production, this scene is more stylised. As the song “Chaka ve Charwahiya” comes to an end, Yerma sinks to the floor, upset and distressed. Two actors, in white, cross the stage and exit. Sarwan appears on stage, his face glowing with joy, and observes Yerma from a distance. She stands and takes a few seconds to register his presence. He encircles her, a little ominously and without losing eye contact. She forgets her misery in his company and appreciates his melodious voice. After some preliminaries, Yerma seats herself next to Sarwan. Some discomfort is detected in their body language as they sit in close proximity with each other. Tension mounts with Yerma’s comment:

YERMA, sitting next to him. What do you have on your cheek?

SARWAN. Nothing.

YERMA, getting closer. I think there is something.

Pause. Very softly, Yerma touches his cheek with the tips of her fingers.

SARWAN. Must have been caused by the sun...

YERMA, slowly removing her fingers. Do you hear that? (Translated from Punjabi)

The magical interlude is broken by the supposed sound and Yerma’s thoughts revert to her life of denied motherhood.

Victor is last seen in Act II Scene 2 when he comes to inform Yerma that he is leaving the village. Yerma recalls the time when Victor carried her in his arms, and he solemnly replies: “Everything changes” (135). She gives a vent to her bitter thoughts in the presence of Victor:

YERMA. Some things never change. There are things shut up behind walls that can’t change because nobody hears them.

VICTOR. That’s how things are. . . .

YERMA. But if they came out suddenly and shrieked, they’d fill the
world.

VICTOR. Nothing would be gained. The ditch in its place, the sheep in fold, the moon in the sky, and the man with his plow [sic].

YERMA. The great pity is we don’t profit from the experience of our elders!

By now, Yerma is resolved to take help from Dolores, the sorceress and her dialogues reflect her growing desperation.

Whereas in the Punjabi version, just as Yerma is cued by Narangi that it is time to meet Shivdevi, laughter of men floats across to them from the darkness of the wings. The stage is flooded with light. The two friends of Yerma (Narangi and Mita) are still on the spot when Jeevan and Sarwan enter. The dialogue between Yerma and Victor is deleted by Neelam Man Singh and the play plunges directly into the men’s preoccupation with fields and cattle.

Yerma, indeed, leads a miserable existence but neither of the male characters in Yerma’s life is living a contented life. Juan doubts his virility and detests the fact that his house is the centre of village gossip. His love for Yerma cannot be denied but it is buried under the shameful guilt of his family secret. Victor, alternatively, is reluctant to unveil his feelings for Yerma because of the appalling social consequences of such an act. In fact, Lorca has dealt with this issue in Blood Wedding, the very first play of his tragic trilogy. Blood Wedding, in brief, traces the story of a bride who elopes with her lover, Leonardo, soon after the completion of her marriage rites. The absconding lovers are hounded by the Bridegroom and his company, resulting in the deaths of Leonardo and the Bridegroom. The play, undeniably, is an action of the dangers involved “when an actual desire breaks the traditional pattern and is punished, ironically, in a traditional hunt to the death” (Williams 170). The seeming cowardice of Victor has its roots in the bloody outcome of running away with another man’s wife. The fear of social ex-communication and staining of family honour; the prescribed roles of men and women in society; and rigid observance of set parameters are common features between Spanish and Indian social orders.

There are two ensemble scenes in Yerma. One is the Laundresses’ Scene and the other is the scene at the pilgrimage, which also formulates the concluding scene of the
On reading *Yerma*, she perceived the two scenes to be wonderfully apposite for ensemble work. The idea lured her to choose Lorca as she works with an ensemble group. This revelation emphasizes that, in a way, the choice of a particular play for presentation is also made in terms of the human material available.

Act II Scene 1 comprises the famed Laundresses’ scene. The scene is a babble of sounds produced by the gushing waters of mountain stream; washing and drying of clothes; and a band of almost fifteen actors singing, dancing and gossiping while at work. In Neelam Man Singh’s *Yerma*, a merry sound of folk instruments is heard before a gang of performers enter and lights go on. The group is chattering and quarrelling loudly.

