Chapter 3: Part I

Critical Study of the Theme of Resistance in the Plays
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Critical Analysis of the Theme of Resistance in the Plays

Women in different locations have differently-constructed meanings. Such differences among women are often concealed when woman is monolithically considered. The concept of “woman” belonging to different castes and classes, socio-economic levels and other identity categories is deconstructed by considering her locations in different spaces. The playwrights through their women protagonists have resisted the ways in which these categories are constructed and function. They act as public intellectuals using their literary dramatic skills to critique repressive discourse and social systems to bring about the institutional change. The mainstream Feminist Movement has failed to acknowledge caste and class as the forms of oppression. Not only that, their voices have historically been marginalised and distorted in the mainstream writings as in the social sciences and history. The playwrights have brought these issues in their plays.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 deal with the main thrust of the study. They critically analyse the theme of resistance in the plays selected for study. The playwrights have sensitively portrayed the awakened women protagonists who through their self-assertion deny accepting the conventional norms. The basis of the study is - What do the protagonists resist against? How much are they successful? Are they satisfied with their resistance? Are they able to sustain the opposition in the face of their resistance? Based on these queries and depending on their themes the eighteen plays have been divided two parts.

The subsection scheme of Part I is as follows:

a) Resisting Historical Politics of Gender Representation: Recovery, Relocation and Re-presentation of the Participation of the Marginalised Groups in History

“A Tale of the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa” (Hindi, 1999) by Tripurari Sharma

b) Resistance through Revisionist Mythmaking

“Medea” (Bengali, 1993) by Nabaneeta Dev Sen
“Mandodari” (Gujarati, 1997) by Varsha Adalja
“Crossing the River” (Tamil, 2000) by C. S. Lakshmi
“Frozen Fire” (Tamil, 2003) by Mangai
c) **Resisting the Voice of the Legends: Re-casting the Punjabi Legendary Women**

“Fida” (Punjabi, 1990) by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

“Sundran” (Punjabi, 1991) by Manjit Pal Kaur

By making women as protagonists these plays have brought the marginalised section to the centre-stage. Not only did the women playwrights feel the need to reach the ears of the society but also considered them and presented them in the dramatic text.

The protagonists have opposed the undue subjugation and injustice meted out to them. It is to discover where and how they have created spaces for themselves by resisting the domination over them. They oppose the system of power and question the validity of tradition at various levels.
Introduction to the play “A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa” (Hindi, 1999) by Tripurari Sharma.

Bringing feminism and feminist theory to history highlights the omission of women and the other marginalised groups as historical actors. The feminist study of history recovers women as the active subjects of history. In doing so, it decentralises the elitist and the male-centred historical narrative. The traditional histories have often neglected the ordinary people and their participation in history because they were not considered as the stuff for big history. Contemporary feminist writers are challenging historical accounts constructed by male researchers who have excluded women’s participation. These writers endeavoured to locate their absences and silences by reinventing the past and by researching available evidences. Feminist writer and theatre activist like Tripurari Sharma felt the need to work from outside the mainstream historical discipline in order to contribute to the existing history which has not recognised ordinary women’s involvement in the freedom struggle. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her “Placing Women’s History in History” (1982) has argued for developing women’s history within mainstream history. Thapar-Bjorkert argues that “until now the dominant historical subject has been male, the history thus written has treated everything non-male as the ‘Other’” (Thapar-Bjorkert 31).

Along with feminist theory, the Subaltern Studies has also provided a way for the historians, theoreticians and playwrights to recognise the contribution of various groups of people and to give them voice and an agency in history. It was largely by its relentless post-colonial critique that Indian history came to be seen in a different light. Indian History has thus found a new approach that was so critically needed. The purpose of the Subaltern Studies project is to adopt “History from below” approach of the West and to redress the imbalance created in the academic work by a tendency to focus only on elites. As a concept Subaltern group encompasses the oppressed groups - working class, peasantry, women, tribal communities and other underclass people; and is used as a name for a general attribute of subordination. According to Oldenburg women are “the largest, ubiquitous, and most obvious ‘subaltern group’ of all” (Oldenburg 24). The project was led by Ranajit Guha with the explicit aim of expanding and enriching Antonio Gramsci’s...
notion of the Subaltern by locating and re-presenting their voice or agency in the Indian history. The term “Subaltern” came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci and is referred to the subordination in terms of class, caste/race, gender, language, location and culture.

Ranajit Guha started Subaltern Studies collective by declaring a break with the most Indian historians, announcing the ambition of the project to rectify the elitist bias. He declared, “The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism - colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism” (Guha 1982 01). He further says, “What is clearly left out of this un-historical (elitist) historiography is the politics of the people. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups - that is, the people” (Guha 1982 02). The failure of the bourgeoisie to include ordinary people including women expresses “a characteristic blindness of elite discourse” (Guha 2008 xv). In 1981 Sumit Sarkar said that “written literature in a largely illiterate country... can be a guide to the ideas and values only of a minority” (Sarkar 10). He urged to recover “history from below” by examining oral cultural forms. Besides these, there have been systematic attempts to assess the role of theatre in order to identify what Ranajit Guha calls, “the element of subaltern protest” (Guha 1992 viii). The very notion of the subaltern became an issue in post-colonial theory when Gayatri Spivak took on the main assumptions of the Subaltern Group which she did in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern speak?”

There is no denying the fact that Subaltern School has contributed a lot in the study of history, economics and social sciences in Third World countries at the end of the twentieth century. The term “The Subalternists” has been used to describe a new generation of historians who enriched the subaltern studies with path-breaking work on the subaltern groups. The Subaltern Studies has now become a part of postcolonial theory in literature and its application is indeed very useful in the study of certain texts as for example the women’s writing and Dalit Literature.

The saga of women’s participation in Indian freedom struggle began one hundred and twenty-three years before India became independent and at a time when Indian society was still dominated by conservative traditions and the social customs which denied women their rightful place. Nevertheless, leaving the hearths and houses they came forward and fought against foreign domination. They also made supreme self-sacrifices. The story begins with Rani Channamma of Kittur in Karnataka who bravely
resisted the armed might of East India Company as early as the year 1824. It is followed by Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi who blazed a trail by dying in action in 1858. The upheaval of 1857 had among its victims two Begums - Hazrat Mahal of Oudh (wife of Nawab Wazid Ali Shah of Avadh) and Zeenat Mahal of Delhi (wife of Mughal emperor Bahadur Ali Shah Zafar). Decades later, it was Madame Bhikaji Rustom Cama (1861-1936), who opposed British imperialism with uncompromising ferocity. She was the first “revolutionary woman” of the Indian freedom struggle. She hoisted the Indian Flag for the first time in a foreign country for India's Independence at the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart, Germany in August 1907. Dr. Annie Beasant was among those foreigners who inspired Indian national resurgence. She was the first woman President of Indian National Congress in 1917. She represented the Indian delegation to England in 1924 and raised the demand of “complete swarajya” (Saxena 126). The contributions of the elite women like Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripalani and Aruna Asaf Ali during Freedom movement have been well archived and documented. These are a few outstanding women who made the name, but ordinary women have largely been left out of the historical record. Zoya Hasan interrogates, “Were not the activities of ordinary middle-class women who did not engage with any form of political machinery is important?” (Hasan 11).

With the advent of the second wave of women’s movement came in the realisation that women are essentially absent from history as “History was made by, about, and for men - an androcentric compilation of the historical record of mankind perpetuating the idea that women were little more than the passive helpmeets, to use a biblical phrase, of these extraordinary male actors” (Adams 234). When historian Gerda Lerner observed that “women have a history; women are in history” (Lerner xx), she was announcing both women’s historical existence and her intent to revisit and reinterpret the past through the lens of the current understanding of gender power relations.

This introduction to the historical play “A Tale of the year 1857: Azizun Nisa” by Tripurari Sharma focuses primarily on how women’s participation throughout freedom struggle was sidelined. It highlights the resistance of women writers against the historical politics of gender representations and its exclusion from mainstream history. The play apart from its being literary piece is the “historicizing activities of women which had not previously been seen as ‘historical’ in wider historical processes . . . this would also contextualize women’s resistance and explore the unequal ways that relationships between gender, race and class-specific subjects are forged” (Gordon 92). In doing so, it
prompts researchers to explore the role of gender and gender conflict within the political and historical context. The play helps in re-assessing women’s role in the nationalist construction and proves immensely influential in setting the direction of historical enquiry. Despite being a written record, history is “more than a selection of facts” (Williams 414). Women writers have turned not only to Government records but also excavated the unconventional sources such as fictional material, oral narratives and also the cartoons which though have been regarded unsuitable for historical evidences, have only recently come to be seen as useful sources of data (Rao 36). These writers had to go beyond the archival, official and unofficial documents in order to re-interpret women’s participation, their recovery from the past and relocating and according them their proper space. In this regard Malavika Karlekar highlights Bengali women’s importance in “re-creation of women’s lives” (Karlekar 12) in history.

Since colonial period, performance of historical events has been central to theatre. At different points of time, the historical dramas have performed different social and political functions. Aparna Dharwadker argues that the genre of drama “has priority over other fictional genres . . . because dramatising the history of the nation on stage subjects the nation itself to particularly acute scrutiny” (Dharwadker 221). She further says that dramatic representations “serve as alternative sources of historical knowledge for audiences ideologically resistant to dominant narratives” (Dharwadker 222).

The monumental historical event - the “1857 Mutiny” has fascinated not only the historians but also the literary writers, theatre activists and the journalists all over the world. The official transfer of power from English East India Company to the Crown in 1858 after the Mutiny also expresses the fears experienced by British authorities. The regulation of drama through “Dramatic Performances Censorship Act, 1876” in India indicates that theatre was perceived as the threat to colonial rule in India as it had indeed become an expression of political struggle against colonial rule.

During the centenary commemoration of the Mutiny in 1957 numerous performances were held. In later years, the plays that were written around the Mutiny included Gurusharan Das’s Larins Sahib (1970) and B. Ahmed’s The Rani of Jhansi (1995). These works demonstrate the continuity with colonial and national historiography that erases the ordinary people. In a context of selective memory, the significance of performances about Jhalkaribai can not be minimised. Nandi Bhatia points out, “In order to restore the dignity of dalits and especially of dalit women, members of the BSP, as part of their political campaigning in recent years have undertaken the recovery of
stories of dalit warriors such as Jhalkaribai through theatrical performances. Jhalkaribai, a maid of the Rani of Jhansi who is supposed to have looked a lot like the Rani, ostensibly fought against the British in a bid to save the Rani’s kingdom and her life” (Bhatia 2010 98). The performance created awareness about the need to remember stories which get lost in the celebration of elite women. The story of Jhalkaribai is retold in fiction and political campaigns only to provide examples of unsung women from Dalit communities. But this selection and projection of particular images is subjected to by the vested political interests of the dominant group to present a particular image of the past to the future to rationalise its political moves. As Uma Chakravarti emphasises, “At specific junctures the sense of history may be highlighted and past may be dramatically reconstituted, bringing into sharp focus the need of a people for a different self-image from the one that they hold of themselves” (Chakravarti 2006 27). Pankaj K. Singh says “Hence, history is not very different from myth and legend in its manipulation of cultural materials” (Singh 2000 05).

In the last few years this interest in the recovery of subaltern voices continued and is seen in the film Mangal Pandey: The Rising (2005). In this film Ketan Mehta accords a superhuman status to Mangal. In the year 2007, the Mutiny received further attention by the press and the historians, and, a number of local and international conferences were held. Even Tripurari Sharma alludes to Mangal in her play “A Tale of the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa.” She speaks how Mangal is marginalised. She expresses the lack of concern for such fighters. She painfully says: “He is the messenger of revolt . . . Mangal who was tortured . . . we don’t even possess enough love in our hearts to speak a word in defence of our companions, and friends . . . or shed tears in shared grief” (138).

While working with different performative traditions Tripurari Sharma indulged in transforming and recreating history. Her reflections on Azizun in her play on 1857 picked up on the tawaif theme that “brought a somewhat neglected historical figure back into conscious memory through a feminist recovery of history” (Chakravarti 2011 14). Vrindavanlal Varma’s Hindi novel Jhansi ki Rani Laxmi Bai (1946) affirms the “freedom and empowerment of women of all castes . . . as a necessary requisite of ‘Svarajya’” (Orsini 220). In the novel women form a separate army of women that included Jhalkaribai and an actress named Motibai who became the head of intelligence. In Varma’s version, weavers and actresses - Jhalakaribai and Motibai are brought in to signify the unity across caste and to endow the action of ordinary with “national
purposefulness” (Orsini 221) as well as to show the Rani’s democratic and egalitarian vision. Yet it is the Rani who is at the centre.

A question arises about women such as courtesans who are placed outside the middle-class morality, political agendas and social integration. The courtesans who are commonly called “prostitutes” and “tawaifs” are located in the category of “Kothewali - woman of the Kotha” and therefore are of inferior character. They are the “Kalankini” i.e. the blemished one and therefore are seen as a threat to the morality and respectability. It is Veena Talwar Oldenburg, Lata Singh and Tripurari Sharma who located the invisibility and absence of the courtesans in the nationalistic representations of the Mutiny. Oldenburg could tell the Courtesans’ “stories of self-consciously elaborated, subtle, and covert forms of resistance against patriarchal culture. Equally remarkable was the realisation that this form of feminist resistance was as old as the profession itself, and had not found its inspiration in western liberation or the women’s movement, or Gandhian modes of protest” (Oldenburg 23). Through her essay on the courtesans and the revolt, Lata Singh brings out how courtesans and their contributions are not at all considered. She argues that the courtesans face neglect from both the elite and the subaltern reconstructions of female participants of 1857.

Gautam Bhadra a prominent writer on 1857 Mutiny remains silent regarding the participation of women in his highly informative essay “Four Rebels of 1857” (1988) which remains focused on male rebels. The book Rethinking 1857 edited and published in 2007 by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya marks the 150th anniversary of 1857. It explores the recent thinking of 1857 Mutiny. It is commendable that the book considers uprisings in the regions beyond the north Indian Gangetic Plaines which have scarcely merited mention in the narratives of 1857 till recent times. One of the four themes of the book no doubt deals with the impact of 1857 Movement on the subaltern group of tribals and Dalit communities. Unfortunately it does not make mention of the other subaltern group - women and their participation in the 1857 Mutiny and its impact on them.

Neither the popular and political discourse nor literature nor history accords any space to courtesans. Even though they are accomplished artists, the dominant image of the courtesan in literature and cinema is that of a prostitute. During the Civil Disobedience Movement when these fallen women wanted to participate in Congress activities, Gandhiji himself refused to accept the prostitutes as Congress members unless they gave up their unworthy profession, and were advised to “choose alternative profession to facilitate their participation” (Forbes 1988 69). “However, the
unrespectable and impure could become 'pure' and 'respectable' if their work was regarded as a nationalistic sacrifice" (Thapar-Bjorkert 99). Tripurari Sharma and Utpal Dutt turn to this subject of forgotten figures of history i.e. the courtesans and also the common people. Utpal Dutt’s *Mahavidroh* (“The Great Rebellion 1857”) (1986) comments also on the contemporary local insurgent movements. It is a play which carefully weaves in the stories of ordinary people and includes a courtesan as one of the characters.

Through the characters Azizun and Waziran, Sharma in “A tale of the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa” and Dutt in *Mahavidroh* wish to bring out the implications of courtesans’ re-emergence in historical works. The specific narrative of Azizun - a courtesan is recounted by many women in Kanpur. She was exalted to the status of a warrior through her contribution to the nationalist movement and also the way she provided inspiration to many women. Sharma’s play on Azizun therefore, becomes very significant from a historical point of view. It also indicates how a woman’s resistance to exploitation and domination extends beyond the limited spheres of the dominion of her *kotha*.

Dutt also focuses on the popular base of rebellion to bring alive the role and participation of marginalised citizens like women, prostitutes, untouchables, peasants, weavers and poor people through the sub-plot of the family drama of three generations in his *Mahavidhroh*. Dutt feels committed to recover and relocate these subaltern voices in the dominant history and makes the element of resistance staged by women during the rebellion central to his drama. However, he complicates this connection by presenting one of his female protagonists Waziran into the role of prostitute who has Lachman as her lover and she sleeps with Englishmen at night.

Dutt’s selection of prostitute as the protagonist is significant because the nationalist discourse focuses on the images of good wife and mother as the inspirational figures but Dutt makes Waziran the central figure of the drama. Waziran argues vehemently with the soldiers over their caste and religious narrow outlooks and makes them aware how they themselves are responsible for the British strategy of keeping them divided over the issues of religion and caste, and preventing their unified nationalistic action. By giving voice to Waziran, Dutt pulls her out of the realm of her *kotha* and places her equal among the soldiers. He once again disrupts the image of mother as “mother-India” which once again dominated the nationalist thought while sketching the character of Kasturi, the mother of Lachman. Kasturi is not confined to the domestic
space. She comes to the battle field in search of re-saleable material that she removes from the corpses on the battlefield for her own sustenance.

Through Waziran and Kasturi, Dutt recovers the role of the subaltern women who have remained behind the histories of queens. Like Waziran, Azizun fought against the British in the 1857 Mutiny. Azizun was a prostitute in Bithoor, Kanpur during the years leading to 1857 revolt. It is recorded that she used to dance with a kamal (lotus) and with roti (unleavened bread) in the army camp. If a soldier accepted the roti then he was willing to participate in the struggle for freedom and if he accepted the kamal, he was not. Often Azizun used to go on horseback and feed the wounded soldiers. Though she was a courtesan, she was accorded the status of goddess and acquired purity in the eyes of the people because of her sacrifices. “She cleaned herself of all past sins in the sacrificial fire of freedom, and instead of being referred to as Azizan randi (a pejorative in Hindi for a prostitute) she was addressed as krantikari Azizan, or the warrior Azizan” (Thapar-Bjorkert 100). Thus Sharma interrogates the accepted “gender-roles, of the stereotypes of wife, mother and courtesan and attempted to dissolve the boundaries between public and private, between outer and inner selves” (Dalmia 317). In her other social plays Sharma depicts such other characters who are relegated to the fringes of society. These characters range from lepers in The Wooden Cart to working-class women in Bahu (1979) and Anglo-Indian women in Traitors (2001).

Thus it can be concluded that the theatrical representation of viranganas in recent years brings attention to the role played by a Dalit woman as Jhalkaribai and a courtesan as Azizun in the 1857 Mutiny. These plays can be seen as the attempts to re-write history by re-locating and thereby re-presenting the lost figures of history in anti-colonial struggle. The plays have tried to assert the need for social recognition of the historical contribution of marginalised citizens and to give space to these women in the nation building. It can be observed that the “feminist scholarship can show historical sociologists the possibilities of expanding (not replacing) historical analyses by ‘digging underneath’” (Morawska 43), thus exposing the dualities and the oppressions embedded in and made invisible by historical narratives. This approach to historical study has opened up a space for feminists to “revisit” male-centred history, armed with their concerns about omission of women’s voices, the relationship of power to knowledge and history creation, and the construction of women’s selves through historical narratives. Guided by feminist theory and methodology, it is imperative to view the past from the standpoint of women. Thus subaltern history by feminist helps to lay bare the previously ignored events.
Tripurari Sharma is an accomplished theatre-director and playwright. She tells, "When I started theatre in 1976, the year I joined National School of Drama, there were few women-oriented plays in this profession" (Sharma 2006 132). Therefore she started working in that direction by conducting theatre-workshops in different parts of India and South Asia like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. She has translated a number of Indian and Western plays into Hindi. Inspired by the Street Theatre Movement of the 1970s and 1980s Sharma developed the new concept of theatre-workshop and proceeded to produce plays through those theatre-workshops and her own theatre-group Alarippu, and at the National School of Drama bringing in a sharp edge to her experimentations extending to social activism. Sharma’s special focus has always been on socially challenging subjects. Her work can be seen in a larger social and political framework, as theatre for social change is her mission.

Sharma discovered how the very process of theatre-workshop with women’s groups, contributes to raising awareness about women’s issues. She represented India at the First International Women Playwrights’ Conference held in USA in 1986 and has also taken her group to Norway, England and Pakistan. In 1986, she received the Sanskriti Puraskar (Delhi) and was honoured by the Delhi Natya Sangh in 1990.

