Chapter 5:
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Women's contributions as actors, directors, organisers, activists and writers of plays are very substantial in the Indian context of art and culture. They have been very active not only on the stage and in the print culture but also on the streets. By intensifying theatre on the street through their plays - "Beyond Facades", "Thirst" and "Purdah", these playwrights kept the legacy of Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) alive. Today theatre has opened many avenues for women and indeed theatre of women is growing. Women have emerged not just as the playwrights but as the theatre practitioners and are running their own companies, conducting several production-oriented drama workshops and teaching theatre in colleges and universities. They explored the history of drama and theatre, the use of myth, adaptations and translations and the political and socio-economic conditions of India.

The explosion of interest among women in theatre criticism, research, performance, theatre-groups and translations related to drama is the result of the explosion of plays written by women specifically on women. When viewed as a whole it can be noticed that the eighteen regional playwrights have not only experimented with the genre of drama but also ventured into depicting, constructing and staging women's issues and concerns beyond their class, caste and gender. In constructing and staging the women's identity through resistance, these playwrights as actors, theatre-critics, directors and activists, have become the central players in the debates concerning women.

In the opening chapter several queries were raised and commitment was made to explore the nature of resistance which characterises the eighteen plays which are translated into English from Indian regional languages. In the subsequent chapters an attempt has been made to fulfil this commitment in some measure. There is a constant flow of the theme of resistance from one play to another. This theme of resistance is explored in different ways as it exists in the everyday ordinary life of a woman.

These playwrights have directed the attention of the reader/audience to the unique situation of women not only in the domestic arena but also in myths, legends, history and social reform movements. They have generated research about women. Through staging they have endeavoured to expose and also to eradicate the discriminatory conditions.
They have enabled women to resist by challenging and by transcending dominant representations of them as docile beings.

The years of the societal and the cultural conditioning have taught the Indian women to be self-effacing, submissive and subordinate to men, and to suffer the patriarchal hegemony in silence. The feminist approach of the playwrights has deconstructed such traditional concepts of woman. They have presented a “New Woman” by revealing the rich diversity among women belonging to different socio-economic and educational levels besides their other identity categories like Dalits, Muslims, soldiers, courtesans, uneducated, deserted wives, the second wives, widows and domestic servants. The content of their plays have ranged from re-working of traditional myths and legends to current social issues.

The study of these women playwrights have opened up the rich heritage of women’s resistance literature which is hardly tapped. Women’s resistance literature has comprised a wide variety of approaches in terms of both substance and form of expression. The plays have expressed creatively the aspirations and the dilemmas of women who have accepted the values and lifestyles of progressive individualism.

The study has pointed out that the women protagonists have developed different resistance strategies to survive the indifference of men, oppressive social roles and cultural and historical erasure by engaging in subtle and silent strategies, standing up to the partner’s attempts at their control, fighting back vigorously, holding their ground and refusing to be dominated.

The playwrights have appropriated the specific space of stage in order to present a new woman protagonist who utters a strain of resistance as she feels stifled under the oppressive constraints. These women have their own changed notions of life. The genre of drama has helped open up a space for debating the subjects that were considered to be social “taboos”. Aspects that were private like sexuality and interpersonal relations became objects of study. They have provided their protagonists a distinct voice of their own, and their opinions do not need the sanction of the elders of the family in order to be articulated. As the mainstream media have failed to provide the means for women to give an account of themselves, these women made use of the space provided by the stage and the street which helped reinforce the liberal values.

Women’s writing is perceived to be engaged with domesticity, marriage, motherhood, wifehood and family. They have mostly done so since they started writing. Despite these limited engagements, the women playwrights have reached out to define
women's "self" anew. By doing so, they have not only contributed to the scholarship on the genre of drama by women but also on women's theatre - an area that has started receiving research attention slowly. By analysing the representative spectrum of plays by women playwrights, the study covers the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century by dealing with plays from "The Wedding Tangle" (1904) to "Thirst" (2002), "Purdah (2002) and "Frozen Fire" (2003). These playwrights' focus provides a much-needed challenge to the male-dominated dramatic canon. They have also written poetic plays - "Fida" (1990), "Sundran" (1991), "Crossing the River" (2000) and "Frozen Fire" (2003). A study of the women protagonists has revealed how the distortions in the social and familial order affect women more adversely than men. Despite, these women emerge out of it by throwing off the legacy of their suppression.