![Fig. 24. An actor posing as one of the laundresses in the Punjabi adaptation of *Yerma*.](image)

All of them are carrying a variety of props like clothes, buckets, bamboos and soaps. They come across as a group of busy yet melodramatic gossip mongers. Neelam Man Singh’s Laundresses’ scene makes for a unique interpretation because she does not limit herself to the use of female actors for this scene. Her involvement of the musicians and the female impersonators, along with the female actors, makes this scene a prototype of Neelam Man Singh’s theatrical idiom. The actors playing Jeevan, Mita, Narangi, Shivdevi and Sarwan appear in this scene as vague characters. A few male actors are clad as washerwomen while the female actors, in their turbans, pass off as male characters at first sight. While Sarwan is playing a washer man, Jeevan sports a “Lehenga-choli” and enacts a nagging washerwoman in moustache. Impersonation is a common device used by
Neelam Man Singh. She elaborates that the combination of male actors acting like female and vice-versa has become her work mode. Neelam Man Singh emphasises that ‘gender’ has no relevance on stage. It is only ‘character’ that is principal on stage and is, consequently, the single dictating factor.

In the original play as well as the adaptation, the discussion centres on Yerma’s childlessness and her relations with Victor. The arrival of Juan’s/Jeevan’s sisters raises questions about Yerma’s fidelity amongst the village-folks. The situation is unfortunate because Yerma is a woman of strict moral integrity and her sense of family honour and her obeisance of social strictures had since long forbidden her to stray. Yerma, by this time, has lost trust, understanding and support of the villagers who have begun to concoct tales about her alleged relations with Victor. She is, furthermore, held responsible for her childlessness:

FIFTH LAUNDRESS. She [Yerma] spent the night before last sitting on her doorstep – in spite of the cold.

FIRST LAUNDRESS. But why?

FOURTH LAUNDRESS. It’s hard work for her to stay in the house.

FIFTH LAUNDRESS. That’s the way those mannish creatures are. When they could be making lace, or apple cakes, they like to climb up on the roof, or go wade barefoot in the river.

FIRST LAUNDRESS. Who are you to be talking like that? She hasn’t any children but that’s not her fault.

FOURTH LAUNDRESS. The one who wants children, has them. These spoiled, lazy and soft girls aren’t up to having a wrinkled belly.

They laugh.

THIRD LAUNDRESS. And they dash face powder and rouge on themselves, and pin on sprigs of oleander, and go looking for some man who’s not their husband. (121)

Such remarks reveal, to a great extent, the place of women in society and how they are viewed in an oppressive patriarchal set-up.

The gossip, further, provides information about the deteriorating conditions of Yerma’s household. It throws light on Yerma’s restlessness and her gradual mental degeneration:
FOURTH LAUNDRESS. Every passing hour makes the hell in that house worse. She and her sisters-in-law, never opening their lips, scrub the walls all day, polish the copper, clean the windows with steam, and oil the floors: but the more that house shines, the more it seethes inside.

(122)

By redirecting their energies to other use, the women of Juan’s household are averting domestic clashes. Scrubbing and polishing becomes a channel to vent out their aggression and frustration.

An Indian village comes alive in Neelam Man Singh’s version of the Laundresses’ scene.

Fig. 25. The Laundresses’ Scene in Neelam Man Singh’s Yerma.

Though the content of the scene remains the same as the original, the presentation offers a fresh perspective and accounts for its newness. In contrast to the tragic circumstances of Yerma’s life, the Laundresses’ scene in the Punjabi adaptation is vibrant, highly visual and, in places, quite comic and bawdy. Each musician is wearing a stark white “kurta-lungi”. The look is completed by red turbans with one end loose and hanging behind their backs. Though, this style of turban is exclusively worn by men of Rajasthan and Haryana, yet Neelam Man Singh has effortlessly incorporated the fashion in her Punjabi presentation. The washerwomen are dressed in simple printed “lehenga-cholis” (a long skirt teamed with a blouse that covers the waist-band of the skirt) worn with huge turbans...
which give them a peculiar look. All the performers blend well and execute their prescribed chores in order and without failing. They sing and make formations, pausing before the sisters on left, then right and then facing the audience. Against this heaving picture of communal life, Yerma’s unhappiness achieves unbearable poignancy.

Halcyon Theatre performed *Yerma* in the session 2006-07 at Steep Theatre in Chicago. The Laundresses’ scene enacted by the Halcyon group lacks the ingenuity of Neelam Man Singh’s production. A group of eight-ten women are facing one another over a narrow course of an engineered river.