The purpose of Sharma’s dramatic intervention in the 1857 Mutiny is (1) the re-thinking of the existing knowledge and literature on the Mutiny, (2) to restore the dance tradition of courtesan culture, and (3) to revive and represent the political contribution of the marginalised courtesans in the nation-building. By doing so, Sharma “rewrites the dominant versions of historical truths and accords the subaltern subjects of colonial history their proper roles in anti-colonial struggles” (Bhatia 1999 168). It is to follow the advice of Gerda Lerner who in her Challenge of Women’s History says, “... to light up areas of historical darkness we must focus on a woman-centered inquiry. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women’s past... The central question it raises is: What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define?” (quoted in Showalter 1981 198).
While doing her research for the play, Sharma found references to Azizun's roaming the city in soldier's attire and her role in the massacre of Kanpur. In the mainstream history-writing however, these evidences have been obliterated as extraneous and irrelevant, making Azizun and other women like her invisible. Her careful selection of the title highlights the importance of the rebellion as carried out by an ordinary courtesan and also the gender exclusion present in the mainstream history. The study looks at how the playwright Sharma has tried to unsettle and resist the nationalist project by foregrounding the voice of the performing woman in the play. She "attempted to know the life of courtesan behind the image that gets created. Courtesans could only figure in literature as victims of society and objects of elite pity" (Singh 2009 159). The courtesans played a prominent role in the revolt of 1857. There are historical sources which document them as covert but the generous financiers of the revolt. "Their names were on the list of properties confiscated by British officials for their involvement in the siege and the rebellion against colonial rule in 1857" (Oldenburg 27). The play was first performed by the National School of Drama on 27 March 1998 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of International World Theatre Day and to celebrate fifty years of India's Independence in 1997. She exposes the limitations of historiography and restores a new dimension to the struggle of 1857. The play places Azizun in her historical context and thereby through the interpolation and insertion of historical data, the play is given a significant element of historicity.

Azizun is from the 'Bedia' community whose traditional profession is singing and dancing and was associated with the events of 1857. Deepti Mehrotra in her book on nautanki theatre gives more information of Bedia community (Mehrotra 38-42). During the revolt Azizun's house in Kanpur becomes an important meeting point of rebel sepoys. She is said to have been behind the massacre of the British women and children in Kanpur. It is a part of the history of 1857 mutiny. She had an affair with Shamsuddin Sawar of the 42nd Cavalry who was in the frontline of the mutiny. Sharma introduces a character in Zubaida who vehemently opposes war and its brutality. There is a juxtaposition of historical and fictional.

Theatre is an important space from where Sharma represents the narratives of female heroes. She provides Azizun's life with details about her transformations in the play of ten parts that shifts from her Kotha to British cantonment and to the battlefield. The play begins in Azizun's house which is located at the centre of the market in Kanpur and is frequented not only by the money lenders and other kinds of men but also by
Indian and European soldiers. A British officer comes to her in search of Shamsuddin Sawar whom Azizun loves and who has deserted the British army. The British officer fails to get any information about him from her. At his juncture, she prepares herself to help the soldiers fighting against the British. She rejects herself as a courtesan, throws her jewellery and takes up the sword. She resists the subordinate place accorded to her as a courtesan. Shamsuddin gets killed in the battle that rages and after his death she vows to continue the battle started by the soldiers. According to Oldenburg this participation shifts the resistance of Azizun from her private space of Kotha - a space that removes her from mainstream society - to armed fighting in the open battlefield. The play “can be seen within the larger framework of the social and political canvas marked by feminist resistance to structures of domination. It may also be read as a text that, by retrieving the marginalised voices of performing women, provides a vantage point from which history may be re-read and re-written, and the contours of the contests over narrating the nation redrawn” (Singh 2007 95).

In acknowledging the importance of Azizun the courtesan, Sharma defies the patriarchal bourgeois attitude that sees only the “respectable” woman as the inspirational figure. The courtesans were seen as stigma on respectable society. Uma Chakravarti in her essay “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?” explains how the re-inscription of women occurred in nationalist discourse. In their fight against colonialism, nineteenth-century nationalists “rewrote women’s identity as super-women, a combination of the spiritual Maitreyi; the learned Gargi; the suffering Sita; the faithful Savitri; and heroic Lakshmibai. Spiritual power and the sahadharmini model in particular were central to the idea of womanhood” (Chakravarti 1989 79). In “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” Partha Chatterjee writes that the nationalists defined the role of women within the parameters of the home and recuperated women’s strength in her willingness to be a good wife and mother (Chatterjee 253-54). In this context of nationalist discourse which focuses on the respectable wife and good mother as the inspirational figures, Sharma’s emphasis on the courtesan disrupts and ruptures it by bringing in a performing woman and public entertainer Azizun to the centre-stage through the dramatic discourse which has been male hegemonic. Sharma provides her a political space which has been denied to many such women in the dominant literature.

Sharma pulls her female protagonist out of the realm of the Kotha and places her as an equal among the soldiers. She legitimises her claim to speak and fight for the nation. By doing so Sharma shows the distinctive ways in which resistance to social and political
norms is exhibited by Azizun in each case. The portrayal of Azizun and her dauntless fights with the British soldiers during Mutiny complicate the nationalist construction of historical figures such as the Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi and recently acknowledged female Dalit hero Jhalakaribai who are valorised for their courage, virtue and patriotism. Not only does Azizun assert her subjectivity as a woman but also her political subjectivity. She is marginalised in two ways. In the first instance, she is a woman and secondly, she is a courtesan. Her publicness ironically makes her invisible in the mainstream history. The play tries to bring out the positive aspects of the creative role of performing Azizun in her quest for a respectable self. She exhibits control over her sexuality. She also disrupts the patriarchal notions about women as “pure”, “weak” and “submissive”, complicated as they were by the stress on the sexual purity of women. Azizun does not see herself as a fallen woman or prostitute. She considers herself a creative artist with purposive and intelligent understanding of her life. By bringing her into the play to speak for herself, Sharma grants her social and political agency and allows her to give her own version of the treatment accorded to her by the English and also the Indians.

Azizun is portrayed as a talented artist. She has great love for music and art. She does not perform merely for someone’s praise or pleasure. They become merely the excuse for her practice. “Courtesans were artists who had to undergo rigorous training” (Sharar 192). But “The colonial government overlooked the artistic and creative elements that the Kothas had hitherto been associated with, equating them with brothels” (Oldenburg 31). Azizun emphasises that one does not become a courtesan by just leaving home. She has a deep commitment to art and considers herself a poet, lyricist and artist. That is why in the play when a British official addresses her place as a brothel full of lust and sin, and hints at its immorality, she feels humiliated and resists strongly saying, “Such accusations are baseless. I’m not a prostitute. I’m a dancer. I am an artiste. I do not wear the veil but I’m not a public woman. People in the city acknowledge me as a courtesan, a poet, a lyricist. I’m not in the flesh trade” (133). She dismisses his judgement and demands that he should recognise her as an artist with rigorous training in the art of dance. “An examination of tawaifs resistance in the spaces of the Kotha . . . illustrates how socially marked subjects defy dominant patriarchal codes” (Nagar 62). People rather undermine their skills by addressing them as women sitting in the bazaar.

The courtesans are not seen as the political subjects and even considered to have any values. Azizun resists this notion. By questioning such notions, Sharma’s play stresses that Azizun too has her conscience and values. She has her own God and dignity.
Her decision to participate in the revolt is not an easy one. Taking to bloodshed and war is never an easy decision. So, for Azizun it was a moral and spiritual decision too. Her participation is the consequence of a call of conscience and not craving for personal gain or political power. For Azizun there is no personal interest. She does not have any connection with any big power or big man. She is involved with Shamsuddin a rebel sepoy who is not a big man but has just 30 or 40 horses under him. Azizun’s stake does not seem to be personal or for any immediately recognisable reasons. Her goal is not power, but the recovery of self-determination. She wants to regain control over her own self. Her stake is one of conscience.

Azizun’s settling in Kanpur is also of significance. The play projects her as a very independent and strong woman. She declares she would have stayed back in Lucknow but “obeisance to any prince”, which was becoming progressively difficult to avoid in that city, “was not possible for her” (121). It can also be speculated that in order to avoid the colonial patrolling, policing of the courtesans and “circumventing colonial rules, regulations and laws” (Dang 176) after 1856, that Azizun moves to Kanpur - a city of bazaars, devoid of the cultural sophistication of Lucknow. Another reason for Azizun’s relocating in Kanpur is that the British intervention in Awadh and the exile of Wajid Ali Shah resulted in economic and social deficits for courtesans. In order to avoid this loss of status, Azizun comes to Kanpur to find her own independent Kotha.

Azizun was not at all put under any compulsion to fight. She could have done anything rather than make the rare choice of fighting and even dying. It points to her strong passion for independence and reluctance “to stay under anybody’s patronage” (121). The play has tried to assert the need for social recognition of the nationalist zeal of the courtesans. Looking at her participation as an angry and impetuous resistance would also indicate towards her political consciousness and agency. The play highlights the political subjectivity of Azizun who is aware of the contemporary politics and law; and also well-informed about the history of the city. In the play informed debates often take place among courtesans on political matters. The British officials were aware of such places and looked upon them with suspicion as places of political conspiracy. In fact, “After quelling the mutiny and rebellion of 1857, the British turned their fury against the powerful elite of Lucknow. The tawaifs were perceived as an integral part of the elite” (Oldenburg 33). When a soldier comments that she is not aware of the politics of 1857 and that the political matters are in the male domain and not of interest to women, Azizun resists by informing him that she is fully aware that matters have gone out of the
hands of the merchants and into the camps of soldiers. To his retort that Azizun being woman would not be able to bear the sight of bloody bodies scattered around as even the hearts of men shiver at such sights, she protests saying, “Men covered with gunpowder and blood come to my house everyday. I have spent my entire life in their company. If I can bear them, then why can’t I bear the context they create?” (143). The soldier wonders how she could contribute to the war when she can not even wield a sword. She responds that she has the same interest in war as in life.

The play allows for the re-thinking of the political issues. It has compelled to recognise women as political subjects. It has challenged the patriarchal notion which asserts that women have no interest in politics. The soldiers in the play strongly feel that political matters are in the male domain and they are not of interesting matters to Azizun. The dialogue between the soldier and Azizun indicates the notions of masculinity and femininity. The soldier considers his soldiering as an essential aspect of masculinity and that it consists of the superior values of patriotism and courage. Shrma opposes the notions of militarism as masculine; and peace and passivity as feminine. She therefore does not believe that peace and thereby opposition to militarism is the innate quality of women and through Azizun she disturbs and unsettles this notion.

When Azizun expresses her desire to participate in the mutiny, she is assigned the role of an informer or a spy. In assigning such a job to her, it can be seen that there is an intention to exploit her womanly charms. Though the role is important, it is devoid of any activity which is visible in soldiering. As she is a woman, she is treated differentially by the soldiers. They did not want her to disturb their “masculinist camaraderie and unsettle this hierarchical binary” (Singh 2007 105). Sharma here highlights the fact that though the courtesans are outside the family structure they are subjected to the patriarchal structure and command. Shamsuddin does not want her to take this role as her life would be in danger. But she laughingly stakes her life, saying: “Why worry about sacrificing this life for a good cause?” (144). Though Azizun accepts the role assigned to her, she is not happy because of its limited scope. Therefore she breaks into the masculine political space to play a more active role. When Azizun is caught spying and is shot at though escapes, she feels greatly affected by this. She was not able to defend herself when attacked. This changes her perception of her role. She throws off her jewellery and takes up the sword. In spite of her being active, after the mutiny she is again pushed back to her conventional role of a performing courtesan. But Azizun does not want to return to her old courtesan-role, and refuses to dance. She now considers herself to be primarily a
soldier and wants to be treated as such. Azizun is anxious also to prove that she is suited to political domain as any man. After the temporary victory of the mutiny, her language does express the masculine authority. Her relationship with other women becomes authoritarian. When the soldiers wanted her to dance after the victory, she takes it as an affront to her role of a soldier.

Azizun has one more earnest passion and that is to wield the sword. In an incident where she is humiliated by a British official who addresses her place as a brothel, she feels dishonoured and says that had she a weapon, she would have “with one swing stopped his inauspicious steps” (135). She feels sorry that her father did not teach her the handling of the arms. Women have been excluded from the army. The argument for this is based not only on their inherent desire for peace but also because they are considered to be born with insufficient masculinity. Sword signifies physical strength and it is denied to women. Azizun feels she is denied the ability to exert the strength. Azizun as a soldier is placed as a foil to her role as a dancer. Sharma foregrounds Azizun’s overwhelming desire to be the part of a man’s world. It is significant to note that she assumes masculinity. It is also worth speculating why Azizun feels that being a singer or a poet is not enough. She wanted to break free from the confining boundaries of the home and from merely being a passive observer of events. Apart from her desire to serve the country, the urge for adventure and to prove herself, and be a part of a man’s world play a determining role. “The skills displayed by female warriors suggested the possibility that a normal woman could, given equivalent encouragement and training, wield weapons, serve in the military, or exhibit the courage or develop the physical skills of men” (Harris et al. 297).

Many incidents in the play highlight her desire to prove that she can be as much of a man as the other men around her. One such incident centres on Ali Khan, a soldier who elopes with the British General’s daughter with whom he has fallen in love and subsequently marries. Azizun tells Ali Khan to give up the girl to Nana Saheb because she is white or rather of mixed blood. Upon Ali Khan’s refusal to give up his wife, they have a kind of duel which Azizun loses. Ali Khan spares her life saying that since she is a woman, he will not kill her. Despite her learning to wield the sword, she is still regarded as a woman and pitied for it. She feels hurt. She asks “What’s this weakness in me that he would speak that way to me! I thought I was equal to the ‘sipahis’ that I have acquired expertise in sword play... but some weakness persists” (166). She adds, “I am not a mere woman. He should have treated me like a soldier. Fought and killed me. I am not
afraid to die. But no, in his eyes I remained a mere woman . . . I must become so strong and tough that one would not know that one is facing a woman. There would not be any need to show pity” (166). Her defeat in the fight affects her seriously. The massacre of British women and children could be seen taking place in this context.

Anuradha Chenoy affirms that women can also be violent and play an active role in the war-mongering or militarism (Chenoy 22). The British women were in the custody and protection of the rebels after their initial victory when Kanpur had temporarily come into their hands. But when the British emerged victorious, they too massacred in revenge. Azizun who wanted to prove herself strong and tough, looks upon the act of punishing British women and children as a masculine activity. She feels she is manifesting male interests, methods and values. While her determination to prove herself strong and tough as men is one of the main concerns of Sharma in the play, she at the same time wants to know what happens in the process of fighting to the woman inside Azizun - to her music, her song and if at all there is any feeling of loss. She does feel the loss of her music and song and it hurts her. In one of the sequences in the play Azizun tries to sing after her initial victory but she can not sing. She has forgotten it. It pains her and she says: “Why do I falter . . . it has slipped off somehow. My treasure now lost” (163).

The hegemonic notion of racial hierarchy gains significance in the play. Race has assumed priority in the play. Azizun’s opposition to Ali Khan’s marriage with a white girl of mixed blood brings out the centrality of race. It constructs resisting identity in the colonial context. Azizun’s approval of the massacre of white women and children is again a manifestation of the ways in which the race of white women made them involve with their husbands in the colonial project.

Zubaida’s voice is a dissenting voice to that of Azizun. Zubaida raises uncomfortable questions on war and the nature of politics. She highlights the brutality of war and presents an alternate vision of politics based on love and compassion. She is of the opinion that battle is a fight among men and feels that Azizun is being used in men’s fight. She considers Azizun to be a very kind and warm person and is disturbed by the change in her persona. It causes her pain to see the way Azizun had toughened herself. The play is thus a critique of war also. Sharma emphasises that in a war every one ends up a loser. For Azizun fighting in the war is like the desire to win God. After the massacre she feels she has lost her God whom she wanted to reach out to. The British were able to reclaim Kanpur, though they lost their loved ones. Sharma emphasises that they were not able to reconcile to the fact that they had been unable to protect their dear ones, and that
was the hurt that the Indians were trying to inflict on them, a moral wound. The Indians
did not allow them to have the glory of having protected their own people and that was a
combination of both guilt and defeat they live with. So they also lost and in Kanpur,
obody really won.

Thus the play exhibits how Sharma has disrupted, disturbed and unsettled the
hegemonic claim to respectability by re-claiming the voice of a courtesan. It is because
the protagonist is neither a respectable mother nor a wife who has been the ideal
inspirational figure in the nationalist discourses. Sharma’s protagonist Azizun is a
courtesan, marginalised and excised from the metaphors of ideal womanhood. By
retrieving her Sharma unsettles the centrality given to the middle-class women who are
considered the protectors of national culture. She shifts the attention to the courtesan as
the producer and the repository of culture.

Azizun is presented as a conscious political subject. She resists the patriarchal
notion that women have no interest in politics. Her participation in politics is on account
of her own passion and not due to any external pressure or compulsion. Azizun assumes
an active political role. She does this as she is not happy with the limited role ascribed to
her in a patriarchal society.

The substance of women’s participation in the politics is that they bring in a
distinctive culture and a way of looking at life which is nourishing and humanising.
Azizun goes to battle field to nurse the wounded soldiers. Sharma feels that if at all
women are excluded from their political participation, it curtails the possibility of the
potential for change. According to her it is important for women to question the norms of
politics. Unless they question, they will end up perpetrating masculine culture and values.
Becoming like the oppressor is not the answer for Sharma.
(b) Resistance through Revisionist Mythmaking


Mythology is a collection of myths, especially one belonging to a particular nation, religion or culture. The word “myth” is derived from modern Latin mythus, via Greek muthos (Soanes et al. 946) which means a story typically involving gods and their adventures. Margaret Waller in her The Revolution in Poetic Language says, “Pure myth - in the sense of a literary mode revolving around a world peopled entirely by gods, demons, and other supernatural forces, a world, as Northrop Frye notes, which is not necessarily ‘attained or attainable by human beings’” (quoted in Seldon 418). The values and ideals of a culture are ingrained in its myths which in turn construct and define culture. It is myths which perpetuate the values of culture. And thus they are the living reality of daily life well integrated into the psyche.

“Myths, by definition, voice a culture’s most profound perception, and, when given fictional form, can awaken the audience’s strongest impulses” and thus women playwrights “who rely on myth have the potential to provoke whatever response they wish: to move the audience to consciousness, to attitude, even perhaps to action” (Campbell ix). Tilde Sankovitch elaborates the meaning of “revision” - “Revision is a process of recovery and reformation by which old myths are driven away and revitalized by reinterpretation” (Sankovitch 146). Sankovitch further uses the term “the mythopoetic process” by which “the ‘old’ myths are spirited away from their dead, oppressive contexts and rejuvenated by reinterpretation, rereading, rewriting, all performed in newly found female contexts” (Sankovitch 146). The women playwrights have revised the classical myths for artistic, social and political purposes. The study demonstrates how the playwrights have reworked the myths to re-present mythical female characters from female perspective and to counteract denigrating cultural and social myths that devalue womanhood.

Revisionist mythmaking is to discuss myths and develop new ones from women’s experiences. It views myths from a woman-centred angle and displaces the dominant myths that have devalued women’s worth. It aims at recreating the past by rewriting the myths and recovering women’s voice by articulating what has remained unsaid. The revisionist mythmaking by the playwrights is a potent instrument of resistance because it
provides an extra space where women speak the unspeakable. The rise of the second wave feminism in the West led to the rethinking of myths as the ideological practice within feminist literary criticism and feminist theory. The theoretical frameworks of traditional canonical myths are provided by Northrop Frye through his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and Roland Barthes through his *Mythologies* (1973). The feminist theorists thereby started enquiring into and deciphering the politics of foregrounding female experience in and beliefs of the myths. They started exploring the possibilities of writing a counter-mythology from a women’s perspective. Once they discovered the power of myth to explore women’s experiences, they started appropriating and providing new definitions and new meanings to the existing ones.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s play “Medea”, Varsha Adalja’s “Mandodari”, “Crossing the River” by C. S. Laxmi “Ambai” and Arasu Mangai’s “Frozen Fire” revisit the Greek mythology, the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*. These plays explore the personae of Medea - the wife of Jason; Mandodari - the queen of great king Ravan; Sita -the wife of Rama; and Amba - the sister of Ambika and Ambalika respectively. No doubt, the protagonists of these plays are the archetypal women but are portrayed differently with capacity for intense ambition, freedom and self-realisation; and anger. The playwrights have tried to present the ideologies which were oppressive to them, and also to challenge the canonical texts. The revisionist act of these playwrights has provided them with a key to redefine the protagonists’ experience within that hegemonic value-system. They have deconstructed the male-images of power by reconstructing the past by providing an alternative space to women to demonstrate their power. This process of restructuring can be appropriated as resistance because it depicts female characters who do not accept and agree with but resist the dominant and repressive ideologies. This is the mode of mythmaking by which these women writers have presented the mythological beings and actions closer to human experience. Thus, “Mythmaking,” is “the process whereby writers throw into relief the values, perceptions, and behaviors they want the audience to acknowledge within a particular culture” (Campbell x).