Woman's writing whether in the genre of drama or any other genre can not be treated as a monolithic structure. The plays of these women playwrights reflect their concern and preoccupation with familial, social, political, historical and mythical issues related to women. Their act of writing plays has enabled them to move outside the narrow roles. These playwrights have discovered a new potentiality in the life of the low and the lowest, the deprived and the humiliated. They have helped construct the basis for studies related to women.

The playwrights have used a strategy totally different from the stereotype writings handed down by the patriarchal order through the centuries. They have transformed their protagonists. Though it is almost unintentional part of their writings, these plays are intensely feminist in their messages, as they have addressed numerous feminist themes. The women protagonists have refused to identify themselves by disabling definitions that mark them as inferior, other, marginalised and subaltern. Therefore these playwrights have resisted presenting their protagonists onstage by such definitions. The playwrights have created out of the oppression of women the plays that resist the challenging dominant cultural ideology.

These playwrights by bringing women's previously ignored and discounted thoughts, actions and words on stage have illuminated the workings and the potential of women-power that the patriarchy would keep in dark. The study brings out the multifaceted perspectives on these playwrights' contribution to the genre of drama and the performing art of theatre. The plays foreground the roles of the playwrights in sustaining theatres as they dealt with reformist notions. The plays reveal how the playwrights as theatre practitioners, actors and directors have represented women at
different moments in the history of the nation. They have represented women who challenged mythical, legendary, historical, familial and reformist ideologies, and confronted caste biases and also highlighted the gendered experiences of real women during the 1857 Mutiny.

They have also made significant contributions in many realms. The alternative space of street has been made use of in order to address the issues of other groups as Dalits and Muslim women who remain marginalised from the mainstream nationalist literature. Women like Swarnakumari Devi Goshal worked from the beginning in many spheres - from domesticity to the wider public sphere supposedly reserved for men. She was the editor of a monthly journal *Bharati*. The nationalist struggle of 1857 has been brought into the private realm of the courtesan - Azizun. The play has involved a complex representation of nationalism and gender politics by highlighting the private and the public domains. Besides making a Harijan girl the protagonist, Kusum Kumar through the character of the Mother, highlights how the social pressures on women push them to take radical steps and how these social pressures on women often go unnoticed.

The playwrights have deconstructed the depriving structures of ancient myths and legends that still operate in Indian society. Their feminist myth revisions of Sita, Amba, Mandodari and Medea have sought to overcome the mainstream hero-centred myths that validate the subjugation of women in patriarchal culture. The injured women of these myths pledge to take revenge in some way or other, underlying the intensity of their sufferings. Instead of being quiet, these women have come up with alternative solutions.

The re-presentation of history, myths and legends highlight the point that all the three are not neutral but many a times are politically, socially and even personally motivated renderings. They are structured and controlled by the powers that promote and perpetuate their own ideology. History appeals to the idea of the nationality with its recorded facts which lends authenticity. Myths appeal to the religious faith of the people whereas legends present the extraordinary deeds of local people. The women playwrights have manipulated these three traditional narratives in order to talk about gender-justice, power, morality and individual choice. They have tried to achieve this through two ways - they have transferred these from their narrative forms to a dramatic form and secondly they have dragged them from the planes of antiquity to contemporaneity for their own purposes.

The playwrights have underscored the aftermaths of men's neglect; of their emotional, psychological and physical abuse of women; and of their disregard for
children and family responsibility. The plays have focused on women’s situation when they are abandoned not by accident or nature but through the mistakes of a man. But the plays have portrayed them as different from the stereotypes of helpless and suffering. Here they take control of their own lives and display courage that shake up the norms of morality. They adopt modern medical methods and seek the support of law courts as in Jahan’s play “Woman” and desert their husbands as in Dev Sen’s play “Medea” and Sagar’s “The Swing of Desire”.

The plays have focused on the position of women in domestic spaces too. These domestic women are accorded highly vocal roles by generating debates on subjects such as woman’s right to choose and to have children - privately as in “Gamble”; without marriage as in “The Six of Them” and from extramarital relations as in “The Swing of Desire”. The plays discuss the social roles expected of women from arranged marriage, love marriage, bigamy, widow remarriage, girl-education, premarital and extramarital relationship. Their voice assumes a force that allows them to express their strong opinions on the challenges of marriage. Usha Ganguli in her “The Journey Within” has redefined the space of the theatre and also of the bodies performing there on. As an actor-director she has enacted the fundamental issues of female existence and identity. Mamta G. Sagar in her “The Swing of Desire” has brought on the stage the important aspect of feminist debate that is on the violation of women’s right to her body. Similarly in “The Six of Them” the playwright allows her protagonists to break the norms. They resent being sidetracked. They exhibit anger, articulate their feelings and ultimately take their own decision though it is not considered healthy according to the traditional tenets. The protagonists in these plays redefine the new woman who is more open to experiences of sex without qualms - be it premarital or extramarital. They seek a radical revision of society and often call for the creation of alternate female systems to replace those of the patriarchy.