![Fig. 26. The Laundresses' scene in the Halcyon production of *Yerma*.](image)

Juan’s two sisters, dressed in black, pretend complete immersion in their chore while the village women jeer at them, converting their domestic issue into a public affair. The black costumes of the sisters are consistent with Lorca’s stage directions: “They [Juan’s sisters] are dressed in mourning” (123). The assigned duties are being performed by the women simultaneously and the fanciful baskets are flaunted but the production falls short of the impact created by the billowing dances, the energetic movements and the absolute stage-use of The Company.

In contrast to almost-bare stage of Halcyon, the set of Holy Cross’s 1984 production of *Yerma* is impressive. Designed by Bill Rynders, the set and the lights sustain the European charm of the play. At a rather awkward angle, the door of Juan’s house is visible. From one side of the door, a set of six steps enclose the house forming a semi-circle. The steps are wide enough to accommodate a number of actors and big props.
They wound up in a spiral manner and have the rustic look of cobblestones on the surface. The rising steps accentuate the mountainous terrain of the play, especially highlighted by Lorca in the Laundresses’ scene: “A fast flowing mountain stream where the village women wash their clothes. . . .” (120).

For this scene, a sheet of blue with ripples of white is arranged in the middle of the steps, length-wise, to signify a stream. The women sit on either banks of the contrived river. The spiral steps, on one hand, help the audience to get a better view and, on the other hand, are in keeping with Lorca’s guidelines for arranging the laundresses “at various levels”. The two sisters-in-law sit at the bottom of the steps dressed in white. Depending upon culture and perspective, the colour of mourning varies from black to white. Irrespective of the presentation, the production fails to reach the hurly-burly of rural domesticity depicted in the Punjabi adaptation of the play. In Neelam Man Singh’s Laundresses’ scene, the cruelty of village folks is intermingled with their caricatured characterisation and lewd bickering; and the visual effect is heightened by their choreographed formations and deliberate pauses.

The sisters of Juan act as personification of Yerma’s melancholy. They are thus described by one of the laundresses: “They’d give me the creeps. They’re like those big
leaves that quickly spring up over graves. They’re smeared with wax. They grow inwards. I figure they must fry their food with lamp oil” (121). The prevailing gloominess of Yerma’s house is symbolised by the sisters’ presence. Both remain silent through the play barring in Act II Scene 2, when the only word they speak is “Yerma!”, after Yerma leaves to meet Dolores (137). Another time, one of them says, “Here she is” when Yerma is discovered by Juan in the sorcerer’s house in the first scene of Act III (141). In Neelam Man Singh’s play, the duo does not utter a single word. They are seen, on different occasions, standing in the shadows, eavesdropping on Yerma and Jeevan, serving food to their brother and, even, helping with the stage setting; but they never speak. The sisters are portrayed by female impersonators. They wear grey clothes in accordance with their dreary character.

There are two scenes in the play which stand witness to Yerma’s ever-increasing misery. In Act II Scene 2, Juan tries to reinforce his control on Yerma by expressing his dislike for her conduct. An argument ensues. It intensifies when Yerma talks about her youth which stops her from being contented in her misery: “... If I could suddenly turn into an old woman and have a mouth like a withered flower, I could smile and share my life with you. But now – now you leave me alone with my thorns” (129).

In the Punjabi adaptation, Yerma, on entering, repeats her water ritual of the opening scene. Following the bickering, she smears her lipstick all over her face, in agitation. At this point, Jeevan tries to comfort her by hugging her but she shrugs him off and takes a step backwards. This act of Yerma’s is in direct contrast with the opening scene of the play where she takes an initiative and Jeevan prevents her from hugging him. Yerma has lost hope from her husband now and is falling into the darkness which will slowly engulf her being by the end of the play.

A passing reference to adoption made by Juan in this scene also gets eliminated in the Punjabi adaptation. In the source text, Juan suggests: “Everybody’s not the same way. Why don’t you bring one of your brother’s children here? I don’t oppose that” (129). Yerma strongly resists the proposition and says that her “arms would freeze” from holding someone else’s child. Yerma’s resentment for adoption appears obsolete in present scenario of population explosion when Government and other social agencies are promoting legal adoption in cases where the interested applicants can afford a decent
upbringing for the child. Other methods for sponsoring a child, especially girl, have
gained impetus, too. In the midst of a significant social revolution, the idea propelled by
Yerma’s refusal can become a serious impediment. Nonetheless, Yerma seems to have
her own reasons for contesting adoption. Perhaps it is her latent wish to prove to the
world that she is not barren which compels her to vehemently oppose Jeevan’s
suggestion. Her need to reinstate her feminine dignity urges her to fight for a child from
her womb. But, Neelam Man Singh, taking her social responsibility in earnest, does away
with this particular section of conversation.