Adrienne Rich in 1980 gave a call for “re-visioning” the old patterns and claimed that revision implies remembering and refocusing on the past. According to her, “Revision” connotes “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text with a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (Rich 35). According to her the revisionary approach in writing helps deconstruct the stereotype images by restructuring and reconstructing the tradition
of new woman. Revision consequently is “an act of survival”, a drive to “self-knowledge” achieved through “re-writing”. Consequently, the female characters of the myths find their strong voices in these creative renditions with the new found perspectives of themselves. The protagonists of such mythmaking rejected the delimiting values of male culture by overturning stereotypes. Mythmaking constitutes the radical act, inviting the audience to subvert the discriminatory treatment that thwarts and defeats female creativity by replacing it with the new mythology rooted in the feminist perspective. Thus as Hayden White tells in his *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), “*Every mode of telling the past involves a process of representation*” (quoted in Sundar 23). Similarly Valentine Daniel in *Three Dispositions towards the Past* (1989) tells, “*Different aspects of the past get emphasised, depending on the aims of the present*” (quoted in Sundar 23). The women writers have felt the need to interpret and re-present the mythological female characters because mythically as well as historically women have been viewed and portrayed through the patriarchal lens and have been presented with, if not completely but with few distortions. Women depicted through male imagination tend to be stereotypical and also static. Mythology including History and Art constrain women within a static image. With the advent of feminism and the growing consciousness, these women writers realised that their experiences are still out of the reach of the male psyche and understanding. Their depiction has lacked feminine sensitivity. Women felt that only they can “*genuinely portray the nuances, traumas and ambiguities that rack a woman’s sensitivity*” (Kalpana 97). As a result there was a shift in ideology and women are being portrayed as radical and intellectual beings.

Classical mythology has endured throughout the history through translations, revivals, adaptations, reinterpretations, the borrowing of themes and images and through the use of key figures and symbols. Such myths have continued to resonate and reflect the continuing human concerns. They have provided an enduring cultural resource shared across the boundaries. The popular uses of the images from classical mythology in the modern world include fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, cartoons, TV and advertising, to name a few.

Dev Sen, Adalja, Laxmi “Ambai” and Mangai have used the mythical figures of Medea, Mandodari, Sita and Amba as emblems and symbols of resistance to patriarchal hegemony by reviving them in contemporary performances. Although the basic outlines remained unchanged, their interpretation and judgements of the action differed radically. They have taken advantage of the continuing relevance of myths to the changing
conditions of human experience to comment, sometimes ironically on the experiences they describe through "a framework within which the past is re-created and contrasted to the present" (Sabean 29) leading to the partial breakdown of traditional authority. Thus "Revisionist Mythmaking is the potential power of the writer to appropriate the mythic tale or the mythic figure for altered ends, which may ultimately make cultural change" (Showalter 1985 317).

The *Ramayan*, the *Mahabharat*, the stories from the *Puranas*, the legends and the stories of the past are not simply epics or the old grannies’ stories but they are the living embodiments of India’s cultural consciousness and all the characters are well-absorbed by the people. Meenakshi Mukherjee has observed that Indian people are closer to their myths and the mythical characters. She tells, “If a world-view is required to make literature meaningful in terms of shared human experience, then the Indian epics offer a widely accepted basis of such common background, which permeated the collective unconscious of the whole nation” (Mukheijee 131). The playwrights have confronted these popular myths with their contradictions, exposed hypocrisy and judged their moral code. Intellectual query became the hallmark of their rewriting. Nothing remained sacred for their contemporary “interrogative text” which “poses questions by enlisting the reader in contradiction” (Belsey 23). They have deflated the moral heroes privileged with an element of divinity and have questioned the hallowed personalities like Bhishma, Krishna, Rama and even Yama, the god of death imparting voice and visibility to the muted victims. Through their plays the playwrights have taken an explicit feminist position against patriarchy and have redeemed these women from the myth of deification and seen them in the realistic light as human beings that too as women. The efforts are on to recreate myths about women that are free from “the man-formed mythic maze” (Palmer 75) that is constructed to confuse and dominate women in general. After discovering the power of myths to represent and redefine the female experiences, these feminist playwrights have appropriated these new found definitions and new meanings to the existing ones. Indeed, the plays “Medea”, “Mandodari”, “Crossing the River” and “Frozen Fire” can be interpreted in many other ways. Not only do these plays reinterpret myths but they have provided sources for further commentary. No longer are these plays the personal narratives of one woman.

Many other women writers like Iravati Karve, Pratibha Ray, Kavita Sharma, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Durga Bhagawat, Shashi Deshpande, Nayanatara Sahgal, Poile Sengupta, Uma Parameswaran and Kavita Sharma have expressed their empathetic
understanding of the mythological heroines in their writings in all other genres and languages. These rational thinking women felt strongly the need to rescue the images of mythological heroines from the existing dominant perceptions as surrendering and passive victims of injustice laid on them. The Indian women writers sensed the need to relate the issue inherent in Indian epics to the contemporary lives in a broader social and political sense. They have applied rational and gender related notions to their writings.

Mondodari, Savitri, Sita, Draupadi and others are the familiar figures in the Hindu imagination. They have been the epitomes of wifely duties, devotion, patience and supreme sacrifice. The unquestioning obedience is expected of them. The novel *Yajna Seni: The Story of Draupadi* (1993) written in Oriya by Pratibha Ray and translated in English by Pradeep Bhattacharya and published in 1995 presents a psychological picture of Draupadi whose depiction transcends the limited social and traditional circumstances of her times. In Divakaruni’s novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), the theme of search for identity reverberates throughout the novel. Draupadi empathetically understands the plight of ordinary women exploited by men. Further, Kavita Sharma’s *The Queens of Mahabharata* (2008) portrays Draupadi as a strong willed interrogator of the patriarchal norms of society. Mahasweta Devi’s story “Draupadi” reflects the atrocities committed by police on a Dalit woman drawing a comparison between Draupadi of the epic. Yarlagadda Laxmi Prasad’s “Draupadi” (2006) brings out her qualities of mental strength, courage, determination, adaptability and nobility. Not only do the women writers but also men writers like Gurucharan Das have dealt with mythological heroines from modern point of view. He has taken up the theme of the *Mahabharat* for his book *The Difficulty of Being Good*. In the chapter “Draupadi’s Courage”, Das portrays her as an intellectual and assertive woman posing grave questions on Dharma to the great heroes like Yudhishtir and Bheeshma. Subramania Bharati’s *Panchali Sabatham* is a patriotic recasting of the ancient story which reflects the plight of India during British rule. *Aandu Bali* - a modern play in Malayalam written and directed by Vayala Vasudevan Pillai where women play a predominant role in the eighteen-day long *Kurukshetra* war. Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra, Hidimba, the slum-dwellers and the marginalised class of society are presented here as taking a dominant role in deciding the course of war and bringing it to an end. Their concern is to release their suppressed energy against war, oppression, exploitation, etc. at all levels of social fabric. The play evokes the feminist urges.

The animated film “Sita Sings the Blues” happens to be the latest retelling of the *Ramayan*. It is a rendition from Sita’s perspective. The director Nina Paley applies
modern rational and gender-related notions to the mythological story. *In Search of Sita*, a collection of essays, explores the persona of Sita who is not depicted as a woman with divinity but as an ordinary woman destined to suffer. The Sita of Bina Agarwal’s poem “Sita Speak” and “Beyond Captivity” is interrogated vehemently for her silence. Snehalata Reddy’s play “Sita” shows Sita plunging in the funeral pyre of Ravan. Meena Alexander wrote poems “Pale Sita”, “Preclude to Ruin” and “Sita’s Story”. Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s three short stories “The Ur Ramayana”, “The Trap of Immortality” and “Sita Enters the Netherworld” deal with Sita who is portrayed as a person with an independent mind. Amba, Kaushalya, Shoorpanakha and Shakuntala are other remarkable women included by Dev Sen in her series of short stories. Uma Parameswaran in her dance drama “Sita’s Promise” (1981) tries to provide a corrective to the Indian code of righteousness. One can not miss the hurts that Sita’s tender mind suffers due to Rama. The play also makes Lakshman blame his brother Rama for giving importance to duty and neglecting the call of love. A Marathi play *Bhoomikanya Seeta* by Warerkar questions the treatment given to Sita. In Malayalam literature, Kumaran Asan wrote about Sita as a violent person who questions Rama’s moralistic complacency.

Shashi Deshpande in many of her short stories reworks the myths from both the epics and interprets and relates them to the situation of contemporary life. Her numerous reinterpretations of myths expose the confining stereotypes. Poile Sengupta’s *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* (2001) is an ambitious play that deals with two characters from two different epics. Shoorpanakha represents all those women who are bold enough to remain single and declare their desire for male companionship without taking recourse to false modesty. Tara Vanarase’s novel *Shyamini* has Shoorpanakha as its central character. Nayanatara Sahgal’s “Rich like Us” (1985), “Plans for Departure” (1985) and “Mistaken Identity” (1988) are retrievals and restatements of India’s past. *Madhavi* (1984), a play by Bhisham Sahni radically decentres the myth and presents Madhavi as a bitter, disillusioned and angry woman who refuses to submit any more to the male dictates and walks out of the unjust structure. A play *Mata Hidimba* based on the story of Ghatotkacha brings out the injustice done to Hidimba and exploitation of Ghatotkacha in the power game.

Thus these women writers have taken up the stories of mythological characters and located them differently. Resistance through revisionist mythmaking constitutes the rupturing of the patriarchal textuality of the myths. They make ideological shifts by creating women-centred works out of male-oriented textualities. Individual self-assertion,
subversion and interrogation are the hallmarks of revisionist mythmaking through which women are introducing "mythic symbols to defy traditional feminine ideas of feminine passivity in an oblique way" (Humm 89).

It can be concluded that the themes of Indian myths do have a contemporaneity and timelessness as they imbibe multiplicity of themes to different readers at different ages, and in different contexts to reconstruct and revise. These writers - both men and women - have taken the advantage of the continuing relevance of the myths and the extended uses of mythic themes and images to the human experiences and have commented, sometimes ironically on the experiences they describe. In all the varied forms the classical myths have retained their power to compel the readers’ attention and to reveal to them in myriad ways their complex capacity for conveying meaning. Feminist writers through revisionist mythmaking are creating a positive female mythology with images of women characters who can serve as strong models for women to build their inner confidence and dissipate crippling fears of insecurity and helplessness.

The fact eternally remains that the themes of Indian myths do have a contemporaneity and timelessness as they imbibe multiplicity of interpretations to different readers at different times and contexts to ponder, think, analyse, explore and reconstruct. Myths have a transformative import and when re-written with feminist perspective, they foreground women’s views of existence and validate female experience. The problematising between the established and the resistant versions makes the reader/audience re-think and re-examine the myths. The literary texts thus become a potential means of challenging and resisting the cultural heritage.
ii. Medea

Medea (Bengali, 1993)

Nabaneeta Dev Sen
Trans: Tutun Mukherjee

"We were dismayed at your self-inflicted exile,
a destination more daring than any of ours,
and you so ordinary and timid" (Ruth Kessler 323).

Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s play “Medea” was published in 1993 along with her two other plays and received the Sahitya Akademi award. Its several performances through the years have generated great enthusiasm. Daughter of the well-known poets Dev Sen (b 1938) was named by Tagore. She has published fiction, poetry, children’s literature, travelogues, literary criticism and essays. After marrying the economist Amartya Sen, she moved to Britain. But when the marriage broke up, she returned to Calcutta with her two daughters - Antara and Nandana. In her writings Dev Sen has explored various aspects of women’s identity. She reveals the changing social values and family structures, and discusses the issues of women of all age. The works of Dev Sen sum up what Heilburn reflects, “Courage in women always catches me up, moves me to compassion and the desire to offer them succour, sustenance if possible . . .” (Heilburn 153).

Medea is a Greek tragedy written by Euripides (485-406 B.C.) - a younger contemporary of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The play was first presented in 431 B.C. (Magill 2295). The eponymous protagonist Medea in Greek mythology is a daughter of Aeetes, King of Colchis. When Jason - a celebrated hero of antiquity, son of Aeson - King of Iolcos comes to Colchis in quest of Golden Fleece, he and Medea fall in love with each other. In order to help Jason she deceives her father and kills her brother. After Jason has with Medea’s help overcome all the difficulties placed by Aeetes in his way, Jason and Medea embark to return to Greece. She saves his life by helping him obtain the Golden Fleece. In all his endeavours Jason’s success depended almost entirely on Medea.

The reward for Medea’s help is her desertion by Jason in Corinth for a younger, richer and prettier woman Glauc - the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Jason soon demands that Medea should leave Corinth, never to see Jason or their two sons again. For her desertion, initially Medea considers killing Jason, Glauc and Creon, and then fleeing with her children. But later she feels revenge would be sweeter should Jason live to suffer long afterwards. “Nothing could be more painful than to grow old without a lover, without children, and without friends, and so Medea planned to kill the King, his
daughter, and her own children” (Magill 2295). Thus Medea resolves to kill the King and his daughter in order to cause Jason the greatest possible pain. She decides to kill her two young sons justifying that it is the only way to protect her children. When Glauce is about to marry Jason, she puts on a garment given to her by Medea. This garment being poisoned sets her body on fire and she dies in torment. Thus not only does Medea destroy Glauce but also avenges herself by killing the two children she had had by Jason. Medea’s marriage in ruins, the only meaningful role she is left with is that of mother. But Jason, demanding the custody of the children, wants to deprive her of that too. She feels utterly isolated in the unfamiliar city to which he has brought her. For all these deeds of hers Medea is considered a witch. She has a sophisticated knowledge of poisons, as well as of fertility, and can command the services of dragons. But in this thoroughly patriarchal society, she is depicted as a witch. The reason for killing her children is as she herself expresses, “I do not care for myself if I am banished / But I am wretched if they (her children) are in trouble” (Euripides 350). She further makes her concern for her children more clear, “. . . my task is fixed: as quickly as possible / To kill my children and to fly this land, / And not by hesitation leave my sons / To die by other hands more merciless” (Euripides 835).

When Jason accuses her of murder, she tells emphatically, “Your defiance and your second marriage killed the children” (Euripides 838). When he again accuses her by blaming her that she is making his marriage an excuse for murder, her defiant interrogation is, “You think it a little thing for women?” (Euripides 838). Though “the terrible image of a mother murdering her own children was a sensational addition by Euripides to the original legend of the Golden Fleece” (Patterson 269), her actions are judiciously defended. “Euripides' willingness to help the audience understand why she acts in the way she does has, however, made Medea one of the most powerful tragic creations ever” (Patterson 269).

R. J. Kalpana emphasises the fact that Medea murders everybody not out of jealousy or to retain Jason for herself but “Medea wants herself back, not him. She had been his equal in every way and she was humiliated to find that she had married a hero and he had turned into a politician . . . To kill Jason would not get her back what she wants. When Jason is brought down and is totally without power, only when she can see him reduced, impotent, his future destroyed by the death of his sons, can she get her own self back” (Kalpana 79). She gave everything of hers to Jason who demanded extraordinary things from her. But he betrayed her. She feels disrespected and belittled.
Euripides presented in Medea a woman who “didn’t just keep the home fires burning and her husband’s bed warm, but she was also capable of burning the house down... She was too much of a woman and too powerful for men” (Kalpana 79). Medea is not only intelligent but also emotionally strong. The “play, Medea by Euripides shocked and angered audiences when it was first staged in 431 B.C. In the twenty first century, the theatre world is still reluctant to touch this dynamite of a play, as it turns men all hot under the collar and uncomfortable in their seats” (Kalpana 78). Based on such a fiery Greek myth, Dev Sen has written “Medea”. Like Manjit Pal Kaur’s play Sahiban (1988), “Medea” symbolically represents the predicament of a deserted wife in the contemporary times. Dev Sen has experimented with the Greek myth and used it as a metaphor of the emotionally strong woman - a deserted wife and mother. Metaphorically Dev Sen’s play frames the story of a contemporary urban middle-class married woman named Rupsa who like Medea of the myth emerges successful in avenging the betrayal of her husband. She maintains a fierce commitment to her freedom from the relationship that ignores her worth. Like Medea, Rupsa avenges herself by deserting her husband and sending back her adopted children to hostel. As in the classic instance of Medea, she too does the unnatural deed of abandoning her husband and loving children in order to prove her firm purpose of punishing her husband.

The play “Medea” deals with family - a microscopic social unit. Dev Sen covers this narrow domestic space and brings out the universal aspect of it. She builds awareness about changing familial values. The families are knit together through relationships among the members who are bound together through the common space and faith in one another. Similarly the same families get disrupted through the betrayal by the members. Likewise, the play “Medea” depicts the disintegration of a middle-class family in a city due to the complacency, irresponsibility and carelessness of the husband and thereby his betrayal. The play opens at the Railway Station in the suburbs where Manas and Rupsa meet after a long gap of five years. The play signifies a return to the past and to the world of memories. The protagonist Rupsa Mullick and her husband Manas Mullick take stock of their lives. They are involved, in some measure, in an observer-status. Rupsa analyses the situations and points out the magnanimity of women-foolk. Through the act of her return to the past, she begins a process of dissection. She very casually and with much indifference narrates how Manas’s betrayal has influenced her decisions and responses. No matter how much he tries his best to negate her, she calmly goes on telling how his abandonment of her and their adopted children has impinged on their lives. She
effectively behaves with more integrity. It is almost a psychological study of Rupsa who powerfully represents the extent of female revenge.

The important aspect of the conversation is that Rupsa is not ready to recognize him as her husband. She does tell him that she is Rupsa Mullik. She silently asserts her own individuality and resists his imposing himself on her. The possibility of procreation is the basis of family. The assumption of such a basis automatically gives motherhood and fatherhood a degree of importance. It is not merely a biological relationship; it has its cultural and emotional associations. When Rupsa could not conceive, she was constantly being examined by so many doctors. She often used to think that Manas should be examined too. She had misjudged him. He knew it very well that the problem was with him. He had got himself examined too but he did not confide it in her. By doing so he ignored the strong foundation of familial bonds on which a strong home rests. One day, quite by chance, she found the pathological test report. Yet, after the initial shock of learning the truth, she supposes, “It isn’t easy for man to volunteer such information. No man can. He couldn’t either” (91). Her heart melted with “compassion and pity for him” (92). Rupsa’s feminine qualities of forgiveness and tenderness could imagine his distress and the cruel injustice of fate to deprive a man of the essence of manhood. She feels it is not fair on her part to be angry with such a man and thus she does not get angry with him. On the contrary she thinks, “He must have suffered too - all by himself - trying desperately to hold on to his self-respect unable to share his anguish with me” (92). She understands the problem of male-ego. “He kept his secret. A man like him must have felt terribly humiliated at this huge lack, the lack of manhood” (92). It leads to “get some inklings in this scene of the insecurities and fears that feed his sense of diminished potency and shape his crazily logical rational for harassing women” (Kondo 53). Rupsa though emotionally harassed tries her best to maintain their relationship. She never lets him guess that she knows about his lack. One can judge the emotional strength and morally worthy intentions of Rupsa. With her careful presence of mind and deliberate actions she strives to avoid the painful circumstances. Unfortunately Manas underestimates and undervalues her. He misreads her inner strength. According to him Rupsa could scare to death even at the mere sound of thunder. He was disastrously blind to her inner moral strength. His misgivings about her harm everybody in the family.

Despite everything, she prepares herself for the betterment of the family. “To surprise him” (91) she brings Ratan and Tutu from the Ashram. Carol Gilligan asserts that “it is important to acknowledge that women are conditioned to nurture others before
*meeting their own needs* (quoted in Waldron 05). Rupsa, in the Indian version of womanhood, as a self-sacrificing and self-effacing angel, ministers to husband and children by satisfying their needs. But Manas wrongs her and she suffers. His affair with Sonali disgusts her. Besides he indulges himself in “fraudulent activities” (92). What pains Rupsa is that he could not and did not share his feelings and his activities with her but could share with Sonali. According to him, Rupsa “lacked the strength to bear the shock. She worshipped me as her god!” (92) therefore he did not dare reveal himself to her as a gambler, thief and swindler. It was simpler for him to explain to Sonali who advised him to leave the country to avoid jail. His doubt was, “Could Rupu have saved me from jail? . . . I had no option but to run away” (92) to Burma leaving Rupsa and children behind to fend for themselves. Completely devoid of male support which is considered essential for female sustenance in a patriarchal society Rupsa bravely handles the reins of the family. Dev Sen has presented the plight of Rupsa in the chaos which is essentially male generated. The play presents a new facet of Rupsa - a woman exhibiting the moral courage to sustain. At the betrayal of her husband she experiences deathless humiliation and disrespect. She undergoes the psychological and mental strain caused by her husband. But she does not allow the consequences to sap her energy as she decides to live on her own. She denies positioning *herself inside relationships and their consequent social roles. Resisting embeddedness in the world of domesticity, she divests herself of the textual encumbrances*" (Smith 418) and takes courageous decisions to stand fast and to risk pushing ahead into the unknown. After her parents death, she sells the house and moves away and “No one could tell where” (89). She sends her children Ratan and Tutu back to the hostel.