The pre-Independence drama was in the process of becoming. Still they celebrate resistance against paradigms of patriarchy. e. g. Swarnakumari Devi’s “The Wedding Tangle” (1904) though less overtly feminist, it kindled the sparks of feminist issues and it also clearly kept them alive in the play. After 1975, the Women’s Liberation Movement talked about the concept of “sisterhood” i. e. bhagini bhav among the community of women. Sisterhood expects women to treat other women with concern and understanding and be support of one another. As back as 1904, 1937, 1947 and 1951 the women playwrights like Swarnakumari Devi, Rasheed Jahan, Malatibai Bedekar and Muktabai
Dikshit respectively wrote about this concept before it gained its acceptance and came into existence. Muktabai Dikshit in her play “Gamble” expresses her intent through the character of Shrikant. She is of the opinion that if she is able to convince a single woman that one should treat others just like one treats oneself, with love and sympathy, she will be happy. If she succeeds in this one task, it will mean that she has worked for women’s problem.

The ideology of sisterhood constructs a safe space where women could affirm one another and by so doing they heal many of the wounds inflicted on all of them by male hegemony. They have learnt to love and respect each other in the culture of male supremacy. Together they grow, develop and nurture one another’s spirits. They make a community of resistance and operate from their homeplace. By believing in and practising sisterhood, the female characters in these plays resisted within and also outside their houses and strived to be subjects and not objects.

In India femininity is more socially constructed than in many other cultures. The Indian mythology, families, religious taboos and the cultural narratives have marked the strong demarcations between the good and the bad, and the moral woman and the immoral one. Women have been assigned their spheres of exclusion. They share a common history of constraints. Whatever the religion in practice, the burden of the constraints has always been borne by women. They are considered the keepers of traditions, rituals, family and morality. Hence, women’s freedom, their right to fight and interrogate the norms and any manifestation of their intellectuality and maturity of mind is considered a threat to the structure of society. Women are expected to live only through their bodies and not through their minds.

The protagonists of these plays share certain characteristics and experiences. They have enormous strength, courage and skill. The most common type of protagonist is the wife. Rejecting the role of victims, some of them go out of their marriage. Except for “The Wedding Tangle” and “Gamble” none of the relationships in these plays ends happily. In “Fida” it is violent and irreversible. But in actuality, these endings accept the fact of human imperfectability and thereby dislocate both men and women from idolised positions. There are no conventional happy endings. Besides, all the playwrights some of whom are activists, directors and actors have to be argumentative to make themselves heard. Kusum Kumar was criticised for her 1978 play “Suno Shefali” about a Harijan girl refusing the marriage proposal of an upper-caste man. as a member of the Progressive Writers’ Association (1932) Rashid Jahan in her “Woman” has challenged the religious
and social status of woman in the Muslim society. She was threatened with an acid attack. The conservative Muslim men warned Jamila Nishat for her writings on women’s issues in her “Purdah”.

The Indian society is the heightened version of female morality. The cultural myths, social structures and the caste factors mould the female sensibility. The status of woman is governed by male positions. Woman’s existence is supplement to that of the male’s. The image of the “Bharatiya Naari” is a powerful image even in the public sphere where the dress code and other symbols govern a woman’s body. Man wants her to be “in her place” so that he can exercise his power. When he stands up for his rights, he is appreciated but for the same act woman receives derisive comments. Most women accept the values of their society and succeed in traditional responsibilities. Others who have succeeded in non-traditional commitment are no doubt appreciated but simultaneously have led others to anxiety and to think whether they are feminine. In all these plays, it is the institution of marriage that is under scrutiny and the concept of ‘sati’, ‘pativrata woman’, ‘the pure woman’, ‘the ideal woman’ and ‘the faithful wife’ is contested.

Women are delegated with the task of sustaining the home. They are expected to take care of and nurture everybody even in the face of oppression. But the conscious and matured protagonists of the plays refuse to subscribe to the status quo. They are able to render contentious issues pertaining to women’s education, class, caste and sexuality. They have stressed the need for women to break free from the shackles of their traditional position and see their own need for self-fulfilment as more important than the duty of sacrificing themselves for their husbands and children. But it is not a welcome thought for men. They do not want their women to think.