Other than the dialogues, the two sisters, who hover in the shadows in the original
play, are also deleted from this episode of dissension between man and wife. To show the
journey of her protagonist, Neelam Man Singh focuses on the physical shape adopted by
Yerma’s frustration. As the argument builds up, Yerma is pushed by Jeevan, she screams,
groans and laughs devilishly. The next moment, Jeevan drops the fight and, in a placatory
manner, offers food to Yerma. She bitterly refuses and exits. This is, again, in contrast to
the source text in which Juan leaves and Yerma breaks into a song:

Oh, what a field of sorrow!
Oh, this is a door to beauty closed:
to beg a son to suffer, and for the wind
to offer dahlias of a sleeping moon! . . . (131)

Lorca, in his customary manner, does not supply any stage directions for the scene except
for a slight clue that Yerma sings the song “as though dreaming” (131). There are no
indications for her movements, her gestures or even the tone of her voice. The song ends
with the coming of Maria and Yerma wakes from her supposed dream.

On the other hand, the song that follows, in the Punjabi version, is one of the high-
water marks of Patar’s poetry. It shows, in an exemplary way, the magic created by the
unison of Patar’s verse and Neelam Man Singh’s directorial vision. As Yerma goes in the
wings, Jeevan picks up the dimly-lit lantern and, as per the theatrical convention, the
sisters help him clear the stage. Moving downstage, Jeevan empties the contents of a
small bowl making a horizontal white line along the edge of the stage. Meanwhile, a
hand-held curtain is brought in to cover the household setting and transport the audience
to a no man’s land. The stage is littered with dry leaves. The two sisters take positions at
either end of the stage holding a rope chest-high, parallel to the audience. When Jeevan
leaves, Yerma reappears with a flaming “mashal” – a make-shift torch – with which she sets the rope on fire. Correspondingly, music begins. Yerma half falls on the pile of leaves and shuffles them spitefully. The song, “Saeion nee main ant-heen tarkalan” (Oh dear, I am an endless nightfall!), epitomises the feverish longing and pain of Yerma. Suffused with heat, Neelam Man Singh’s Yerma groans and wails during the song.

The rope scene is the most talked about scene of the play. The asbestos rope, doused in kerosene, when lit, burns like a sheet of fire. Yerma sits below this almost transparent wall of fire. Neelam Man Singh believes that it is the choreography of the burning rope that mystifies the audience. The song and the fire extinguishing gradually are synchronised by their own mysterious laws. It is one of the most powerful visuals of the play. When the rope burns out, only cinders are left. The rope is symbolic of the threshold which Yerma will cross in the next scene by visiting Shivdevi. On many occasions earlier, crossing the threshold has been the main cause of strife between Yerma and her husband. In her desperation now, Yerma will break the patriarchal laws by
stepping out of the house and seeking help from Shivdevi. The powdered line drawn by Jeevan on the stage is reminiscent of the “Lakshman-rekha” drawn by Prince Lakshman in Ramayana. “Rekha” means ‘line’ in Hindi. This line was drawn by Lakshman to protect his sister-in-law, Sita, the wife of Lord Rama, from the demons of Ravana. Sita was compelled to cross that line to offer alms to Ravana disguised as a sage, which led to her abduction. For Indian audience, this symbolism is not esoteric and is immediately appreciated. Yerma bends under and challenges the sheet of fire which, in a way, signifies her going through fire. The dry leaves stand for the dryness of her life but, still, there is fire in her being which is expressed through her heart-rending cries. She is like a burning passion. Similar to the rope, her life has been reduced to cinders. Yerma’s weeping beneath the taut rope of fire into a pile of dried leaves lends a grace and trance-like quality to her angst.