When she accidently comes across him after five long years, she coolly rejects his claim on her as his wife. By this time she has established herself as an autonomous being free from any relation. Her enormous sacrifice and magnanimity have proved worthless. She sees only deceit, treachery and betrayal which frustrate her irreparably. She undergoes an arduous journey but emerges an independent and assertive woman with definite purpose ahead of her. She gains her assertion of will. Hence Rupsa indifferently responds to Manas’s queries. In the process she does not express any of her grievances against her husband for whatever happened. She only reports - neither with any emotion nor with any complaint nor blame. By bringing Rupsa and Manas face to face in the present moment, Dev Sen calls attention to its aftermath. She exhibits the distance between the married couple.
Dev Sen has drawn critical attention to the Indian middle-class woman in the domestic sphere. Like Euripides’ Medea, Rupsa is also a very passionate woman. As she loved him extremely so did she hate him. Hence when Rupsa meets him she rejects him. She is no more an angel. She does not forgive him for all his misdeeds. Ultimately she goes her own way. By doing so Rupsa demonstrates the history of risk-taking towards positive outcomes for herself. In this play of woman and her courage, Dev Sen suggests that each woman can free herself from the tradition in order to explore the world’s possibilities while taking care of her own destiny.

Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Viewing motherhood as a symbol of power can catalogue women to take actions they otherwise might have considered” (Collins 194). Dev Sen deconstructs the “angel stereotype”. She expresses the possibility of women exerting their agency as exit. Rupsa resists the patriarchal control by getting control of her life. She is quite unruffled, unperturbed and composed. It expresses the evolution of her feminine subjectivity. She faces him with all dignity. Though she is anguished, she is calm in tone. She experiences a sense of remoteness from him which she is unable to alter. She is quietly steadfast and not confrontational with her husband. Rupsa’s unwillingness to recognise her husband is a powerful way of enkindling the innate energy for rebellion. The dignity and self-respect of a devoted wife is not recognised. It also marks her faith in the capacity of her own for self-emancipation. Her matter-of-fact narration of her suffering speaks of her strength. Her resistance gives a glimpse of what the victims are capable of. Rupsa’s promising resistant actions demonstrate the ultimate redemption for her own self. Her resistance is a weapon to slam, indict and impeach the exploitative social system. Though he falls on his knees for forgiveness, she is cool and composed. He does confess, “Yes, I was wrong. What I did was wrong. But don’t be so cruel. Please believe me this time” (93). She sorrowfully places her hands on his head as in benediction and says without perturbed, “You are still mistaken” (93). She repeats his words, “Don’t people make mistakes? One has to make a choice but who can tell what might be lost in the process?” (93-94). She committed a mistake by believing him and having utmost faith in him. But when he runs away to Burma abandoning her and children she too is forced to make a choice and in the process she loses much.

As the train enters the station she prepares to leave and gently pushes Manas aside. Rupsa becomes the agent of her own deliverance. Her abandoning of her husband is a classic example of the powerful form of resistance which causes a rupture in the hegemonic discourse of family and its solidarity. Her powerful, satiric and hard-hitting
words paralyse Manas. Her going alone is an act of justice that vindicates her honour and pride. “The discourses of colonialism and patriarchy have defined woman as other, not licensed to speak for herself but to be spoken for. But feminism has tried to eradicate the burden of inhibitions women have supported for ages and to urge them to think and live for themselves . . .” (Bedjaoui 46).

When Manas goes away she chooses exile i.e. to go away from the places where her old memories can be revoked. Exile, thus becomes a vital metaphor in the consideration of her true identity through which she interrogates and dislodges the patriarchal codes of womanly existence. It clearly highlights the potential of women to articulate agency and female empowerment.

The play deals with domesticity, children and family life. Dev Sen deconstructs the great collective myth about women by creating the character of Rupsa. She is one among those “writers who alike reject the polarities and the unidimensional portrayals who deconstruct both romantic and heroic images of women” (Rani 09). The play thus explores the interior spaces of women and questions the conjugal rights. “The question that is addressed in every generation is the rights that marriage bestows or the space it takes away . . . The impossibility of trust in any relationship, the consciousness that members of a family need to be protected from their own members subverts the concept of a safe hierarchical family . . . feelings of loss and of sympathy” (Jain 2003 53-54).

In her resistance, there is no hysterics, no melodrama, no tantrums and none of the conventional reactions. Apparently she does not directly let him down in any dramatic manner. Manas tries his best to reach out to her in several small ways. But Rupsa is not a conventional stereotype wife to forgive the flirtation of her husband with Sonali and take him back into her fold. To be within the marriage is not the only option left for Rupsa. She wanted a house where confidences can be shared, fears expressed, guilt condoned, questions asked and answered. But Manas exercises his male prerogative of desertion which results in the desolation of his family. She does not stir from her deliberate pace, but responds with quiet defiance. Dev Sen in an interview by Ritu Menon says, “According to the sociological myth of a broken family, an abandoned wife with kids is in a stereotypically tear-jerking situation” (Menon 69). But Rupsa has moved out of her marriage and family, her city and then later, even out of the relationship. Usually the ending of any piece of work works ordinarily towards restoration of relationships. The play ends with despair for Manas and his realisation that there is no possibility of return
to the past. Thus Dev Sen makes "the dailiness of life universal" (Menon 69) because her stories happen in every home.

The play ends with the director coming over the stage along with actors. She says, "This play may be called MEDEA, it might also be called JASON. You can choose to call it what you will. But, tell me, who do you think is the subject of this drama? To whom does the drama really belong: Jason or Medea?" (94). The reader/audience of the play will definitely agree with the fact that MEDEA is the subject of this play and it is to her the play really belongs. Like Medea, Rupsa murders her own trusting self because of the unscrupulous husband. Both Medea and Rupsa humble their offending men by divesting them of their power. The play "Medea" explores the nature of Rupsa’s risk-taking and courage. Although it deals with her resistance, thematically it is also a play for male readers who wish to understand better the inner self and the strength of each of the woman. Dev Sen appeals to the reader/audience to reconsider the traditional exploitation and misappropriation of women which is still rooted in the glorious heroic values of the ancient myths. She takes a new look at the old myth and makes it the instrument of a radical revisionist-mythmaking.

The play is an assault on the male ego. Rupsa frees herself from the conventional duties and obligations of waiting for her husband to return. It is not the only one woman Rupsa, there are several examples one can trace in social history as well as in myth where the wives are abandoned midway on some pretext or the other. Sita and Shakuntala are two major examples where the wives are abandoned and expected to give birth to their children and bring them up single handedly. Dev Sen describes the self-chosen exiled existence of Rupsa that becomes a way of breaking the patriarchal hold over her life. She resists her degradation, her humiliation and the eradication of the values she upheld.

Reading this play can connect the personal struggle of woman to the wider social reality. The play affords a space to women to articulate and to commiserate the experiences of being left behind. Rupsa’s sense of self leads her to desist herself from falling into trappings of conventional meek wife, submitting and surrendering her will to her husband. Thus the images of woman have been changing and moving from traditional self-sacrificing towards settled and firm minds searching for freedom and proper identity transgressing the male centred power.
iii. Mandodari

Mandodari (Gujarati, 1997)

Varsha Mahendra Adalja

Trans: K. L. Vyas

Varsha Mahendra Adalja, a Gujarati writer was born in 1940 in Bombay in a family which has been congenial to a future writer. Gunvantrai Acharya, a famous Gujarati novelist was her father. “Drama was her first love” (Tharu and Lalita 465). She has trained herself from the National School of Drama in Delhi and produced features and plays for television. She even dramatised her own novels. Many of her stories have been adapted for the stage, films, radio and television serials. She has served as an editor of Gujarati women’s magazines like Sudha (1973-1976) and Gujarati Femina (1989-1990) and a member of the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad for nearly two decades. Adalja has short-story collections, essays of criticism, drama anthologies and thirty-two novels to her credit. Aansar - a television film, presents the saga of people afflicted with leprosy and social ostracism. It won the Central Sahitya Akademi Award. Her popular detective stories include social comment. Her plays Sharada, Aparadhi and My Name is Shraddha Kothari present strong women protagonists who are not afraid to confront the society nor do they hesitate to embrace life despite the crises they face. She has long been associated with Gujarati “Rangabhumi”. She has won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1995; Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1976; Gujarati Sahitya Akademi Award thrice in 1977, 1979, 1980; and Gujarati Sahitya Parishad Award in 1972 and 1975.

Adalja has incorporated classical themes and archetypes from antiquity into her play “Mandodari” - the character from the epic the Ramayan. Adapting the myth by centering exclusively on Mandodari’s humanity and her love for her countrymen, the play highlights the contemporary rendition of the ancient texts by engaging in a social commentary on issues related to female victimisation. Adalja has significantly altered the archetypal myth of Mandodari by reconfiguring the motif of pativrata. Adalja’s “movement back into the past is an attempt to deconstruct the cultural narratives and rewrite them as enabling ones. This is a symbolic imaginary used to deconstruct the mythic past” (Jain 2003 270).

In 1997 the play “Mandodari” received Gujarati Sahitya Academi Award. The play presents a woman’s struggle with fate and the hovering clouds of war. Adalja makes the eponymous character to represent all those wives whose husbands fight the battles to satisfy their egoistic pursuits of love and lust. Mandodari becomes the mouthpiece of all
wives and mothers who suffer from the battles fought by men. The play helps to reveal the innermost recesses of Mandodari, her qualms about her misery regarding which the epic is silent. The play is an attempt to unlock the misery behind the exhibitions of man’s war capabilities and to understand the role of woman in such circumstances and to theorise about the wailing and losses of womenfolk. Alicia Ostriker contends that women’s revisionist mythmakings are the corrective revisions “of representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival” (Ostriker 318).

Through the depiction of Mandodari, Adalja has attempted to present a counter mythology to view myths from a woman-centred angle and to displace the traditional dominant mythologies that have under-valued and under-estimated women and their capacities. Adalja’s idea was to recreate the past with focus on women. The men writers through the ages have immortalised the deeds of the mythical heroes. They have got these heroes’ cults established in their honour. The heroes are even deified, whereas women of myths enjoy no such privilege. They are neglected and are almost sidelined in the myths. “The message is clear: heroes are brave if they fight their enemies; heroines are brave if they sacrifice themselves” (Harris et al. 300). By sacrificing themselves the women become “Satis”. Five women - Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari, Ahilya and Tara - from the Indian mythology have been playing crucial roles in Indian tradition and the psyche of women who relate to these “Satis” or “Panchakanyas” even today in this tech-savvy age. They are being influenced by their life-graphs and carry the legacy of these feminine icons of Indian tradition. Mandodari was a woman of character, virtue and relentless faith. What stands out about Adalja’s play is that even at the risk of losing her husband and sons, Mandodari exhibits tremendous nationalist zeal. It directs the reader/audience’s attention to her balanced response to Ravana’s abduction of Sita, her humanity and her unyielding commitment to save her nation - Lanka and also the salvation of her husband.

In the play Mandodari challenges Kaaldevata - the Lord of Death who is popularly known as Yama Devata. “Yama, like many other gods, has been known by several names, which depict his characteristics. One among them is Kaal (Time). He is also called Antak (One who ends life) and Mrutyu (Death)” (Saletore 1990 1662). He comes to “destroy Lanka since the reign of Ravana and the power of his mighty kingdom are over” (99) but he is challenged by Mandodari. She stops him saying firmly, “But I shall not allow this to happen. This task of yours must remain unfulfilled” (101). Her resisting
voice denotes, “Myths are used to infiltrate the language of power with the language of rebellion” (Jain 1996 163). She is concerned about the people of Lanka and Lanka - the capital city, both of which are dear to her than her own life. For whose sake she even advices Seeta to surrender to Ravana and save people from ensuing war. Her alert and intent words of challenge suggest her keen intelligence, rationality, self-control and supreme self-confidence. She is also a combination of feminine beauty and mature self-awareness. Kaaldevata acknowledges her stance and says, “You are indeed very daring to challenge me. I accept your challenge” (102). He also admits that she is a wise and devout Maharani. As a part of the challenge she invites him to play a game that is played with the pawns. She tells him that she has helped Ravanasur many times with battle strategy. She has been his war-strategist with the thorough knowledge of Saam, Daam, Danda and Bheda. She has devised the game with such designs in her mind. She is a strong woman who sets her own terms and conditions.

The first move of Kaaldevata has been the abduction of Rama’s wife Seeta by Ravanasura. Mandodari is fully aware that kidnapping a helpless lady is not a trivial matter. Hence, as a counter move, she tries her best to convince Lankesh of the consequences of this abduction. But Lankadhipati is adamant and unswerving. The play is a serious comment on man’s blindness towards woman’s appeals. Dashanana is totally bereft of understanding and sensitivity. His ego can often be considered as a myopic concern with self-interest and serve as inability to face reality. Ravana misses the mark by falling short in his judgement, understanding and action which can be described as “hamartia . . . the term Aristotle uses to denote a serious error in judgement of the tragic hero” (Harris et al. 1039). Ravana’s excessive pride i. e. “hubris” blinds him to his own limitations and he offends gods and initiates his own doom. In literature, a character with this pride ignores warnings and laws; and this usually results in their downfall and death. Ravana too meets his end.

The individual will of Mandodari which is characterised by her need to act rather than to yield; to resist rather than passively accept, is thwarted by Paulatsya. But she does not desist. As a man, it is impossible for him to understand the emotional conflict of his wife Mandodari. Yet, she warns him, “A woman is not an object to be used to settle enmity nor a victim of lust” (105). He ignores all her sane words. “It has always been considered that man’s charge was colonial to wrest the great field of nature, whereas woman’s was parochial, to simply love and bless man” (Mullenix 105). Men are public figures, the lords of creations and women their ordained inferiors. But Mandodari is not
ready to judge herself as inferior. The feeling of neglect and alienation of her husband seeps in her. It makes her to point out the different facets of masculinity - the masculinity defined by power, control and success. She completes her process of becoming and growing out of passivity and her secondary role acquires an agency by challenging Kaaldevata to play the game of dice.

As a next move Kaaldevata sends Ravana to Seeta. Ravana boasts of his power and tells her that he can make her submit but she does not yield. Mandodari is hopeful to see that Seeta is unyielding to the pressures of Ravana and that Ravana will get tired of convincing Seeta and release her to go back to Rama and “So, war won’t happen” (106). But Kaaldevata sends Jatayu to inform Rama of Seeta’s abduction and alerts Mandodari that Rama must be getting ready to fight Ravana. Further Kaaldevata exhibits his power by burning her golden city Lanka through Hanuman. Kaaldevata warns her that destiny’s inevitable cycle cannot be stopped by the puny strength of man. He orders her to admit defeat. But she is not a person to accept defeat so easily. Her words exhibit her strength as well as her confidence in herself. She says, “Not so easily, lord. I am the daughter of the legendary Maydanav and an apsara. I am Ravana’s wife and also his war-strategist... I shall surely be successful with my moves, you will see” (107). When Mandodari fails in her move to convince Ravana of his deed, she as her next move sends Bibhishana - brother of Ravanasura to convince him. But he is compelled to return telling Ravana that they will meet on the battlefield.

All the pawns of Kaaldevata, the Lord of Death are in motion and he asks her to allow him to go. But Mandodari requests him to allow her to play her last pawn. He admires her determination and cleverness, and allows her for the next move. This time she makes herself the pawn and goes to Seeta to convince and alert her. She tells Seeta that she will be the cause of the catastrophe that will ensue and it is she who can stop it. She can put an end to the terrible war and the death of so many people. She tells, “If Ravana gets you, he will not fight and many lives will be saved. Surrender to Ravana, Seeta and stop this war. This is the only way to stop this war, Seeta” (110). Mandodari does not know what Seeta should do but she knows it for sure what Seeta can do to save the innocent people. She also explains what the “Sati” really is. “Does woman become a Sati by washing the feet of her husband? No Janaki, Sati is one who follows the path of truth” (110). While saying so Mandodari has the innocent people in her mind and a great hope for humanity. In asking Seeta to surrender to Ravana, Mandodari hopes that, “All these people scattered in different factions, forever fighting each other, could be united
and could at last live happily in one Kingdom under one emperor. This is the dream I had, Seeta, that I hoped to see reflected in your eyes” (111). She also tells her that how they have got a great opportunity to serve humanity and prevent further hatred and bloodshed. She knows, “Great deeds call for great sacrifice” (111) and therefore everybody’s welfare lies in Seeta’s surrender and sacrifice.

When Seeta does not agree to it Mandodari explains how she too has sacrificed herself and her life. She clarifies, “I have paid the price of being Ravana’s wife by burning lifelong in the fire of penance . . . You too will have to pay the price for causing so much death and devastation with your tears . . . No one is free of Karma. No one is spared the consequences of one’s action. Devi Pardon me. Farewell” (111-112). The proper protagonist Mandodari subordinates her own needs to those of the kingdom her husband rules over. She accepts whatever burdens and sacrifices the patriotic duty imposes on her and she does not ask to be rewarded. She finds herself caught up in a situation beyond her control. The occasion demands that she should not indulge in emotional excesses. Duty requires that she should avoid giving away to passionate excesses of grief or rage. Adalja’s play provides a “spacious agency to women by casting them as the moral guardians of both the private and the public sphere” (Mullenix 105). Mandodari is aware of the fact that she is the loser both the ways. If Ravanasura wins the war, Seeta will become the Patrani - his queen in the palace and Mandodari will be her attendant. If Ravanasura is killed then too her future is bleak. She may throw herself into the pyre of her dead husband or Rama - the victor may offer her to Bibhishana. She loses all her sons - Akshay, Indrajeet, Meghanaad and Aahiravana. Kaaldevata consoles her and tells that in this life the only truth is death. “I am touched by your love for your country. I bow to you and bless you. May you always be honoured as a great Sati” (114). When he is about to leave her after convincing her that “Kaal can never be defeated” (114) Mandodari laughs loudly but scornfully. She tells him that he is mistaken. She declares “You have lost the game and I have won” (114). She explains to him how every move of his led her towards her ultimate goal which has been her lord Ravana’s death for which she has been waiting. By speeding Ravana’s death Mandodari defies mythology which has not lacked in its spread of women who are self-sacrificing and follow their husbands through tribulation and exile, women who plead with the gods to take on punishment or death intended for their husbands.

Kaaldevata is awestruck and surprised. Being omniscient he too could not know her mind. Hence she comments “Well, to read a woman’s heart one has to be a woman
perhaps” (114). It is now that she speaks out her agony of being Ravanasura’s wife. “How would you understand the agony of being the wife of such a lustful yet blind man? . . . Through Seeta’s abduction and ensuing war, I sought the redemption of my clan. The arrow that killed Ravana actually released his soul and gave the egoistic man his salvation. Though I am widowed now, I’m a happy woman. I have succeeded in what I set out to do ha, ha, ha” (114). Kaaldevata is stunned and leaves silently. For the playwright Adalja, “. . . revising myth is about stripping myths down to find new ways of interrogating them” (Walters 100). Mandodari walks towards the throne. Her face expresses bitterness and anger. The war has carried away everything she loved and everything she built through the years with tenderness and care has been destroyed. She laments asking, “War! Why do wars happen? What do they achieve? The annals of time record many civilisations have been wiped out by these wars. How long will innocent people continue to be the victims of such needless violence? . . . Why should women be left behind to lament their loss?” (115). Pointing to the throne, she blurs out, “That is the reason. Yes, the lust for power, the rites of ego . . . lead towards the path of war and destruction . . . Such killings must stop. Oh, you future generations, stop your armies that trample the earth . . . Or else, the day will come when the whole world will be submerged in the ocean of tears of the helpless . . . I am a woman who has experienced this pain and suffering, I beg you for peace. But who is there to listen to my feeble voice? My lament is drowned by the sound of war drums . . . who is there to listen to me?” (115). She collapses near the throne. Her refutation of the war seems to be the most powerful stance of hers which articulates her social concerns.

The ego of Ravanasura drives everything in his Lanka to nothing. He is reckless in his pursuit of Seeta to commit antisocial acts, and puts an end to his own glorious life. Nevertheless, he remains a model as regards his devotion to god. Though Mandodari instructs him to accept god’s arrangement of their destinies he neglects her words. Hence, she compels Kaaldevata to participate in her plot of causing Ravana to fall in the war in order to redeem her clan knowing full well that she will have to be a widow. She speeds up Kaaldevata’s moves as quick as possible. Kaaldevata assumes almost a sinisterly destructive role. Nemesis - the power of retributive justice, the punishment that overtakes wrongdoers, describes the fall of the tragic hero - Ravana. Mandodari nevertheless enacts her resistance and performs the role of a woman in a tremendously new way.

Adalja deconstructs the image of Mandodari who is considered, adored and worshipped as one of the five *pativrata* women. But this *pativrata* woman plans her
husband - Ravanasura's death. She does this not for herself. She is ready to lose her beloved husband for the sake of many innocent people, to save her clan, her country and for her own humanity and above all for the salvation of her proud husband. By challenging Kaaldevata, Mandodari seeks to extend her influence beyond the palace, her chamber and does so only under the impact of altruism. This alteration indicates towards "a sign that this text will turn upside down the 'standard' archetype" (Hayes 174).