The playwrights have presented the new potentiality of women. The hero-centric world is vanished yielding place to the women protagonists. The question that keeps recurring is about the male characters. There are very few male characters in these plays. The range of male characters is not fairly wide. If there are fathers and husbands they are passive as well as aggressive and diplomatic. There are also the nearly absent father and husband figures as in “Prey” and “Listen Shefali”. Some of the plays are purusha patra virahit plays i.e. “without male characters”. The plays like “The Journey Within”, “Crossing the River”, “Frozen Fire”, “The Six of Them” and “Purdah” are “all-women plays”.

In the process of defining New Woman and depicting them in the plays the masculinity gets redefined. Men like Babasaheb in “Gamble”, Satyamev Dikshit in “Listen Shefali” and Moulvi in “Woman” are aggressive, associating if not with money but with power. They are created to provide the backdrop by which the protagonists highlight themselves. Men’s actions are like the catalysts by which the protagonists highlight themselves and are shown as struggling and moving towards activism liberating themselves. The unquestioned power-relationship of men and women has been interrogated by the protagonists.

Pitiless in their treatment of women, men willingly sacrifice priceless relationships in their quest of power. In an Urdu play “Woman”, Rasheed Jahan resists the notion that married women are legal non-entities and have no voice in determining their destinies. The protagonist Fatima reproofs her husband with a demeaning remark about his hypocrisy. Here as in Dev Sen’s “Medea”, the woman is at her most radical. By detailing the deficiencies of manhood, the playwrights have called for a new social order that would heed women’s voice and insights.

In fact, these peripheral men are projected into the central consciousness of the reader/audience. Their masculinity has been redefined and freed it from the heroic mould. Almost all the male characters except Shrikant in “Gamble” no matter how highly or lowly placed, are totally bereft of understanding and sensitivity. Only Shrikant displays a sense of responsibility towards his cousins in particular and all women in general. Even if these male characters are not central to the plays, their presence and attitude allows the social background to emerge in detail. Though portrayed in low key, they fit into the idea of a patriarch who is ruthless and rigid.

There are several examples in social history and mythology where the wives are abandoned midway on some pretext or the other. Sita, Shakuntala and Yashodhara are the classic examples. In “Prey” the husband of the protagonist is almost indifferent to the sufferings of his wife Rama. In “Medea” Manas absconds when Rupsa has to take responsibility of her children. In “Prey” and “Listen Shefali” the fathers though do not desert their families, are sick and passive hence the mother figures have to manage the household matters singlehandedly going through the pressures of the society on them. These acts of men project marriage as a tie of limited concerns. This is what the women protagonists disapprove of and resist. Consequently an insight is offered into the mind of women and how they feel compelled to resist the social pressures. In the absence of the
grown up sons to share the burden, the responsibility falls on the young daughters and aged mothers of the family.

Almost all the plays are about growing up, not through an adolescent period but growing up into selfhood. The protagonists are able to outgrow the traditional training imparted to them and the socialisation which they tear through. The plays begin at a point of crisis in the life of the protagonists. This crisis necessitates readjustment to the external world and which, at the same time, sets in motion introspection and further action that results in change.

The playwrights have made an effort to render visible the pain of women. But they faced criticism for this. When they performed their plays many men used to say that they are spoiling other women and disturbing the peace of home. Usha Ganguli was happy to hear all this because she knew the arrow had hit its target. Those who properly fulfil the roles as defined from man’s perspective are held to be models of loyalty and obedience. Those who for various reasons refuse to do so are condemned. But the reward for both wifely virtue and the consequences of rebellion end up the same in these plays. The sister of Pratap in “The Swing of Desire” though submissive is disliked and hated by her husband.

The contemporary rhetoric is of the opinion that somehow a free, independent-minded woman disrupts the idea of a happy family and the feminist writers and the feminist movements by promoting the rights of women are leading to family breakdown. The playwrights have allowed each of their protagonists to draw on their inner vision to achieve autonomy. In their maturity lies the vitality of their art. It is here that resistance instead of shattering the socio-cultural structure holds the transformative promise. It certainly shows the march from silence to assertion, from speech to action. Though patriarchy is the collective legacy and that there is little one can do about what the historical condition are but a lot can be done by what these playwrights have passed on to the next generation. The playwrights suggest that an important part of breaking the cycle of oppression is sharing what they know with those coming after them and helping youth explore and construct positive attitudes.