The second noteworthy scene in the journey of Yerma takes place in the house of Dolores. In the first scene of the third act, Yerma is seen with “Dolores and two Old Women” (138). It is reported that they have been to the cemetery to perform some pagan ceremony so that Yerma can bear a child. The ceremony is not performed on stage and the women only talk about the positive results of such prayers. On the contrary, the Punjabi adaptation shows Shivdevi absorbed in performing a ritual when the scene opens. She strews some flowers on the stage and lights a fire in a shallow basin in front of her. Yerma moves in frenzied circles to the beat of music. Her movement intensifies as the music becomes louder and more urgent till she collapses. The ensuing dialogue takes place in the red glow of the fire. Yerma visits Shivdevi in the company of Mita and Narangi. Neelam Man Singh has shortened the scene by editing many dialogues. She feels that some of the descriptions are too coarse and elemental by Indian standards to be enacted on stage. For instance:

YERMA... I have an idea that women who’ve recently given birth are as though illumined from within and the children sleep hours and hours on them, hearing that stream of warm milk filling the breasts for them to suckle, for them to play in until they don’t want anymore, until they lift their heads, “just a little more, child...” – and their faces and chests are covered with the white drops. (139)
Many similar discourses failed to impress Neelam Man Singh and were dropped in her production.

Unlike Juan who tracks down Yerma with his two sisters, Jeevan is alone when he enters Shivdevi’s house. An argument takes place, packed with allegations and explanations, between Yerma and her husband. She tries to reason with him but Jeevan is constantly breaking away from Yerma. The climax is reached when Jeevan pushes her and Yerma breaks down. She wails and beats her hands on her head, cursing her father for leaving her with the blood “of a hundred sons” (143). Soon after, she faints. Jeevan calls out her name twice and then carries her off-stage in his arms.

Fig. 29. The scene at Dolores’ in the Punjabi version of Yerma.

This conclusion to the scene differs from the source play in which Yerma continues to complain and is constantly checked by Juan for fear of being heard by others:

JUAN. Silence.
YERMA. That’s it! That’s it! Silence. Never fear.
JUAN. Let’s go. Quick!
YERMA. That’s it! That’s it! And it’s no use for me to wring my hands!
It’s one thing to wish with one’s head . . .
JUAN. Be still!
YERMA, low. It’s one thing to wish with one’s head and another for the body – cursed be the body! – not to respond. It’s written, and I’m not
going to raise my arms against the sea. That’s it! Let my mouth be
struck dumb!

She leaves. (141)

Some minor episodes also undergo serious editing in the adaptation. In Act II
Scene 2, after the song, Yerma notices Maria carrying her child and hurrying past her
door. The exchange between the friends reveals Yerma’s hatred for her sisters-in-law, her
relationship with her husband, and her self-pity on seeing Maria’s child. After Maria
leaves, “SECOND GIRL” emerges out of the darkness and informs Yerma that her
“mother’s expecting” Yerma (134). This is the same girl who meets Yerma in Act I Scene
2 and is the daughter of Dolores. The girl hides her true intent from Victor who comes to
the house looking for Juan. In Neelam Man Singh’s production, the friend, Mita, and
Narangi together meet Yerma after the song. Mita is not with her baby and the segment of
conversation revolving around Yerma’s sisters-in-law, Jeevan/Juan and Mita’s baby are
deleted. However, the humiliation Yerma feels at the sight of crop-laden fields, over­
flowing streams and other forms of nature’s bounty is carried forward in the adaptation.
Later, when the act closes, Yerma, with a look of determination, gets up and leaves with
Mita and Narangi for Shivdevi’s. Neelam Man Singh does not show the sisters-in-law
searching for Yenna at the end of the scene because that would have meddled with the
flow of Yerma’s journey and would have hindered audience’s appreciation of Yerma’s
newly-found freedom, even though short-lived. The resolution demonstrated in her
posture and facial expressions demanded complete attention and would have been
interfered with by the shouts of the ghoulish sisters-in-law.

The concluding scene of the play, Act III Scene 2, comprises the ritual of the
saint. Lorca describes the scene as a concoction of sight and sounds: “Downstage are the
wheels of a cart and some canvas forming the rustic tent where Yerma is. Some women
enter carrying offerings for the shrine. They are barefoot.” (144). A little later, more
details are provided:

Girls running with long garlands in their hands appear from the left. On
the right, three others, looking backward. On the stage there is something
like a crescendo of voices and harness bells, and bellringers’ collars.
Higher up appear the Seven Girls who wave the garlands towards the left.
The noise increases and the two traditional Masks appear . . . The back of
In Neelam Man Singh’s production also, the scene begins with the sound of festivities. It formulates the second ensemble scene of the production, first being the Laundresses’ scene. Barring a few minor alterations, the content of the dialogue remains unchanged in the adaptation. However, the activities at the shrine – the coquettish behaviour of the girls, the bacchic revelry of the pilgrims, the puppet show, songs and dances – are presented in a new form in the backdrop of Punjabi folk.