The appearance of Kaaldevata provides her with an opportunity and confidence to assert herself in initiating and thereby precipitating the fall of Ravanasura and participating in social reforms. This notion of Mandodari's moral superiority can be adjudged as a principle of True Womanhood. Such women are an honour to their sex and entitled to public praise. She resists the normative gender roles that expect women to be passive and submissive. She enacts a resistant performance that lies in contrast to the prescribed and sanctioned role for a woman that she normally assumes in the domestic sphere. Her acting outside the private sphere, her display of resistant gesture stuns Kaaldevata. As Adalja reconstructs her story, her tone is neither aggressive nor condescending, instead it has the unmistakable undertones of resistance. Adalja makes Mandodari ponder over the futility of her existence and the mockery of her being Sati and Pativrata. The result of her absolute loyalty to Ravanasura leads her to resist him as he insists on seeking glory on the battlefield, despite his awareness that his death will lead to her enslavement and widowhood. She, to Ravanasura, is simply a possession, an object owned and expected to fall in line with obedient wives. But her sense of "self" leads her to a different end. Her exercise of will, independent thoughts, the need to take decisions - all these abilities and her habits of mind can not be waived aside. There is no conflict in her as regards the social expectations from her and her own individual strength and thoughts. She is sure of her stand and therefore assertive.

Adalja's experimentation with breaking Mandodari's silence operates in several ways. Not only does Adalja allow Mandodari to gain and establish her voice but her own choice. Adalja has presented the life of Mandodari which is replicated in the lives of millions of Indian women even today. It is clear that Indian society at its deepest core still thinks that man is born to rule and woman to be ruled. A staunchly male-oriented society overlooks the affairs and illicit relations of a husband and expects the wife to love and honour him despite his misdemeanour. But Mandodari defies such notions by speeding up the death of her husband Ravanasura. "Women writers achieve a stirring emotional
response to the reader through such revision and inversion of canonical myths” (de Weever 24).

The prominent women personalities of epics and legends including five Satis show that women have been considered the “property” of men for millennia. They have been kidnapped, punished, abandoned to live alone in the forests, also as widows, even disrobed, staked and sold as slaves by powerful men. Things are not much different today. Women suffer the same humiliations even in modern Indian society. But the significant change discernible among today’s women is their awareness of themselves as human beings having the same rights and duties to be enjoyed and performed and thereby asserting their selves. Like Mandodari, most of the Indian women live a life of duality with the turbulence of varied experiences on the surface and a deep, silent core within their souls, where wisdom originates. Like Mandodari, they have an inherent gift of distinguishing between right and wrong and they also know how to insist on doing what they consider right.
iv. Crossing the River
*Aatraik Kadaththal* (Tamil, 2000)

C. S. Lakshmi “Ambai”

Trans: C. S. Lakshmi “Ambai”

C. S. Lakshmi was born in 1944 into a larger middle class family. “Ambai” is her pen name. Her grandmother was self-taught and a scholar of Tamil literature; her mother - a musician. Ambai writes, “My love for Tamil I learned from her and my grandmother” (Ghanou and Lalita 487). Her works are characterised by her passionate support of the cause of women. Her early novel *Andhi Malai* (Twilight) published in 1966. Her works reveal her insightful reading of the myths with a gendered perception. Many of her stories have been translated into English. She herself has translated her poetic-play *Aatraik Kadaththal* into English as “Crossing the River”. As regards her experience of translation Ambai says, “*All I am saying is that as I translate from Tamil into English, I should also be translating Tamil and English: each into its own relative imperfection, incompleteness and contingency*” (quoted in Radhakrishnan 22). Ambai has been working in the field of Women’s Studies for the last thirty years. She is the founder of SPARROW - Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women - a dynamic organisation working in Mumbai. It became “*an agent of conscientisation*” (Lakshmi 03). The aim of SPARROW from beginning is to acquire everything - from women’s private papers and journals to photographs and recordings, and thereby conduct history workshops. Being an activist and archivist Ambai makes efforts to redefine the archives and to preserve women’s records. “*It is a project*, Ambai explains, “*conceived not only as voicing silence but as one that would lead to communication, sharing an interaction*” (Forbes 2003 10).

Rewriting myths that have been unfair to women and re-looking at women in the epics have become an important area for feminist study in India. The poetic-play “Crossing the River” re-looks at Sita of the epic. Ambai tries to work with poetry and explores the power of the poetic-word on the stage. The play presents Sita’s appealing song. It is a symbolic enactment of woman’s song of anguish and suffering, her desire for freedom and her resistance to oppressive social norms. In “Crossing the River” Ambai has taken up to reinterpret and relate primarily the mythical character of Sita from the *Ramayan* to the situations of contemporary life. “*Ambai experiments with form, genre, and narrative technique... Her feminism permeates but does not restrict the subject matter of her work, which investigates the ways gender is constructed in society,*
explores communication between human beings, and celebrates ordinary women’s courage and resourcefulness” (Miller 13). The play has the detailed stage directions. It has only one performer-woman in black. There is a bare stage with a white screen on the wall facing the audience. Light falls on her from above. Shadows appear and cover the white screen in the centre. Voices are heard - both female and male. One of the voices is similar to hers. The transformation of a play from the page to the stage is usually collaboration of the performer, the costume and lights along with many theatrical aspects. The playwrights’ creativity can help the audience interpret what the dialogue reveals to them as the play proceeds. The lighting of the sets helps to give the stage composition a focus. Light also casts shadows, suggesting a mood and also enabling the audience to feel a scene rather than just see it. Thus the play has been developed into a different way in which only two voices are heard - one is that of a woman and other is that of the shadows on the white screen who question her identity. It has a single woman who calls herself Sita. She tells the story of herself from the centre-stage.

The feminist vision of the playwright has directed the plot to become one of questioning and resistance. It is not a mere description of woman-experience. It does more than just dramatise a tear-soaked tale of suffering and endurance of Sita. First, it subtly shows that there is no change in the expectation of males from women whether they are from the epic age or from the contemporary period. Second, it depicts the many faces of female resistance that makes woman’s survival in the hostile world possible. The play opens with a graphic but somewhat saddening description of woman’s lot in the mythological past and it continues, interspersed with the comparative plight of woman in the contemporary period. Through them the playwright works out an entire patriarchal structure that has generated the whole value-system. The playwright allows a peep into the past generation of silent, suffering, tolerant woman who chooses to resist when life becomes choiceless and unbearable.

Myths have been regarded as ploy to restrict women to a subordinate role. “Men discovered that one of the best ways to control women is to construct myths about her” (Tong 205). But women are writing the versions where the central female character - Sita displays none of the subservience to her husband that is highlighted in the sacred text. For instance, the historian Uma Chakravarti’s case study of women in myth exhibits how women say ‘no’ to Rama-like husband and preferred Lord Shiv; and an agricultural economist Bina Agarwal’s two poems on Sita - “Sita Speak” and “Beyond Captivity” depict Sita who is vehemently interrogated for her silence. Thus “Feminist resistance to
such gender constructions has taken various forms, including challenging popular interpretations of female characters in the epics and drawing attention to alternative interpretations" (Visvanathan et al. 96). By providing alternative texts women are questioning the sacred texts. Bina contemplates over Sita’s silence. She almost commands her: “Sita speak / your side of story. / We know the other too well [. . .] / . . . / They say you, devoted wife, / questioned him not, / And let him have his way / Sita speak / You who . . . / could command the earth with a word, / how did they silence you?” (Agarwal 239, 240). As if to answer these questions, Sita of “Crossing the River” speaks. She speaks not only her side of the story but the story of all the contemporary women-folk. She is no more silent, patient and submissive Sita. Ambai has employed the myth of Sita to explore how it can be used to create a liberated woman with self-awareness. This sort of revisioning of myths has enriched the literary tradition. The play is not a repetitive version of the dominant values and ideals of Sita-myth. It is a transposition of mythical material on Sita as Roland Barthes puts it, “bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within” (Barthes 1981 39) to create a new feminist text

Though the Ramayan occupies a religious place it goes beyond religion and enters into the discussion of man-woman relationship. Kakar observes that “The ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which can not be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband’s rejection, slights or thoughtlessness” (Kakar 1989 55). Kakar also observes that the, “Sita-legend also gives us a glimpse into Hindu imagery of manliness” (Kakar 1989 55). Rama may have all the traits of a “godlike hero, yet he is also fragile, mistrustful and jealous and very much conformist, both to his parents’ wishes and to social opinion” (Kakar 1981 66). He wishes to be without fault and above all men. It is evident that Sita is sacrificed to Rama’s own pursuit of perfection. But it is the same Sita who emerges a stronger woman when she rejects Rama and returns to her mother - Mother Earth. This aspect of her life is not emphasised either by religion or by popular culture. Sita does emerge as a strong-willed woman. This aspect has led to the exploration of alternative views on this particular event. The play displays the enigma of woman’s subdued anger and thereby her strength in resisting her subordinated existence in the patriarchal setup as the mythical Sita finally rejects Rama and goes to Mother Earth,

Ambai has worked out the possibility of exploiting the use of myth to determine the nature of the “heroic” men like Rama and his Ram Rajya. “For 2000 years the god-
like Rama has been in front of all contenders for the title of Official Ideal Man in Hindu India" (Hess 01). Of all India's heroes, Rama is acknowledged to be the most nearly perfect, and his rule the fabled Rama Rajya stands as the golden age of dharma. But Sita his devoted wife, “... chose exile; suffered privation, abduction, then the rejection” (Agarwal 239). Sita too voices her resistance more vociferously. Sita here is the representative of the new woman - the contemporary generation of women. Ann Heilmann observes that while “the first wave feminists defined the problem of woman, the New Woman defined herself, positioning herself within the larger feminist movement and generating a critical analysis of patriarchy” (Heilmann 42). Resisting the position the woman is placed in, Ambai prepares her to define herself and evolves a critique of hegemonic dominance. It is the female solidarity that saves them from psychological debacle.

Ambai valorises Sita's individualistic, dogged resolve to resist her torture and survive on her own terms. It shows not a passive acceptance of man's supremacy but a contestation and a critique of tradition. She decides to resist by crossing the river and reclaiming her own identity. Sita says with confidence, “I shall cross the river / I shall cross the river / to see the new world / To assume a new form / to create a new Rajya” (439). The Voices point out that the lot of woman is miserable. All through the ages women have been sad and their body tired. They ask her whether she is the face in Ravi Varma's painting, or the statue in the temple or the mother holding the holy child. The Voices of the shadows ask her what distances she has traversed. They imply that society has worshipped woman as a beautiful woman and glorified her in paintings, worshipped her as a goddess and as Mother Mary. She has travelled a long distance. She has been the goddess but reduced to a status of an ordinary woman. She has been depicted in the extremes either as a goddess or a demon but not as a human with her own wish and will.

The woman on the stage speaks aloud like making a loud announcement. She says that she is Sita who entered the forest, got imprisoned in the forest and is roaming in the forest because of love, lust and politics of men. She is deserted by Rama - the Maryada Purushottam. She becomes the pawn in the hands of circumstances. When it is the lot of the queen of Rama, what one can speak of the ordinary woman who too is subjected to more subjugation like that of Sita. She says, “I am Sita / who has / nothing” (434).

Though Sita is created by Kamban, Valmiki, Tulsidas, whether she is a Maya Sita - all Sitas have to bear the pain and sorrow of real Sita. No man could liberate her from the oppressions. The playwright wants to tell that the lot of all women is same. Here Sita
like any ordinary woman is suppressed by the authority and none could liberate her. Therefore Sita says it does not make any difference which Sita she is. Sita in other words is a woman made up with words, bound in words and imprisoned in words of men. It is the authority and the state that creates and shapes the woman. They do not allow her to flower in a natural way. But the playwright anticipated “a different Sita” (435) who could break the cage of words and liberate herself free.

Man has eulogised her but has restricted and restrained her to be a woman under his order. The words of the male hegemony have conditioned her throughout. “Be this way / Stand this way / Sit this way / Lie this way / Think this way / Your Ayodhya is where Rama is / You go to the forest / If he wants it” (436). It is the way the woman has been socialised and conditioned throughout her life. Despite all these restrictions her purity above all is to be proved. But Ambai in her play asserts the strength of Sita and tells that she is another Sita who will no more be bound by the words of men. Therefore she says, “I am / another Sita / another Sita” (436). The ideological struggle is well-depicted in the play which articulates women’s suppression, thereby their aspirations, their disapproval of dominant male ideology.

The play maintains the balance between progressive vision and cultural specificity by redefining the role of Sita in the contemporary contexts. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan observes that the transgressive practices of women do not always remain suspect. In times they cease to be viewed as transgressions and become socially accepted acts (Rajan 71-92). The protagonist tries to step out of the patriarchal control, satisfy the claims of her being woman and savour freedom. The protagonist here does not retreat with any disastrous consequences but looks forward with the confidence of crossing the river of obstacles. When she tells that she is another Sita the Voices ask her who she in reality is. She answers that she does not have any identity, a place or other names. Her oppressed life itself is her identity and it has become a story for others. “They called me / a demoness. / Turned me into / an ugly creature. / Called me / a demoness / and killed me / An authority called Rama / An arrogance called Rama / An ego called Rama / A politics called Rama / Humiliated me” (437). The intensely patriarchal society turned her into an ugly creature and put an end to her being. From a woman she is brought down to be an object and a thing hemmed in by the rules of the rulers i.e. men. Sita in the play is full of fury while describing her self. She wants herself to be changed. She speaks of the stages through which she has been reduced to “an object ferreted out by rulers” (437). Therefore she says, “They roll me over / push me aside / crush me” (437).
The playwright speaks ironically that in Rama’s Rajya woman was turned into a Sambuga to be destroyed, the horse to be thrown into the ritual fire and the frog that Rama’s arrows pierced. Thus the woman says she is the thing “caught in the illusion of love” (438). By saying this, the playwright deconstructs the hegemonic notion of Ram Rajya. “A far more dramatic, indeed shocking illustration of Rama’s commitment to dharma - one is tempted to call it his servitude to dharma - occurs at the end of the Lanka Kanda, when Sita is brought to Rama after her long captivity. At this point... the audience may be pardoned for expecting a joyous reunion. But all that Rama has to say to Sita is that he has done his duty as a warrior - kshatriya king and he fulfilled his dharma as a husband, but now as the ruler of Ayodhya he has to fulfill the dharma of casting out a wife... perceived as an unchaste woman” (Bose 04). Man after all, considers his own self-fulfilment at the cost of woman.

Ambai has displayed a more subtle and refined handling of anger and resistance. Rage as a mode of resistance is embodied in this play. The play engages in a struggle to redefine woman’s independence as against social oppression. The re-visioning of Sita’s plight is neither futile nor is the mere reproduction nor the repetition of female experiences. By reworking and retelling the tale of Sita, the playwright shows the procreative energy of the dramatic form to brighten itself and to make site for the further elaboration of the subject of her play.

Though, the woman has different stages of her life, at every stage there is a means to put an end to that stage. Family, marriage, children and bereavement are some of the dominant social concerns of all the time. Social issues like female infanticide, foeticide, rape, etc. feature the modern period. Social attitudes which have evolved over a period of time are critiqued by the playwright. She speaks of female foeticide, dowry deaths, domestic violence and so on. Thus a woman has gone through anguish, agony, misery through the ages. At last her life is turned into stone. The woman at the end says, “I am you, / all of you, / all of you asking questions” (438). Sita is not different from any other woman. The tale of Sita is the tale of all. But this Sita is not silent. By speaking she raises a number of questions and looks forward with hope. She tells with confidence that she shall cross the river. She repeats it so that she could convince others of her determination. She is confident of seeing a new Rajya. Her face becomes bright at the end of her talk. She stands looking ahead with a hope of bright future and says, “There is strength / left still. / I shall cross the river / I shall cross the river / To see the new world / To assume a new form / To create a new Rajya.” (439). As if to answer the questions of Bina Agarwal,
Ambai’s Sita answers each and every question asked. She expresses her resentment at the oppressive male regime and at the end of the play looks forward in a resistant gesture. The language and the use of an assertive tone have the energy of a determinant protagonist who has taken up on herself the radical and complex responsibility of dismantling the structure of ideology that has silenced women, and to replace the male voice with an authoritative female voice. This exercise in self-making is going to focus on the rejections, denials and gaps in the female history. The same force is Sita’s resolution.

The play as a mode of woman’s experience underlines her resistance and subverts and undermines the traditional narratives. Those who focus on the play’s feminist overtones see it as a story of betrayal and oppression and as a play of becoming which necessitates not only the readjustment but also introspection. The play lays bare the entire socio-cultural historical matrix.

The play predominantly depicts resistance to positioning, socialisation, abused relationship and to the social order at the individual level. There is a strong undercurrent of resistance to silencing as the playwright builds a feminist critique of historically privileged texts. The discourse on Sita in itself is a re-examination of mythology. In dealing with mythology, Ambai becomes an “agency reinstating and revising knowledge and attitude that are socially constructed” (Lopez 35) and thus becomes an instrument of resistance. The play ends with upholding human dignity and the woman’s strong resolves. Such subtle acts of resistance offer a critique of the oppressive structure and the need for change. It presents the uninhibited, independent and self-assured woman. Defying the socio-cultural imperatives, Sita in the play speaks out her agony. Women’s defeatist approach in silently accepting their sufferings are the days gone by. She articulates her own belief in women’s possible emancipation. It is only after her resistance and the accompanying tension and bitterness, the woman has achieved a new woman status. The playwright perceives the new woman as “aware, self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood” (Malik 137). The rhetoric of the play celebrates Sita’s feminist rebellion. One would agree that the hegemonic stronghold has not yet disappeared even after many centuries but writers like Ambai are trying to offer the critique of the existing social reality by advocating the exploration of woman’s inner consciousness and by highlighting the subtle nuances of the resistance consciousness.
v. Frozen Fire

_Pani-t-Thee_ (Tamil, 2003)

Mangai

Trans: Mangai and V. Geetha

In Tamil literature V. Padma (Padma Venkataraman) works under the pseudonym Arasu Mangai. She prefers to be known by this pen name. A performer, director, activist, feminist and writer Mangai teaches English in Stella Maris College, Chennai. Her Tamil essays on Women’s theatre have appeared in one volume and she has also published articles in English. Mangai has directed plays for her “_Mouna Kural_” or “_The Voicing Silence Theatre Group_” since its inception in 1992. Ananda Lal claims that in 1990s Mangai established herself as a playwright who “focused on gender issues through _Voicing Silence_” (Lal 471). Mangai declares, “I consciously prefer a gendered perspective . . . I am a feminist and like to explore women’s issues in my plays . . . I make a conscious effort to take up women’s issues . . . My protagonists are always women but I don’t believe in an all-woman troupe or in women who declare themselves helpless in the world of men” (Padma 430-31).

Mangai’s play _Pani-t-Thee_ is based on her study of Ambaa who as Shikhandi in the _Mahabharat_ avenges her humiliation at the hands of Bhishma, Salva and Vichitravirya. It is translated into English as “Frozen Fire” by herself and V.Geetha. Mangai has rewritten the myth of Ambaa in order to articulate and recover the voice of Ambaa. Mangai has sought to recover the history of the marginalised and silenced Ambaa lost to the silences of the dominant myths of the epic and succeeded in creating space for her and making her a visible central subject. Mangai has attempted to reconstruct the women-centred discourse which can be read as the retrieval of women’s history which empowers and prepares a woman reader to confront the reality. The playwright Mangai has shaped the received material on Ambaa into a specific literary dramatic poetic form where Ambaa speaks out her mind. The poetic form establishes the seriousness and grandeur of the theme. In fact her selection of Ambaa over the possible male heirs is symbolic of the shift in gender roles. She has creatively exposed the subjugated image of Ambaa and restored her from the extant text to reclaim Ambaa her own space from the writings of the male oriented representations.

The title “Frozen Fire” refers to insult, humiliation, anger and hatred experienced by women in general who are rejected, abandoned and humiliated for no fault of theirs by the male hegemony. Mangai informs about her play that, _The play opened in 2003._
To me Fire is not only anger / revenge . . . I hope the play lends the many layers of emotion in her” (Mangai Dec 2011). The play depicts Ambaa’s tale of woe, resistance and revenge. It tells how in man’s quest for honour the woman is trapped in a position of no return. She is referred to as the deserted one whereas the man who is responsible for her plight is not considered the deserter. Ambaa avenges the wrong done to her and her efforts for revenge are so drastic that “she can be said to be Revenge personified” (Bhawalkar 440). The play opens with the “The Myth” that sets the stage for re-vision, for the act of looking back. This device is important as it gives voice to the female and also the central position in the narrative.