When the scene opens in the Punjabi adaptation, whistles, loud cries and hooting are heard off-stage. Immediately the stage is flooded with lights and a string of decorative lights is lowered from the flies. Musicians and a number of performers enter dancing on folk music and brandishing coloured ribbons, streamers and baskets.

A multicoloured curtain is brought on the stage signifying a tent. Shivdevi is seated in front of this tent and drinking from a bottle. By virtue of its being an ensemble scene, all
the actors are seen either as themselves or doubled as various other characters. In a fit of ribaldry, the performers form a group and start wooing a girl, one at a time, with verses and presents. After the song, everyone collapses; some of them out of fatigue, but many because they are drunk. A casual conversation involving Shivdevi, her daughter and Mita reveals that the ritual is little more than violent abuse of women justified under the name of religion: “You come to ask the saint for children, and it just happens that every year more single men come on this pilgrimage too; what’s going on here?” (144). The scene is teeming with boisterous laughs and tipsy cheers. Even the girls enjoy themselves when the young boys tease them.

A puppet show also forms a part of the scene. The convention of play-within-a-play is firmly grounded in indigenous theatrical tradition of India. In Lorca’s *Yerma*, “two traditional Masks appear”, a “male and female” (147). The children recognise them as “The devil and his wife!” (147). But in the Punjabi adaptation, the puppets are recognised as Shiva and Parvati, and Nata and Natni. Shiva is a major Hindu god and is worshipped in many manifestations including that of Nataraja, the lord of dance. He is the cosmic dancer in Hindu mythology who performs his divine dance to destroy a weary universe. Shiva and Parvati, the consort of Shiva, are closely associated with music and dance in Hindu tradition. Nata means male dancer and natni is the female dancer in Indian folk tradition. In *Yerma*, two Naqqals pose as puppets and enact a drama which runs parallel to the story of Yerma’s life. It is a short three-minute sequence.

After the puppet show, dancing is resumed. As the villagers go berserk, Yerma lights five “diyas” (bowls of earthenware) in a “thaal” (plate). Here again, the adaptation differs from the source play in which Yerma enters with other women who are carrying “decorated candles” (145). For Neelam Man Singh, the five “diyas” represent the “panch-tatva” or the five elements – earth, water, fire, sky and air. Two spotlights are used, one on Yerma and the other on the villagers drunk on excesses. Yerma is chanting something in her mouth as Shivdevi enters and offers help to Yerma in the form of her sons.
Shivdevi talks in a hypnotic manner, urgently and with force. This is the moment in the play when the truth about Jeevan’s family is spoken out by Shivdevi: “... The fault is your husband’s. Do you hear? He can cut off my hands if it isn’t. Neither his father, nor his grandfather, nor his great-grandfather behaved like men of good blood. For them to have a son heaven and earth had to meet – because they’re nothing but spit” (150).

Yerma refuses to succumb to temptation and the theatre reverberates with Shivdevi’s hoarse cries of “baanj” – barren. The growing chants of “baanj” lead to the killing of Jeevan. The killing of Yerma’s husband is metaphorically depicted in Neelam Man Singh’s version. In the source text, Yerma strangles Juan to death. In Neelam Man Singh, the death is more stylised. Shivdevi’s departure is coincided with another spotlight that shows Jeevan waiting in the dark for Yerma. A line of actors is led on-stage by two girls with torches. They sit behind Yerma. Two actors hold a sheet of black in front of Jeevan. When Yerma is convinced that “her husband only seeks sensual satisfaction with her, and does not wish for a child”, she is infuriated and douses the flame of the five diyas with her hands (Lamm 348). As the urgency increases in Jeevan’s voice, Yerma anoints her left hand with red water from a pot, trembling with anger. Jeevan offers to kiss Yerma and shower her with affection. She stands near him and, with a shriek, throws the remaining red colour in his direction and breaks the pot by crashing it onto the floor. Instantly, the girls holding the black sheet pull it downwards, revealing a white one instead. The white sheet is smeared with the redness of Jeevan’s blood.
In an interview with *The Guardian*, Neelam Man Singh elucidates:

An Indian woman would rather kill herself than strangle an impotent husband for not being able to conceive a son. I knew the audience wouldn’t accept Yerma’s strangling her husband, so I had to think of another way to kill him. I decided to make the killing metaphorical rather than real. And I believe because I did it that way the Indian audience raised no objection. (Faulkner)

The killing becomes even more symbolic because of Neelam Man Singh’s use of images associated with death. The use of a white sheet, fire and breaking of the pot are intrinsic to an Indian cremation.

In the original play, Yerma chokes her husband to death and announces:

YERMA. . . . Now I’ll sleep without startling myself awake, anxious to see if I feel in my blood another new blood. My body dry forever! What do you [the crowd] want? Don’t come near me, because I’ve killed my son. I myself have killed my son! (153)

On the other hand, Surjit Patar visualises a different conclusion for his publication. His ‘Soma’ hopes to mingle with the earth. She believes that flowers would bloom from that soil resulting in her long-awaited motherhood.
Neelam Man Singh does not relate with Patar’s ending. She does not like her characters to say too much. Neelam Man Singh feels that certain lines might sound good as poetry but become a bit over-the-top on stage. “Academicians are bothered about niceties (of language), the practitioners are not,” says Neelam Man Singh. She is of the opinion that along with the characters, the actors also embark on a journey during a play. The actors develop in a particular direction. Therefore, it is not plausible to suddenly introduce another journey and transform the character into another being altogether. Patar has made Soma endure another journey of renewal by her taking refuge in the earth. Neelam Man Singh says that when a play is performed, on one hand, the audience needs to know how development is taking place and, on the other hand, the emotional graph of the actor has to be taken into consideration. She does not recommend taking the actor to one point and then suddenly bringing her to another level. Differing with Patar’s and Lorca’s conclusion, Neelam Man Singh’s Yerma leaves the stage, screaming wildly. All the other actors follow her. Her wails are piercingly audible, cutting through the darkness of the stage.

Neelam Man Singh’s fascination with Lorca’s imagery dates back to her drama-school days when she did her major project on Lorca. In an interview with Yorkshire on Sunday, she states: “I think there are amazing physical links between the two countries, and whatever else, great drama, great writing is just as relevant in whichever language it is performed”. She, further, believes that Punjabi sentiments and poetic imagery are very similar to those expressed by Lorca. Neelam Man Singh has successfully turned Lorca’s symbolism into visually exciting theatre by using traditional music and her company of highly-trained performers.

There are many occasions in the play where songs are used to depict the mental state of Yerma. Unlike the source play, the songs in the Punjabi version are enriched by the use of a live chorus, dancers and props. In the opening scene, when Jeevan leaves for the fields Yerma looks searchingly in the mirror with painful eyes as if she pities her gradually declining youth and beauty or, may be, their utter waste. With renewed hope, she makes the bed and bedecks herself with bangles and other jewellery. Here, her youth comes in stark contrast with the age obvious in her husband’s movements and dialogues. The song that follows, “Maye Meriye” (My Mother), reveals that Yerma is happiest when left alone with the thoughts of her child, especially son. In the song, she eagerly awaits
her son and questions him about the time of his arrival. The child assures her that: “Next year when spring comes / I shall come for the first time” (translated from Punjabi). During the course of the song, she plays lovingly with her imaginary child. The most striking element of the song is that two female impersonators come on the stage with a cotton sheet in hand. The sheet is rolled length-wise to resemble a long rope. Both edges of the rope-like sheet are held by the two female impersonators. Yerma sits on that sheet and is swung by them till the song ends. Her talk of love, her fondness for make-up and jewellery, and her joy when she sits on the improvised swing call attention to her budding youth. Yerma feels rejuvenated by the reassurances of her ‘son’ conveyed through the song.

Another song titled “Chaka ve Charwahiyaa” comes in the second scene of Act I. After her conversation with Narangi, Yerma, in good cheer, picks up her basket and makes to leave when the sound of music stops her in her tracks. Four impersonators enter and begin dancing to the tune. The backdrop curtain of black, criss-crossed with golden lace used for the first half of the second scene is removed as Yerma starts spinning a pattern of dance around her fictitious child. Yerma, on one side of the stage, plays with her ‘child’ while the four impersonators dance in a group on the other end. They are dressed alike in “lehenga-cholis” and their heads are covered with dark green “dupattas”.