Ambaa was the eldest princess of the King of Kashi. Her sisters were Ambikaa and Ambaalika. During their “Swayamvara” these three princesses were abducted by Bhishma to be the wives of his younger brother Vichitravirya. He thus modifies the “Swayamvara” into “Veer Shulka” - the reward of bravery. While her sisters agree to get married to Vichitravirya, Ambaa resists since she loves Salva, the King of Saubala who fought with Bhisma to stop him but was defeated. Ambaa realises to her horror that she was to marry not Bhishma but “a young lad still shrill-voiced Vichitravirya” (454). Bhishma’s act of her abduction deprives her of happiness with Salva and of the prospects of wifehood and motherhood as she tries to find some route of escape. Shuddered she tells them how she loved another man Salva. “We can’t have you then, it is not done / to accept a woman who loves another, /no, not amongst kshatriyas. /Go forth, find Salva” (454). Bhishma ordered her with these words. Ambaa driven by love for Salva went to him - “Happy / I sallied forth” (454). To her horror Amba realises that she has no place whatsoever in the society because Salva refuses to accept her on the plea that as a defeated king he has forfeited his right to claim her. Further he can not have her as she had lived in another person’s house. Ambaa was spurned and destroyed. She dissolves into nothing when he says, “I shall not touch one whose body another has held” (455). That was Salva. Though she says, “It is not my fault - / Against my will, he abducted me / He is at fault, not I” (455). But Salva looked at her as he would at a hateful scar earned in a lost battle and turned away. He was still chafing at the defeat and argued that a Kshatriya can not accept a woman lost to another man in the war. Ambaa returns to Bhishma and insists that he should take her responsibility since he is responsible for her situation. But Bhishma can not marry her as it would not be honourable for him being under the vow of celibacy. “A divine man, possessed of a divine vow. / A brahmachari. / Yet, he came to my father’s court / And abducted me. / He - a brahmachari!” (456)
All the rationalisations of these men do not take her pain away. Besides, Vichitravirya considers it below his “honour” to marry a woman who professes love for another man - Salva. She is virtually abandoned. She feels tortured and tormented. She has nobody to turn to. Nobody takes the role of a comforter. On the contrary she is trapped among the “honourable men” only to find herself rejected, lonely and angry. All her routes are blocked and controlled by men who make her a prisoner of masculine value-system. These men exercise the male prerogative of desertion. The conventional norms and practices privilege men to look down upon the female. She “loses the eternal female dream of finding happiness through a man” (Jain 2003 76). She feels, “At no stage are the likings and desires of woman important” (Jain 2003 81). Society does not instill in men a sense of guilt for their failures in their duties. Mangai illustrates how a patriarchal hegemony performs the women question.

Ambaa feels subjected to several pulls and pressures, her loyalties fractured, moral concerns cracked and fissured in the inter-personal relationships. She feels compelled to move out of her female role - all forgiving one. A sense of failure and an overriding need for revenge overtakes her. At such a situation, women are likely to feel broken and defeated. But Ambaa rejects these feelings and works her way towards a fresh foothold of rebellion. Disgusted and humiliated she takes vow that she would not rest till she has avenged herself for Bhishma’s indifference. She says, “My body will not find its peace / Until I have his head / My heart will not rest / Until he is dead” (457). According to R. N. Saletore, Ambaa retires to a forest and there she undertakes great and severe penances for twelve years. God Shiva promises her that she could implement her vengeance in her next birth when she would be born as Shikhandin in the house of Drupada and will kill Bhishma. Then she commits Sati and passes away (Saletore 1989 60). “She is born a girl but undergoes a sex change to acquire a male body to be able to fight Bhishma” (440). “Born a woman / I became a man / And here I am in the battlefield / When I spoke as a woman / No one heard me out / To reach Bhishma’s heart, / A heart that turns away from women, / I became a man and / spoke to him - / Man to Man / And wielded a bow” (459). “A man now / Lost to my own womanhood” (460). Saletore describes Shikandin as “a woman and a man” (Saletore 1989 1340).

Ambaa emerges far more energetic, resistant and fiery. She chooses to rebel against the traditional gender restriction. She does not yield to the inevitable and conform to social expectations or to self-destruction. As a rebellious protagonist she resorts to more extreme measures in seeking the death of a man who caused her grief. She explicitly
rejects the confinement of traditional female role and comes to feel contempt for all men who cause her misfortune. Bhishma, Vichitravirya and not excluding Salva abandon their responsibility towards her. One can find these men cold and even inhuman in their responses to Ambaa. But she is not a helpless victim waiting to be rescued by these men. She takes to her own recourse and prepares herself to resist the engulfing forces of societal and cultural pressures. She resists her irrelevance in the masculine culture by empowering herself through the act of severe penance and is able to kill Bhishma. But even on deathbed Bhishma is not ready to accept that a woman has slain him. He considers Shikhandi a woman and feels it disgraceful and dishonourable to die at the hands of a woman. He repeatedly asserts that the arrows that have pierced his body belong to Arjun but not to Shikhandi. He repeatedly asserts that “I lie split / Spliced by these arrows - / These are Arjuna's - no doubt / Not Shikhandi's” (441). “Ambaa! Your arrows can’t hurt me. These are Arjuna's” (448). Ambaa being woman is considered of no worth on the battlefield and her endeavours are not acknowledged by Bhishma whose words exhibit nothing but his arrogance - “Arrogant! A man's arrogant heart! / A vain piece of man-flesh! / A small-minded man, Bhishma, small and mean-minded!” (448). She says, “You know you are guilty and stand damned in front of me / All else is mere man-talk, empty boasts, lies / I have longed for this day - this day of atonement - / Waited for my desire to ripen into action / I knew I could do it [... ] / I have, indeed I have / done it.” (449). The fire which has been burning within her and has had frozen; now gets melted and flows out of her. “A fire burnt within me / Until now, until this moment when Bhishma was laid low” (443).

The playwright Mangai thus revises the subtext and retrieves Ambaa from the margins and assigns her agency to fulfil her ambition. Therefore she gives voice to Ambaa who declares, “Listen! I'll confess - lay bare my heart to you - / A tale that has never been told before / A point of view never heard until now / Listen to my tale and wonder [...]” (443). Thus Mangai has re-visioned the myth and reviewed the text of Ambaa in the light of feminist approach. She discovers from within the previous text, the whole series of small items and details which help express new perspective “by planting them and studying them in hopes that they will eventually be rediscovered. It is a possible explanation for subtext” (Pandey 238). Though a victim, Ambaa does fulfil her vow. She says, “I stood alone to / Fulfil my vow. / I stood my ground, fought in open battle / And won ... / here I am on these / killing fields. There was no other way. I had to be here. And I / fought. / And won.” (444,445). The play by presenting a psychological
picture of Ambaa narrates her story of struggle and how she has to fight it all alone. For a while she expresses her sense of insecurity for having no one else to aid her but she stands her ground alone to slay Bhishma. Draupadi had her Bhima and Arjuna, and her loyal brother Dristadyumna. Ambaa says, “I had neither / Husband nor son / To help me / wreck my vengeance. But I had no one. I had to do it / on my own. / I stood alone to / fulfil my vow.” (443-4). She did not feel disheartened at her being alone. With the divine aid she could fulfil her vow.

The tale of male-desertion of Ambaa and her humiliation becomes an emotional event. Even if her struggles and conflicts are not central to the narrative of the epic, her presence allows the emotional response to emerge in detail. The impact of bereavement, the process of mourning, raking and thereby the emergence of the feeling of resistance are brought about in detail. Mangai converts Ambaa’s sense of pain, rejection and alienation into a sense of vengeance. She eventually exhibits her assertion, a direct statement of her being self-styled, self-motivated and independent thinking individual, geared up for facing all the consequences of that assertion and never giving up. She is “Eager to be a woman of her own” (Jha et al. 20). She can not be assigned to the category of ordinary commonplace women as she has possessed a unique mindset which does not match with that of her younger sisters Ambikaa and Ambaalika. “The images of women in our predominantly male-authored literature are now being explored not as images of women as she is, but projections of the female aspect” (Mora et al. 17).

Aware of the double-standards of the culture, Mangai interrogates it through Ambaa. Ironically, “shame”, “disgrace” and “question” are for the women to face and also to answer. Mangai’s mythmaking has two specific points. First, her play “Frozen Fire” is of a self-assertive woman - Ambaa who resents being a pawn in the patriarchal game. Secondly, she censures the patriarchal values and does not accept them. Mangai does not dwell on the more prominent figures of the Hindu myths like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi or Anusuya often celebrated as paragons of female virtue. She retrieves the marginal figures like Ambaa - “long rejected to minority status, almost forgotten and often rendered silent and invisible in patriarchal versions of myths” (Vijayasree 178).

Ambaa points out the callous attitude of men. She feels pain at her heart when she talks emphatically that it is not just she but, “So many women, so many / Stood shamed before him (Bhishma) / Broken, hurt, saddened -” (449-50). Ambaa refers to Draupadi who was pledged. “And the great Bhishma unable to amend the wrong, / proclaimed: / ‘Your Yudhisthira gambled and lost you. / A man can sell his wife, give her away as a gift / . . . /
Women are not comparable to men - that is clear!” (450-51). Then there was Gandhari - “An eyeless king her destiny” (451). And there is much to say about her own two younger sisters - Ambikaa and Ambalikaa. She asks, “Were they happy? Their desires fulfilled? / Were their lives meaningful?” / . . . / The Kurus needed a son.” (451). And on Bhishma’s advice Rajamata Satyavati summoned Vyasa. “My sisters’ lives! / One could not bear to see the man who came to her / The other turned white with fear / And yet they had to do it” (452) (emphasis mine). Mangai brings out the objectification of women graphically. The dialogues express her uneasiness about women’s helplessness, and anger at masculine overbearing attitude. She seeks answers for the moral and legal dilemmas. She expresses her anger for considering woman only as means to continue their lineage. She has number of questions. She questions, “Are women pots to hold man’s seed? . . . playthings, forced to a king’s bed” (452). She doubts whether men know woman has a heart. Ambaa represents an image of resurgent and fearful strength that also irrevocably associated with the concept of Shakti (Nandy 35-36).

People glorify Bhishma’s celibacy for his father’s happy marriage, Rama’s obedience to his father, and Puru’s giving up his youth to his father Yayati. All these are perceived as the acts of sons’ sacrifice for their fathers’ happiness. But these glorious deeds of their self-denial lose all of its glory when they are located in a woman’s world. Male glory rests on treating women as objects to be possessed or of exchange and as dependents who have no will of their own. The myth has been reworked through psychological empathy, interpretation and by relocating it in the mainstream discourse by highlighting Ambaa’s sense of being aggrieved at the littleness of men who defined the rules of exclusion and destroyed her identity and injured her sense of dignity. “Individual space is extremely restricted in the name of the superior purposes of these tyrannic legislators” (Mora et al. 37). Ambaa’s hurt pride, injured self-esteem and her loss are brought out poignantly.

Despite the repeated insult and mental torture inflicted on Ambaa, V. Bhawalkar finds fault with her and opines that “Though endowed such excellent qualities Amba’s life is to be pitied for her wrong use of these qualities. Thus Amba’s penance and efforts are commendable but her aim is damnable” (Bhawalkar 443). Mangai therefore presents the agonies of woman’s objectification and desertion which can not be empathised with by men. Mangai attempts to fathom the psychological depth of the character of Ambaa. It is a plea for hearing the feminine voice seriously. It critiques the
practice of taking vows that bind persons blindly, eliminate the choices on the part of the individual and its consequent repercussions causing suffering to women specifically.

The play is thus written both at creative and critical levels. She has appraised the mainstream mythmaking practice of misrepresentation of women characters and interrogated the justification of perpetuating and sustaining gender inequalities and suppression. By voicing the silenced “other” Mangai has displaced the “dominant logic by dislodging its hegemony and demystifying its ‘naturalness’ and unleashes an alternative potential” (Ebert 888).

The play can also be read as the retrieval of Ambaa’s history that presents her as one who suffers emotional injuries and confronts the injustice. It affords glimpses of an alternative where Ambaa acquires agency and becomes self-directed by dismantling the hegemonic structure. She is not her uncertain self but a self-assured individual who knows her mind and is determined to stay and fight and thereby win. Ambaa’s fury becomes her life-force, the central motive of her existence.

The play exhibits Mangai’s opinion that the myths imposed on the feminine psyche need to be revisited, revisioned and revised, and not only that they should be envisioned. Through Mangai the old myth is eroded, new woman-centred myth is formed and the protagonist is empowered to ask questions, seek answers and regenerate power-relations.
(c) Resisting the Voice of the Legends: Re-casting Punjabi Legendary Women

Introduction to the Plays “Fida” (Punjabi, 1990) by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and “Sundran” (Punjabi, 1991) by Manjit Pal Kaur

This section introduces some of the plays dealing with Punjabi legends of Hir-Ranjha, Mir-Sahiban, Rasalu-Kokilan, Puran-Sundran, Salwan-Ichhran and Puran-Luna by trying to highlight how different playwrights have viewed women characters and have held them as solely responsible for the tragedy in these legends. However some others have tried their best to absolve these women of the charges of patriarchy and have reviewed and reconstructed these popular legends from feminist perspectives. These legends have motivated writers to invent new stories on the lines of these legends. Influenced by the legendary “Luna” and other women characters from the Indian as well as the European classics, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry has created the character of Fida is her play “Fida”. She has presented the re-version and re-vision of the legend. An overview of these Punjabi plays dealing with legends reveals a dominant trend of the feminist approach. The contemporary renderings of these legends in Punjabi dramas do support feminist renderings.

The word “legend” is derived from old French *legend* and from medieval Latin *Legenda* which mean “things to be read” and from Latin *Legere* which means to “read” (Soanes et al. 814). Legend is a type of “a story from ancient times about people and events that may or may not be true” (Hornsby 734). It is also a “traditional story popularly regarded as historical but which is not authenticated” (Soanes et al. 814). “A legend is a story transmitted from the distant past, especially one based at least in part on some historical event” (Harris et al. 1042). Unlike myths, the legends are secular in nature. Like myths, legends are located in the identifiable geographical places and are cultural constructs which regulate and present the attitudes and values of a society. Legends are also the parts of folk tales which belong to the oral tradition of literature and are very old traditional stories from particular places that are originally passed on to people in a spoken form. They include fables, fairy/ghost/giant/saint stories, husband and wife tales, short humorous tales, tales of a man and his beloved. They mostly relate to local characters. “They may pertain to a particular clan, a society, or a region depicting the popular beliefs, local deities, clan heroes, clan originators, etc.” (Kumar et al. jacket). They represent the richness of cultural heritage of the concerned society. “These
stories inculcated ethical values, religious practices, an idea about social organisation and customary laws. In fact, these tales constructed the self-identity of the society” (Ray 16). Arundhati Ray - a social worker and activist asserts that these folk tales form “a very important material for historical reconstruction” (Ray 17). In the modern studies of legends apart from historical and geographical, the literary approach is also receiving importance. The mythical and legendary narratives in the Indian contexts exist as both in oral versions and also as written texts and they are culturally vibrant even today in films, television serials, paintings, images, calendars, proper names, aphorisms, metaphoric expressions, dancing, advertisements, cartoons, etc.

Legends thus signify the hereditary stories of ancient origin and serve to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Both myths and legends are transmitted from generation to generation contributing to the continuity of culture. Myths are commonly known to all whereas legends are spatialised. They have been the instruments of control by encouraging conformity to the accepted norms and discouraging social deviance. Myths and legends have thus become embodiments of dogma, preached not by sermonising but by simple storytelling. They function as “illustrative media” (Sahni 94) by connecting individuals to their social, collective past and by defining their present in relation to their past. They become vehicles for carrying awareness of the past onto the future. A very fine distinction between legend and myth has been brought about by many critics. M. H. Abrams is of the opinion that, “If the protagonist is a human being rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is usually not called a myth but a legend. If the hereditary concerns supernatural beings who are not gods, and the story is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified a folk tale” (Abrams 170). Chowdhry has incorporated in the legend of Luna her own vision and intellect; and developed the character of Fida whose story can be called an invented legend. Fida is metaphorical representation and re-casting of Luna. Furthermore myths and legends are sometimes controlled and structured by the politically motivated groups which promote and perpetuate their dominant ideology in which the subjugated are either silenced or made complicit. Various questions related to power, gender-justice, individual choice and morality surfaced when the creative writers like Chowdhry and Manjit Pal Kaur confronted the textualty of the traditional narratives while attempting to re-structure and re-write them.
Legend has emerged as a favourite term for modern critics. The elements of legends have at all times entered into sophisticated written literature. Chowdhry and Kaur have presented not the "hero" but the "heroine" at the central place by re-arranging the events of action and re-casting the characters of Sundran and Fida from feminine interpretation. They focus on the necessary materials of Indian especially Punjabi culture which serve a greater purpose in post-independence and post-colonial Indian life and the re-presentation of women characters. Both the playwrights reject the western denigration of legends as irrational and superstitious. Through their plays they re-cast the legendary women by critiquing the contemporary situation, prevailing social inequality, gender discrimination and exploitation. They have re-fashioned their regional Punjabi legends and have highlighted them by making relevant in pan-Indian context. They have shown that modern Indian writers can have various approaches to them in their various interpretations and their performances as drama.

The most popular legends of Punjab, like Hir-Ranjha, Mirza-Sahiban, Raja Rasalu-Kokilan, Puran, Luna, Ichhran and Sundran are very much a part of the popular cultural idiom and fascinate the contemporary creative writers' mind even today. The creative writers intentionally or unintentionally have re-structured them to mean differently in the form of plays, poems, films and television serials. It can be seen that these two playwrights have uncovered the Punjabi cultural background and cultural past. They have presented the legends of Sundran and the story of Luna in the guise of Fida from a feminist perspective. The characters are presented as the conscious-raiser of the Indian women. They have tried to help women-folk analyse the given reality, a need that is not outmoded and changed by the scientific advances and rationality. They have evolved their plays with those variations that cope most effectively with the changing social environment and that the legend of Sundran and the story of Fida are best conceived not as a presentation of fixed and final stories but as "re-casting" - an ongoing and ever-changing process. The playwrights have taken up a radical and comprehensive re-visioning of the Punjabi legends and have re-cast women characters by providing centrality to them. It is as Northrop Frye asserts, "literature turns out to play an essential role in refashioning the impersonal material universe into an alternative verbal universe that is intelligible and viable, because it is adapted to essential and universal human needs and concerns" (quoted in Abrams 13-14).

Chowdhry and Kaur find in these legends the glorification of patriarchy at women's cost. Their lament over this lends them a perspective - a feminine perspective.
and they re-cast these female characters with due justification. By the virtue of poetic license which is every author's prerogative, Kaur has changed the ending of her play "Sundran" and Chowdhry has created a new woman character named "Fida" who reminds Luna of Punjabi legend, Phaedra of Euripides, Seneca and Racine; Abbie Putnam of Eugene O’Neill and Tishyarakshita - the wife of Ashok the Great.

The intentions of Chowdhry and Kaur get explicit when their plays juxtapose two textualities - of the legend and of the drama. They through their plays undo the pervasive marginalisation and misrepresentation of women in the legend and present the realistic, humanistic and fairer representations of Sundran and Fida in post-Independence and post-colonial experiments with drama in Punjabi. They re-present and re-fashion women's case and acquaint the readers with their attempts at re-casting of the legendary women characters. Legends perform social functions. Not only do they transmit the social beliefs and values but also check on the deviations, if any, from the norms established by the society in which they circulate. They have become part and parcel of the existence of society, consciously in the form of observations of rituals, customs, festivities and in story-telling and unconsciously in the use of proverbs and values internalised and imbibed by the society. Since the legends have such a wider acceptability, the playwrights through their plays try to right the wrongs done to female characters. Another significant reason for their re-casting is that the legends are transmitted from one generation to another contributing to the continuity of culture. The playwrights have wished to connect individuals to their social collective past of legends and define their present in relation to their past. They wish to represent the self-hood of the female characters of these legends.

While the events of the two legends of Hir-Ranjha and Mirza-Sahiban are said to have taken place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively in the areas now in Pakistan, they are a source of countless Punjabi sayings, proverbs and folk songs and fascinate the contemporary creative mind which frequently returns to them through poems, plays and even films. Despite differences the two legends have many similarities. The context of the legends is the feudal setup. These legends are the tragedies of love of the daughters of the Siyals. Both of them love high-born young men and their marriages are opposed by their respective families. Their love is sacrificed for the sake of kinship. The lovers, conditioned by the prescribed gender roles fail their beloveds at crucial moments. The dominant strain in the legend of Mirza-Sahiban is that Sahiban betrayed Mirza and in the legend of Hir-Ranjha, Ranjha allegedly blames Hir of inconsistency despite her steadfast love for Ranjha. According to the modern feminist approach Mirza
and Ranjha themselves are to be blamed for failing their beloveds at crucial moments. Whereas the patriarchal set up put all the blame for the tragedies in the two legends on Sahiban and Hir. At the crucial stages in the course of their love, both Hir and Sahiban were failed by their lovers. When Hir’s marriage was fixed with Saida, she asks Ranjha to elope but he does not agree to it. Having no choice left Hir submits herself to the dictates of her elders. Later he reaches her in-law’s house and elopes with her causing the further tragedy and insult to all. If he had listened to Hir’s advice earlier, her parents would not have poisoned her as they did.

Similarly Mirza too slights the advice of Sahiban who warns him of the ferocity of her brothers but he instead takes it as a challenge to his ego. Though he elopes with her he stops halfway unmindful of her repeated warnings regarding her brothers. As conditioned by the patriarchal code he takes woman’s words as of no importance. Thus in both the legends women and their initiative are neglected by both men who reject and ignore their words of wisdom. Mirza follows Sahiban’s advice so far as his own ego was not challenged. Once he elopes with her, he thinks he need not follow her warnings. Had Ranjha and Mirza listened to them at crucial moments their love could have been succeeded. As both the men believed in the gender roles in patriarchy, their tragedies were bound to take place. When the playwrights re-constructed these legends not only did they redeem these women from the charge of infidelity and betrayal but also presented them as more complete, humane and true beloveds caring for their lovers in comparison with their men who were blinded by their egos and were at least partially responsible for their beloveds’ suffering. These playwrights maintained the broad outlines of the legends. They only slightly shifted the emphasis in character, language, incidents and also by filling in gaps they made the legends more realistic.

*Mirza Sahiban* by Pilu (17th century poet) and *Hir Ranjha* by Sayyid Waris Shah (18th century poet) are labelled as the tragedies of patriarchy. In these works the legendary women instead of being relieved are still more blamed for no fault of theirs. Sant Singh Sekhon (1908-1997) in his prose play *Siylan di Naddhi* (1968) depicts Ranjha as an escapist and weak. Harsaran Singh’s *Hir da Dukanth* (1982) and *Hir Ranjha* (1990) and a verse-play *Bal Nath de Tille te* (1978) by Ajmer Singh Aulakh provide the realistic interpretations of legend where the playwright is sympathetic about Hir and her grief. In her play *Hir Ranjha* (1996) Sheila Bhatia makes a radical change as she saw in the legend the tragedy of woman in a male-dominated world. She makes Hir to be poisoned not by
her uncle Qaido but by her mother to save her from being killed by the society. It expresses the working of the invisible pressures of society on women.

The legend of Mirza-Sahiban too is re-cast differently by different playwrights. The women critics of the play opine that the tragedy of Mirza’s death could have been avoided if Mirza - the man - had been conditioned differently. Mirza turns a deaf ear to Sahiban’s warnings and forces himself into a place and situation from where it is difficult for him to escape. His blind ego becomes responsible for his death. Paradoxically the legend underplays male ego and stresses the role of destiny in the tragedy and Sahiban is held responsible for his death. Many contemporary writers have re-structured the legend of Sahiban in their plays by trying to exonerate her from the blame of Mirza’s death. Balwant Gargi (1916-2003) in his play *Mirza Sahiban* (1976) tries to establish Sahiban’s innocence by stressing the role of destiny.

In *Mera Mirza Yaar* (1975) Surjit Singh Sethi (1928-1995) glorifies the love of Mirza and Sahiban by making many departures from the legend. Even Joginder Bahrla’s brief poetic play *Sahiban* (1975) engages in the politics of patriarchy. *Mirze di Maut* (1978), a one-act poetic play by Ajmer Singh Aulakh also explores and analyses Mirza’s ego. C. L. Narang in his long verse play *Sahiban* (1979) tries to clear her from the charge of betrayal. However no playwright could completely redeem Sahiban from the charge of betrayal and insincerity.

It is Manjit Pal Kaur who attempts to highlight woman’s deprivation in the patriarchal setup. Her *Sahiban* (1988) is a feminist expression of a woman’s quest for fulfilment. She has experimented with the legend and used it as a metaphor for the helplessness of women. Like Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s “Medea”, Sahiban of the legend does not appear here as a character but symbolically and allegorically represents every woman’s predicament. Metaphorically the play frames the story of a contemporary urban middle-aged married woman who like Sahiban is caught between the contrary pulls of natural desire of her own and socio-cultural demands from woman. As she seeks love outside her marriage, not only is she ill-treated by her husband but is shot dead by her grown-up sons. Kaur reverses the legend by making the woman die and her lover flee. The play recounts the anguish of women in the uneven power structure of patriarchy. It is essentially a feminist expression of women’s quest for fulfilment. Her sons assert the patriarchal order by punishing her brutally for her seeking gratification of her own desires. Kaur makes the play universal by giving generic names like Man, Woman and Sons to her characters.
Like the legends of Hir-Ranjha and Mirza-Sahiban, the legends of Puran Bhagat and Raja Rasalu are highly hostile to women. Abounding in sweeping statements against women in general, these legends are also essentially male-centred. Women are represented as fatal, fickle and untrustworthy against whom the virtuous men must be on guard. The two main male characters of these legends - Puran and Rasalu - are the sons of King Salwan of Sialkot. Puran is from Salwan’s first wife Ichhran; and Rasalu, from his second wife Luna who is much younger than the King, fit enough to be his daughter. There is much similarity between the lives of these two sons who are considered inauspicious for their father. Puran is confined to a dungeon for twelve years and Rasalu for eleven years. After eleven years Rasalu comes out of confinement. One of the famous tales is his defeating a cruel King Sarkap in the game of chauper i.e. chess. Sarkap used to behead those who lost in the game. However his life is spared by Rasalu on a promise that Sarkap would give up playing the game of chauper and give his newly born daughter Kokilan to Rasalu as his wife. Kokilan was literally offered like a gift to Rasalu in a platter. Kokilan is brought up in isolation. He grows possessive of Kokilan and out of jealousy he cuts the tail and ears of the deer called Hira which sits in the lap of Kokilan. The herd of deers disowns Hira for this mutilation. Hira decides to take revenge on Rasalu. Hira brings King Hodi near Kokilan’s palace. Kokilan falls in love with the King Hodi. On discovering it, Rasalu kills Hodi. He roasts the heart of dead Hodi and makes ignorant Kokilan eat it. On realising the truth, Kokilan jumps down from the palace wall and dies. Thus goes the legend. Nobody interrogates Rasalu’s cruelty in taking an infant Kokilan as his wife, imprisoning her and then feeding her lover’s heart to her.

In the legend, Luna - the second wife of King Salwan - loves her step-son Puran who rejects her and which represents him as a symbol of steadfast virtue. Frustrated Luna lies to King Salwan that Puran attempted to molest her. The King chops off Puran’s limbs and throws him into a well. An ascetic - Jogi Gorakh Nath rescues, gains his limbs for him and accepts him as his disciple. After Sundran’s episode, Gorakh Nath sends him to Sialkot where by Puran’s grace his mother - Ichhran’s eyesight is restored, who had gone blind at her son Puran’s mutilation.

The politics of Qadar Yar’s play (19th century poet) Kissa Puran Bhagat reviles and slanders women and keeps the men above blame. King Salwan’s action of remarrying a girl of his daughter’s age is not questioned whereas Luna and her conduct fit to her age towards Puran is severely condemned. Similarly, Kokilan in the legend of Rasalu is explicitly denounced. The blame for Puran’s tragedy has squarely been attributed to
Luna whereas the same legend is silent over Sundran’s tragedy for which Puran is responsible. The patriarchal bias of the legends is too obvious to miss. The traditionalist creative writers believe in the uneven gender structure of patriarchy. They privilege and extol men thereby denigrating and subjugating women. In their writings women become objects to be ridiculed for no fault of theirs whereas men despite their fault remain safe outside the ambit of the writers’ strictures. The writers’ lack of generosity in complementing women and their explicit bias against women makes their writings disturbing to women writers. These legends clearly indicate towards the calculated exercises to keep women marginalised, ill-reputed, subjugated and helpless while eulogising and exalting the deeds of men. The resisting voice of the women was smothered and silenced with stern hands of the monarchy and patriarchy which punished these resisting women severely.

The writers like Kapur Singh Ghuman (1927-1986), Shiv Kumar Batalvi (1937-1973) and Manjit Pal Kaur decentred these legends and re-presented women by re-casting. Batalvi launches the most violent and forceful attack on the dual standards of morality in patriarchy. Despite the strict confines of social structures, Ichhran learns to exercise her choice and returns to her father. Shiv Kumar in his Luna (1965) which won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award at the age of thirty makes the malicious Luna of the legend a wronged woman compelled to marry an aged king who was of her father’s age. She questions the injustice and hypocrisy of the patriarchy and social structures. By making Puran’s legend into Luna’s legend Shiv Kumar gives importance to the voice of the subjugated. "The play published in 1965 in fact predates the second wave of feminism in its assertion of woman’s being in her choice, sexuality and self-respect, in protesting against woman’s abuse and in interrogating patriarchy . . . The victim becomes the interrogator of the dominant discourse” (Singh 143).

Kapur Singh Ghuman in his Katha Kokilan di (1978) makes everybody feel what the protagonist Kokilan feels in being married to Raja Rasalu, a man of her father’s age and also in growing up in isolation. Her anguish is externalised by the Chorus. Kokilan resists the glaring practice of commodification of daughters who are given as gifts. Although it means doing violence to her own self she prefers a short life full of love to a long barren life of subjugation and imprisonment and jumps down to death from the palace wall. The victimised wife Kokilan in fact asserts her self in her death. Manjit Pal Kaur’s poetic play Sundran similarly re-fashions the traditional structure of the legend by giving central space to Sundran. An interesting aspect of re-casting of these legendary
women in Punjabi plays is that they are - except for Manjit Pal Kaur and Sheila Bhatia’s - creations of male playwrights who are sympathetic to the women’s plight. These re-creations of the legends are done primarily on feminist lines.

A stark deviation from these feminist re-creations of the legendary women is from Atamjit’s play Puran (1987). The legend is drastically altered with far-reaching effects. Atamjit makes cultural as well as spatial transferences of the legend into modern times. For Atamjit it is Puran who has so far been marginalised in the legend. The setting of Atamji’s play Puran is in the latter half of the twentieth century. King Salwan of the legend is Mr. Salwan who is depicted as a proud follower of capitalism which represents the foremost system of injustice and oppression. As a symbolic of his confinement to a dungeon, Puran is sent to America - the fountain head of capitalism. Puran the protagonist turns to the two poets - Qadar Yar and Shiv Kumar for help and both the poets figure as Puran’s friends in the play. To make her moves towards Puran, Mrs. Luna plays a game of chess. It is an interesting metamorphosis of the legend of Puran.

It can be concluded that as Jane Flax asserts the condemnation of women by men in fact exhibits their inherent fear of women - the “fear of female sexuality and the potential autonomy of women” (Flax 18). Hence in the traditional literature the negative image of such women has always been inflicted on their self and it is also to bridle their power. However, their sexual subjugation, deprivation and injustice to their being have been viewed by feminist writers as the causes of their suffering. They have provided such women with their own voice through which they valued and articulated the necessities of their being and condemned their ill-matched marriages by asserting their sexuality which has so far been ignored and played it down.

These plays authenticate the arguments regarding re-casting. They aid the readers in an intellectual’s quest for knowing more about these powerful legends. These re-structured plays rupture the dominant patriarchal discourse. They simultaneously open up such other possibilities for other oppressed characters in the dominant discourse of the legends, and also by re-casting the legendary women in particular along the more realistic and humanistic lines. As Revisionist mythmaking revises mythology and presents it in new cast, legends also perform the same function through re-casting.
vi. Fida

*Fida* (Punjabi, 1990)

Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

Trans: Prabhajeet Kaur and Tutun Mukherjee

The achievement of women in Punjabi theatre must be measured in terms of work done by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry (b 1949). Besides being a playwright in Punjabi, she is also a theatre-director and has a theatre group to her credit - “The Company” which she established in 1984 in Chandigarh. She is one of India’s leading theatre-directors and has been striving to revive Punjabi theatre by fusing the performance style of Punjabi aesthetics. According to her, “Theatre is an adventure, because one never knows where it’s going to take one” (Chowdhry 2011 211). Her “The Company” has participated in major National and International Festivals. Chowdhry has a degree in the History of Arts. She completed her Diploma from the National School of Drama, New Delhi. It is in Bombay while working as a teacher of theatre and drama that she contributed a lot in finding a Hindi theatre group - “Majma”. In 1983, she moved to Chandigarh and joined as a faculty of the Department of Theatre, Punjab University.

The significant contribution of Chowdhry is that she has not only re-worked the folk tales, myths and legends but also has done it with a definite feminist stance. “Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry crafts a new folk. She calls herself twice-born. Her perceptions of every change as a challenge transformed her from an England-returned, anglicised, convent-educated miss in Amritsar to a theatre director crafting a new folk plus urban stylistics in mother-tongue Punjabi” (Goloo 37). She became increasingly drawn to folk traditions and forms while working with B.V. Karanth. Chowdhry has also designed the open-air theatre at the famous Chandigarh Rock Gardens.

The play “Fida” by Chowdhry is not a Punjabi legend proper. It is the revisioning and refashioning of legends and other classics. “Fida” is the proof of the powerful impact of legends on the literary creative mind of Chowdhry who has taken the cue from the Punjabi legends of Luna and Puran Bhagat; Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (performed: 428 B.C. Athens. Trn: 1782); Jean Racine’s *Phaedra (Phedre)* (performed: 1677, Paris. Pub: 1677, Trn: 1756) and American dramatist Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms* (performed: 1924 New York. Pub: 1924) and historical Tishyarakshita - the young wife of Ashok the Great; and Chowdhry created her own play by adapting and re-casting Luna, Tishyarakshita, Phaedra and Abbie Putnam into the character of Fida. Although the basic plot-outlines remained unchanged, their interpretations and judgements of the action...
differed radically. In these works the young mother develops an incestuous passion for her step-son. When rejected, she contrives to destroy him but much to her own loss. None of the plays ends happily.

Chowdhry’s taking her cue from other texts can be called “intertextuality”, a concept introduced by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s in her discussion of Bakhtin who is one of its source thinkers. Intertextuality is the shaping of texts’ meanings by other texts. It can include an author’s borrowing from and transformation of a prior text or to a reader’s referencing of one text in reading another. The term intertextuality has, itself, been borrowed and transformed many times since it was coined by post-structuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966. She argues that authors do not create their texts from their own mind, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts. Thus, the text becomes “a permutation of texts” in which “several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (Kristeva 36). Intertextuality calls attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that a work has the specific meaning because certain works have preceded it. The theorists of intertextuality such as Saussure, Bakhtin, Kristeva, Barthes, and Genette state that all texts are potentially plural and open to the reader’s interpretations, without definite boundaries. Intertextuality is a useful tool which enables the reader to better understand texts. However, according to Jonathan Culler the study of intertextuality is not just the investigation of sources and influences. It includes a wider net of connections between authors, readers, society, history and culture (Culler 100-18). Intertextuality according to David Lodge is, “re-working and imitation of someone else’s property - another’s language, another’s style, another’s word” (Lodge 146).

The play “Fida” evokes historical Tishyarakshita - the young wife of Ashok the Great. Romila Thapar briefly discusses the episode in Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas (1963). According to the Bhuddhist religious sources Mahavamsa and Ashokavadana, Ashok the Great loses his chief queen Asandhimitra during the twenty-ninth year of his reign. After her death, Ashok raises his young wife Tishyarakshita to the position of chief queen. She like Luna is enamoured of her step-son Kunal who is Ashok’s son from Padmavati. Like Hippolytus and Puran, Kunal too rejects the love of his young step-mother. In order to avenge the insult the angry queen sends him to Taxila to suppress the revolt there. Later not only does she secretly send an order with king Ashok’s seal that Kunal should be blinded and also be killed. However, the officials only blind him but do not kill him. Blind Kunal along with his wife Kanchanamala goes to Pataliputra. When once playing on his veena, Ashok recognises his son. When he comes
to know the truth, he punishes his young wife Tishyarakshita by burning her alive. Romila Thapar maintains that the legend may appear “largely to be the result of monkish imagination” (Thapar 53).

Hippolytus (Hippolytos) - a Greek tragedy in verse is written by Euripides. Aphrodite - the goddess of love denounces Hippolytus for his renunciation of her in favour of Artemis, the goddess of chastity and hunting. Aphrodite punishes him by arranging for his step-mother Phaedra to fall in love with him. She then reveals the truth to Phaedra’s husband, King Theseus who curses his son Hippolytus. Phaedra, weakened by her hidden passion for her step-son reveals the truth to her Nurse. The well-meaning Nurse tells Hippolytus of Phaedra’s love. He refuses to believe her and curses all women. Phaedra, having lost all hope, withdraws to die, leaving behind a suicide note, accusing Hippolytus of having raped her. Despite his son’s denials, Theseus banishes Hippolytus, calling on Poseidon to punish him. A sea monster destroys Hippolytus, and his mangled body is brought on stage, just in time for Theseus who has been told the truth by Artemis, to be reconciled with his dying son. The Nurse initiates the tragedy by revealing Phaedra’s love and it is Theseus whose anger causes his son to die. This theme was also to form the basis of Lucius Annaeus Seneca’s Phaedra (Written: AD 25-65. Trn: 1566. Genre: Latin tragedy in 5 Acts); of the finest of Racine’s tragedies Phaedra and of Rameau’s opera Hippolyte et Aricie (1733) and was revisited by Sarah Kane in 1996.

The influence of Eugene O'Neill’s play Desire under the Elms (1924) can also be witnessed in Chowdhry’s “Fida”. Twice-widowed seventy-five year old Ephraim Cabot brings a new attractive thirty-five year old bride Abbie Putnam. Cabot tells Abbie that she will inherit the farm if she gives him a son. One night she goes to Eben Cabot - a son of Ephraim Cabot by his other wife - to seduce him. Abbie persuades Eben that his mother’s spirit demands vengeance on Cabot and he gives full sway to his pent-up desires. He takes her passionately in his mother’s parlour as an act of revenge against his hated father Ephraim Cabot. When Eben learns that she has given birth to a baby boy and that she will now inherit the farm, he feels he has been tricked into loving her. Even though she assures him of her love, he blames the baby for spoiling everything and prepares to leave. Desperate to hold on to him, she murders their child. Horrified Eben reports her to the Sheriff, but then, reminded of his deep love for Abbie, insists to the Sheriff that he was complicit in her guilt and they leave for jail hand in hand.

The influences and inferences of these plays, history and legends are never without any design in Chowdhry’s “Fida”. It serves a host of different purposes. These
female characters have contributed in the making and the articulation of Chowdhry's ideas in moulding the character of her play "Fida". They provide an insight into the psychological processes of Fida. Chowdhry explores the grand passions and obsessions of the human psyche. It also foregrounds the cultural inheritance through literature and helps her re-telling and re-writing the known narratives. Unlike O'Neill's play which was banned for a period, Chowdhry's "Fida" has been produced several times with resounding success. It has been a pronounced indictment of patriarchy with its simple structure of semi-poetic play which maintains the ethos of folk tale and legend.

Culturally all the young mothers have been blamed for the tragedy of their step-sons. They have been proverbially disgraced and reproached as wicked and lustful beings. Their valid reasoning as to how they could be the mothers of young step-sons being equal in age and not conceived them has always been considered of no significance. Verily they felt they had every right to resist and denounce their miss-matched husbands who were imposed on them. Chowdhry by evoking such mothers foregrounds their suffering and interrogates the system which is ever ready to punish them on the grounds of morality if they express their natural desire and long for its fulfilment in a man suitable to their age. But unfortunately the male discourses portray them as overtly cruel and full of vengeance.

In the play "Fida" while the King is away fighting wars, his young wife Fida confesses to her confidante and maid Bebo that she lusts after her step-son Harsan and is consumed by passion for him. Despite the well meaning warnings of Bebo, Fida seeks to end her life. When the rumour of King's death reaches the palace, Fida is persuaded by her nurse Bebo to confess her love to Harsan. However, Harsan who loves Asavari - the daughter of King's enemy, is horrified at his step-mother's declaration and cruelly rejects her. Fida is about to relent when she learns of his love for Asavari; and her jealousy leads to further tragedy. The Nurse Bebo concerned much about Fida becomes the engineer of the disaster. When the King returns, Fida fearing that Harsan will denounce her, at Bebo's instigation accuses Harsan of having cheated the King behind his back. In a fit of rage, the King punishes Harsan. Fida distraught at Harsan's death loses control over herself and becomes almost a mad person. The King is repentant for speeding his order in putting an end to his son's life without trying to know the truth. And when he wishes to, it is too late for him to do so. The tragic events in the play "Fida" are unleashed not only by jealousy but by intense passion. "We know not love that is not bound to sin" (Patterson 316)

Through "Fida", Chowdhry reflects the social reality. The play raises relevant questions regarding woman's rights to enter into an extra-marital relationship which fall
outside the socially permitted range for married Indian woman. Fida exercises her will but the traditional conditioning of Fida as a wife and mother leads to the conflict between the social expectations of her as a wife and mother, and her own individual will. The conventional marriage with unequal age difference fails to take into account the physical and emotional needs of a young wife.