Fig. 33. Ramanjit Kaur as Yerma along with female impersonators enact the song “Chaka ve Charwahiyaa” in the Punjabi adaptation.

‘Charwahaa’ means a herdsman in Hindi and Punjabi and ‘charwahiyaa’ is its colloquial form. ‘Chaka’ is basically a title used for ‘Ranjha’, a legendary lover of Punjab who is said to have taken up service of a cowherd in the household of his beloved, Heer.
Ranjha belonged to an affluent family but in order to stay close to Heer, he feigned penury and chose to serve Heer’s family. ‘Chaka’, in the song, can have manifold connotations. It is likely that the song actually refers to ‘Ranjha’, the ideal lover because it is revealed, after the song, that it was Sarwan who sang the song. Sarwan is the one-time infatuation of Yerma which makes him an equivalent of Ranjha. Secondly, Ranjha used to tend to the buffaloes of Heer’s father. Sarwan is also a herdsman. Thirdly, this supposition also has its foundation in the concluding words of Narangi. Just before her exit, Narangi simulates regret at serving a husband who does not reach the idealistic love of Ranjha. She fancies taking food for Ranjha, instead: “See, what a pity – dinner for my husband! It would have been lot more exciting had I been taking crushed bread for Ranjha” (Translated from Punjabi).

Another possibility is that ‘chaka’ has been used for Yerma’s ‘child’ as her child is her only true love. In the song, the singer is searching for his/her love that is playing truant: “The tinkling of an anklet hollers out your name daily / the throbbing of a bosom calls out to you all through the night” (Translated from Punjabi). Yerma’s child is also dodging her, regardless of her continual shouts and wails. That the song refers to her child is also underlined by the fact that Yerma is zealously playing with her ‘son’ throughout the song.

Neelam Man Singh’s approach to theatre underscores Francisque Sarcey’s theory that a play without an audience is inconceivable. In Yerma, Neelam Man Singh adopted a style which is rooted in cultural traditions and aspirations of India, particularly rural Punjab. This cultural transcoding is apparent not only in the costumes, habits and beliefs of the characters, but is also noticeable in terms of the emotional charges and the body language of the actors. In Brechtian style, she jolts her audience out of their customary stupor by playing live music and delegating multiple roles to the actors. At the same time, her belief that her actors play a decisive role in the selection of plays underlines Allardyce Nicoll’s belief that actors, correspondingly with audience, are main ingredients of theatre. Neelam Man Singh’s consideration for her performers as well as her audience is manifest in every decision taken by her during the production of Yerma: the use of elements, ensemble scenes, folk songs, “Lakshman-rekha”, extension of roles and the death scene of Jeevan, besides others.
Even though Neelam Man Singh strongly asserts that good art is a ‘collaborative’ endeavour, yet her role as the leader of the team cannot be contested. Linda Hutcheon also gives primacy to the director who, according to her, “is ultimately held responsible for the overall vision” (85). Writer, translator, music composer and the actors add various dimensions to a play but, it is the director who brings them together and, with their cooperation, gives the new script “embodied life”. It is commendable that along with the demanding position of a director, Neelam Man Singh designed the set and the costumes for the play. Though the female actors are not dressed in typical Punjabi style, their costumes have a folk touch and provide an ocular feast. Notwithstanding the fact that Patar adapted the text, Neelam Man Singh comes across as the real ‘auteur’ of the production. Patar’s script underwent editions and modifications during rehearsals. The final form and the impact of the production is actually Neelam Man Singh’s.

On commenting upon choosing a play that is written in Spanish, translated into English by James Graham-Lujan and Richard L. O’Connell, and adapted in Punjabi by Surjit Patar, Neelam Man Singh says, “Language is not sound, it is images and impulses. How you interpret the emotions is what matters the most”. The emotions of a play are embedded in the subtext which can have numerous theatrical possibilities. Stanislavsky appropriately comments: “...spectators come to the theatre to hear the subtext. They can read the text at home” (qtd. in Styan 224). Mere interpretation of the text does not interest a viewer. The staging becomes a creative process when the text is re-interpreted and explained through the combined skills of the director and actors.