The play has almost a confessional tone where Fida dwells upon her innate desires. This act of hers can be seen as an act of her resistance, of disassociating herself from the values projected by a married woman and mother. She resists when her preferences, desires and inclinations are ignored and bypassed. She resists the notion that the age-old belief that a woman’s true vocation is to give herself up to the care of others. The play deconstructs the image of “Pativrata” - a woman who places her devotion to her husband above all else, vested in the ideas of surrender, purity and passivity. But Fida expresses candidly what remains muted and unexpressed beneath the weight of convention. The play is a serious analysis of what lies in the invisible area of marriage and articulates some of their deepest aspirations. Fida resists the soul-destroying restrictions laid down by tradition. The play basically questions the institution of marriage with unequal relationship and then it also goes to problematise female sexuality which is condemned either to exploitation or deprivation but hardly ever to fulfilment. The men bring home a woman whom they understand not but they do not even want to understand her. It is enough to experience all the feelings she arouses in them.

Through “Fida” Chowdhry has tried to present the deconstructionist notion of a married woman who defies the gender categorisation of morality and virtues prevalent not only in Punjabi but in the universal human psyche. The Indian tradition does not allow freedom in love for a married woman. Fida is dichotomously empowered and subdued. She knows it for sure that hers is a mistake and feels guilty and that her ancestors must be ashamed to see her. Defying the commonly accepted conservative notions requires much of grit. She wishes to put an end to her own life in order to save herself from shame and disrespect from the King and the others. Thus goes on within her the encounter between her self and the prescribed social norms of feminine demeanour. Her own reflections are self-analytical. An enormous amount of guilt generates within her due to woman’s cultural and social conditioning and she indulges in self-accusation which pushes her towards the horrible thought of committing suicide. A sense of discontentment and failure haunts her. Despite, hers is an articulation of the silence to which women have been subjected for centuries. Her words explore the subdued feelings and anger of sexually
deprived women-folk. Chowdhry’s attention in the play is also centred on the psychological aspects of the protagonist. The inner layers of the mind of Fida are explored. How a woman is compelled to lead a life with an elderly husband and how difficult it is for her to suppress her natural instincts is the theme of the play. Her passion for Harsan though natural is unacceptable to the society. Though she succumbs to her natural passion there is still a dilemma going on in her mind. Chowdhry is radical in portraying a married woman’s passions for another man.

Harsan’s love for Asavari makes Fida still more aware of her own potential failure, shame and humiliation besides her own indictments of self-beratement. Fear, guilt and anger inhabit within her. Her further actions are guided by fear of the social stigma. Lewis A. Coser observes, “In systems which are rigidly structured and for whatever reasons, unable to provide alternative to the deprived, then violence is liable to increase” (quoted by Turner 169). Fida regards Asavari not as a member of an exploited sisterhood but the one who solely affronts to her pride. She considers her a rival whom she wishes to exterminate without qualm. It also exposes the dynamics of envy and also the bond of sisterhood in feminist community.

According to Fida, Asavari is free to love Harsan - the same action for Fida is a sinful act since she is married. The result is jealousy, and the desire to have what Asavari has. In order to mitigate the pain, she strives to “alleviate the sense of disparity by lessening the other” (Johnson 197). She envies Asavari because Asavari embodies what Fida has been denied because of the social code of gender roles. The society expects Fida in the image of maternal nurturing. As Lacan defines it, jealousy springs from the desire to be another, as completed and fulfilled by the possession of the object desired. For Lacan, jealousy is the desire to be the other in so far as the other is perceived as self-complete and in possession of everything (Lacan 1992 116). She comes across a way to hit back. She deviates from her roles of wifehood and motherhood and her femininity. Thus much of the play “Fida” is a subversion of the traditional stereotype. Fida’s passion for Harsan depicts her challenge to the status quo. Particularly in the context of love, sexuality and marriage the play “Fida” has an exceptional richness in celebrating Fida’s rebellion against hegemony of the conservative thinking. She displays her courage in expressing her emotions which shake up the norms of morality.

The eponymous protagonist unconsciously throws all her energy into resisting the constraints of femininity and cultural pressures to be a wife and mother. The play ends with suicide, despair and realisation that there is no possibility of return to the past. It
emerges as a melodrama causing death and suffering to its characters. It is a serious play containing pathos and scenes of suffering.

The play points out that all "literature consists of texts and all texts are reflections or reproductions of different versions of other pre-existing texts" (Thody 86). Ravi Chaturvedi is of the opinion that the plays like "Sundran" and "Fida" - "reveal how the post-Independence drama represents women along more just, realistic and humanistic lines as opposed to her persuasive marginalisation and misrepresentation in the traditional narratives. They examine women's construction in the context of love, sexuality and marriage" (Chaturvedi 73).

The play highlights the fact that woman-expectations are not always fulfilled and happy endings are not law of nature. Death also is not a solution. This provides an insight into how traditional roles can often be very crippling. The play is an outburst of the repressed feelings of those wives who are deprived of their rights due from their husbands and thereby the repercussions following this situation. Through resistance, Fida exposes the personal invisible space of a wife and her personhood. "The full force of this reinterpretative exercise needs to be realised in its full significance. No longer is it the personal narrative of one woman but it becomes rewriting of myths, of cultural narratives and of the history that has flowed out of them. These dismantling and deconstructions are a continuation of the process that began . . ." (Jain 2003 279) (emphasis in the original) with Luna, Phaedra and many more invisible and unheard women. Metaphorically the play encompasses the generations of female experience, failures and temptations. It brings out the gender injustice and explores the woman-question.

Fida is not a stereotype of "Sita" model. But what begins as Fida's resentment against social constraints ends up in hysterics and melodramas. The ending of the play does not appear tame and reconciliatory. The days of Luna and Phaedra and the situation of woman today have not much changed. The questions of women's sexuality and the received morality still confront many women. For better or for worse the debate has takers on both sides. For a society in a flux has only recently woken up to live-in as well as gay and lesbian relationships, the openness to discuss hither to hushed issues is in itself a welcome sign.
vii. Sundran

*Sundran* (Punjabi, 1991)

Manjit Pal Kaur

Trans: Tejwant Singh Gill

The role of women in Punjabi theatre has been marginal. Modern play-writing began in Punjabi language in 1913, the credit for which goes to Norah Richards, an Irish lady who chose to make her home in Punjab. At present the achievement of women in Punjabi theatre must be measured in terms of the work done by Sheila Bhatia, Rani Balbir Kaur, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and Manjit Pal Kaur. Kaur has focussed on legends and has tried to give them feminist orientation. In her two poetic plays, *Sahiban* and *Sundran*, she re-presents the stories from a woman’s perspective. By doing so she opens up interesting possibilities. Her *Bandhan te Sarap (Constraint and Curse)* (1988) contains two plays. *Saraap* is her poetic play. She re-tells the much loved tales of legendary lovers but her contribution is in creating a feminist framework. “Manjit Pal Kaur is the only dramatist of significance. By feminising patriarchal legends she subverts authoritarian customs and beliefs” (Lal 365). A theatre academician by profession, Kaur has published three books of criticism exclusively on drama and theatre. She is the “only woman-dramatist of note in contemporary Punjabi theatre, also a feminist poet” (Lal 209).

Kaur’s most famous work again of the poetic kind is *Sundran* (1991). It is titled after a benevolent heroine of an ancient Punjabi legend. Like Shiv Kumar in his *Luna* (1965) and Kapur Singh Ghuman in *Rani Kokilan* (1979) Kaur in her *Sundran* (1991) retrieves the denigrated Sundran from her misrepresentation and from periphery, and re-situates her at the centre of her creative play. By reconstructing the legend of Sundran and Puran, Kaur redeemed Sundran from the charge of infidelity, betrayal and seduction. She presents her as a complete humane soul. The play aims at negating the discourses on legends that legitimise women’s continued subordination and highlights their misappropriation for men’s personal ideology. It is also to examine a recent shift in emphasis in how women respond to their misappropriation by men-folk. It exposes how the changing intellectual climate has turned the attention of women writers to critique the legends. Kaur brings out how men in order to attain their goal become insensitive to the feelings and emotional needs of women. Puran’s involvement with Sundran primarily signifies the glaring images of commodification of women in men’s self-advancement. The critique of patriarchy by Kaur derives from her larger and her humanistic vision which subscribes to the ethos of respect, dignity and justice to women. Both Puran and
Guru Gorakh Nath use Sundran as a pawn to fulfill their wish. In these notions of male pride, honour and personal satisfaction, Sundran is just treated as a mere commodity in the masculine world. Kaur exposes men’s notion of duty as nothing but a discourse of oppression. They exploit her for their selfish interest. She has been considered not a human being but as a valuable asset as the Guru realizes her love for Puran. Thus the play attacks the patriarchal assumption of women as instruments to further the cause of male purpose. The play also shows how this ideology has so infiltrated woman’s psyche that she herself believes to be doing all that she does in the name of love.

Through her play “Sundran”, Kaur has negated the politics of gender and of male superiority which were so much rampant in the acclaimed traditional versions of the legends. This act of Kaur’s is in fact a deliberately retaliatory measure through which she re-cast the traditional version of Sundran to suit its own newer ideology. Through her play Kaur resists the presentation of Puran - the male protagonist of the so-called legend of morality who has been absolved of the wrongs he did at the cost of the legend’s woman - Sundran. She makes Sundran and not Puran the central character of her play. In the legend, Sundran’s humanity is ignored. She is just a means of trial for Guru Gorakh Nath’s new disciple Puran before he is initiated into jog i.e. renunciation. This trial for their salvation costs Sundran her life but neither the Guru nor Puran has any burden on their conscience. In reality both of them wrong her - the Guru by bestowing Puran to her for some time and Puran in telling a lie - to run away from her palace he tells her he wants to ease himself in the forest. Despite it, they continue to be hailed as Guru and Bhagat. The play reminds of Bhisham Sahni’s play Madhavi (1984).

Puran is the son of King Salwan and queen Ichhran. As his birth was considered inauspicious to the King, the boy Puran was kept in a dungeon for twelve years. When the King marries beautiful Luna, a woman of humble origin, Ichhran deserts him. The prince Puran, now a handsome young man, is freed and Luna falls in love with him. Repulsed by Puran, Luna falsely charges against him to King and Puran is thrown into a well by the King from where he is rescued after twelve years by a passing sage Gorakn Nath who tends and cares for him. Puran renounces worldly life for the monastery. Sundran - a beautiful maiden falls in love with him and asks Gorakh Nath for permission to marry Puran. The Jogi grants Puran to Sundran in return for a favour she has done to Gorakh Nath. She is allowed some time of seven days with Puran. When he ultimately leaves her in search of his own peace of mind, she kills herself. In “Sundran” - the eponymous
protagonist whose love is ennobling, Kaur does not allow her to die but prepares her to give birth to her child.

At the outset Kaur, through Sutradhar, Nati and Nat makes it clear that the subject of the play is profound and there is no scope for laughter. Hence children are barred from the show. The Sutradhar, Nati and Nat are used as a means of converging information and of commenting upon events, also as the reflectors of activities in adult lives. Sundran is very beautiful. It is not easy to bear the dazzle of her eyes. “Her beauty can turn even the apsaras envious” (369). Puran - an ascetic - too is aware of her beauty. He acknowledges her beauty saying, “You are beauty incarnate” (395). Besides, she is kind, generous and humane also. It has been her endeavour to satisfy all those who approach her palace doors seeking her help and to relieve them from their problems.

As Sundran loves Puran, she eagerly waits for his arrival. She is aware of his departure and that sorrow follows happiness and fulfilment. Yet she receives him. Her “eager heart yearns but hesitates, / fearing signs of disappointment” (368). Yet she gets ready to welcome him. She is an epitome of those women who though tied up to the affairs of the world in countless ways forsake all they own, turn their back on all the joys and the world but yearn only for the man they love. Yet she does not impose herself on him and these are the signs of her maturation.

Puran is “a young man with delicate looks and royal bearing” (373). To him men and women are designed differently than animal world. His question is why they spend their lives in pursuit of sensual pleasures. He asks, “Why allow the passions of the body / to govern the breath of life?” (374). But he too succumbs to that pleasure. His guru Gorakh Nath wants to prepare him for the task where he has to overcome the temptation of human love. Therefore he tells Puran to go to Sundran’s palace calling for alms. Guru cautions and advises him to be aware of falling into the trap. Puran tries his best to avoid falling a prey to desire but he gets captivated by Sundran’s love and finds himself helplessly caught in her charm. His attempts to cling on to ascetic discipline are being swayed by the powerful currents of Sundran’s love. He surrenders himself totally to Sundran. Despite this he deserts her and goes away from her. When Sundran realises that the seven day period granted by Nath is over she feels miserable about herself. Now she is a deserted woman and she is worried that people will condemn her for nurturing an illegitimate child in her womb. She accepts the fact that she has defiled the palace and tells repentantly, “I have grown a snake in my womb! / Poisoned is the person thus seduced by sex / People will now besmirch the mother’s womb / publicly, at the
crossroads” (400). She experiences acute dilemma. She places her hand on her stomach and says expectantly that, “No father can play false with the womb / that holds his seed” (399). Inadvertently the secret has been divulged and Sundran’s friends Seema and Soma feel both elated and sad by the news to which an inevitable element of shame is attached and are worried. Sundran was very much sure of Puran. “My Puran can nowhere go / Leaving me unhappily distraught so” (400). But he does not return.

Sundran feels that her life is futile and meaningless. Maddened with sorrow, she momentarily contemplates suicide. Through this act of hers a question arises - why does this happen? Why do women think of death in the absence of their men? Is it because women feel they have no other option outside marriage? An answer to this is provided by Kaur. She makes Sundran realise that whatever she is doing is wrong. Sundran shudders at her own thoughts and resists her momentary weakness. She now is convinced that, “Each must follow one’s destiny / that none other can direct anew. / Time’s wheel moves on to record the history of life” (396). She becomes confident of her courageous self. She dares reach beyond the constraints placed by fate and decides to live on, to give birth to the child and to realise her own independent identity. She starts interrogating, “What is this thought that enters my head? / After all, what sin did I commit? / . . . / Why should a woman wish for the martyr’s epithet?” (401, 403). She realises that like any other woman she too desires life and she must live and in her womb a life seeks to be born. She holds Puran also equally responsible for the plight of hers. She says, “May the blame for this bitter existence / fall squarely on your shoulders” (403).

The matter of her entire existence is formulated as a question. Gradually, out of her calmness grows an illumination of self-esteem. She does not wish to be burdened with a martyr’s status. She experiences affection for her own self. She appears a picture of self-confidence. She does not want to sacrifice herself at the altar of conventions. Through Sundran’s friend Soma, the playwright Manjit Pal Kaur posits the positive stance of a bereaved woman. “The senses of the human flesh dominate life. / The man desires the female flesh. / But the womb of the female surpasses the mundane / because within it is contained the possibility of life / And the hope of attaining perfection through human life” (404). These words of Soma allow Sundran to retain her self-control. Her companions and confidantes Soma and Seema have been the chief means of externalising Sundran’s thoughts and feelings. Like a chorus they declare Sundran’s decision. Soma says, “She has a strong desire to live. / Her womb is fragrant with seed. / Her body . . . / . . . does not wish to end in a heap of ashes” (403). Now Sundran is able to utter, “I can
break but shall never bend - / Compromise is not in my nature. / . . . / for it is Sundran's intention to live" (404-405) (emphasis mine). It reflects the phase of recovery and rehabilitation.

Kaur in an interview with Singh tells, "The ending of this segment I changed consciously. If woman finds fulfillment and perfection in motherhood then Sundran must have achieved it. She wasn't so weak, if she desired it she must have accomplished it" (Singh 2000 179). Kaur's Sundran learns to resist the dependency of woman on man. The unmarried but conceived Sundran frees herself from this conventional dependence. Kaur while redefining the self of Sundran, re-evaluates the role of sex, of love, of procreation, motherhood and freedom. Sundran emerges strong enough to survive. When Sundran rejects compromise and expresses her intention to live she makes "a daring remark, a liberated remark" (Wyatt 38). She consciously works herself into a strong self which is no easy matter. But Puran remains callous of her feelings and adds to her misfortune. In the post-Independence era women's writing has been moving towards change by providing new definitions of self, space and freedom to legendary characters. Sundran acknowledges the differential attitude between herself and Puran "The rejection of the harmful is then much easier than attempts to overthrow traditions totally or attack them arrogantly from outside" (Kishwar et al. 47). At least Sundran is able to resist the enslavement of the mind. Confronting her unruly emotions, Sundran utilises all her conscious energy into resisting the cultural pressures of committing suicide. Her attempt is an attempt of self-preservation. Without a man, she can complete and validate her existence by overcoming the desire of committing suicide and making "that self-sacrifice" (Lacan 1982 28). She realises and questions, "Can lost love be recovered with sign-laden words?" (402).

Manjit Pal Kaur exhibits in her play the sisterly solidarity through the companionship of Sundran with Seema and Soma who emphatically and compassionately support Sundran in her grievances. It necessarily fosters the trust and communication among women. Though Sundran's resistance has no revolutionary consequences, her resistance certainly negates the expectations of the male dominated society. "Real resistance, it is argued, embodies ideas or intentions that negate the basis of domination itself" (Oldenburg 50). Harris and Platzer have classified the mythical heroines into different categories. Following their classification Sundran can be fit in the category of "helper-maidens whose function is to assist the heroes in their adventures".
often to be unceremoniously dumped when their assistance is no longer needed” (Harris et al. 298). An august and majestic Sundran too is defected unceremoniously. Though Sundran is abandoned not by accident or nature but through the act of a man, the play does not have any of the accusing the other or blame-throwing. Sundran rejects the feelings of disappointment and humiliation. She is no longer bitter and unhappy, no longer running away from herself and the reality, but willing to face it. She exhibits no hysterics, no melodrama, no tantrums but maturation. She works her way towards a fresh foothold and towards reconstructing her own world. Though she had developed relationship with Puran, it was matured, willingly and with the full knowledge of his separation. Sundran does not feel guilty about it.

The society does not instil in man a sense of guilt for love and sex with an unmarried woman. Hence Puran does not face this alienation to the extent of Sundran because as a man he is not answerable to others for every act of his. Men are allowed more social space for recovery. As a man it is possible for him to ignore the emotional conflict and behave as if woman does not exist in his single-minded pursuit of achieving perfection and sacrifices Sundran whose wishes and desires are not given any priority.

As regards Nath, he is worried only about his disciple Puran. He does not consider it a sin to abuse a woman and her sentiments for his selfish intentions of overcoming the sensual passion. The ideology of Gorakh Nath can be surmised. For him the “Woman is body” (Cixous et al. 95) only. Her feelings do not matter to men but her beauty and body. This quotation of Helene Cixous et al. reiterates a proposition made by masculinist Gorakh Nath who denies woman, specially the idea that “to men a man is but a mind... But woman’s body is the woman” (Bierce 34). For men like Gorakh Nath and Puran, Sundran is only a body to be used to attain the path of salvation.

Kaur makes her point in informing and convincing the reader/audience of the explicit biases in the legend. Lamenting Sundran’s plight in the legend, Kaur raises various other questions as to why the Guru Gorakh Nath blesses Sundran with Puran if he is to desert her later. Another question is why Puran suffers no qualms of conscience after deserting Sundran or at her suicide in the original legend. It also interrogates whether men respond differently to the end of a relationship and loss of a loved one and whether there are any gender differences that invade the experience of bereavement. The interrogative discourse of the play displaces the legends which usually do not allow any questioning. Sundran questions patriarchy and deflates its constructs of men like jogi who flourish by doing tremendous violence against women. Sundran positively rejects the patriarchal
code. She is not a victim of the kind Luna and Kokilan are. She is not a poor man's daughter like Luna or an infant like Kokilan. She is a princess without any parental control over her. She is an adult and not trapped in a coercive marriage as Luna and Kokilan are. Despite all these she too is a victim of male ego. In the social scheme of things she too like them, is a victim and is denied humanity and is ignored.

Through Sundran, Kaur relates that the female expectations are not fulfilled and woman's unhappiness is due to the unreasonable conduct of man. But Kaur deconstructs the myth that women can not survive without men. By decentering the man's space both in society and women's life, Kaur brings out the issues of right to one's body, space for freedom, realisation of self and its worth. Unlike his name, Puran is imperfect. He continues his quest whereas Sundran comes out of the illusory world and becomes perfect. She brings out the truth of life where one has to reconcile but not to surrender unreasonably. The play is thus a journey from happiness to the sense of loss and then reconciliation, self-identification and self-restoration. It works through low self-esteem to recognition of self-worth and also that a woman no longer needs to depend on any social prop of marriage or man. She wishes to continue to live in her own right, for her own fulfilment, for her own love and for her child. By doing so she completely unsettles the patriarchy which wishes to control women. Her sexuality and motherhood are realised at her own wish. She stirs everybody out of their traditional response to the legend and prepares them to expect a different response from Sundran for her problem.
References


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