CHAPTER 4

GENDERING THE THEATRE
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The following story comes out of the death camp at Treblinka. A dancer stands naked in line waiting for her turn to enter the gas chamber. We see a human being with its natural power to command space reduced to a body taking up space, passively submitting to the prospect of death. A guard tells her to step out of line and dance. She does, and carried away by her authoritative action and by her repossession of a self and a world she dances up to the guard — now within the compass of her space — takes his gun and shoots him. What a surprise to the guard that a zombie-like creature can spring back to life by means of performance!

- Yi-Fu Tuan

4.1. Women’s Presence in Theatre

"Every woman is an occupied territory", declares the title of a paper by Simona Sharoni on the politics of militarism and sexism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (447). The metaphor is taken straight out of the battleground to indicate the classic feminist perspective of the woman, conquered, subjugated and humiliated by man, one half of humanity ‘occupied’ by the other half. However, the image of the battleground begs the questions whether the terrain was at all contested, whether women found or created strategies to challenge the oppression with a greater or lesser degree of triumph, and what was the degree and nature of the woman’s agency. As one views the social fabric in the contexts of China, India and Sri Lanka in the latter
half of the twentieth century, one would do well to avoid a simplistic re-assertion of the image of the woman crushed by patriarchy; it is significant and rewarding to analyse modes in which the highly asymmetrical power equation has been challenged, seldom through blatant resistance, but more often in discrete or explicit ways of subversion.

In the turbulent decades of the twentieth century one of the most salient discourses concerns power apportioned on the basis of gender. In this chapter the endeavour is to conduct, around the world of theatre, "an exploration of the relationships of power which, by their very nature, are contested and negotiated every moment that human beings come into direct or indirect contact with one another, each using diverse resources and modes of their deployment in the contest" (Mukhia 15). From the 1980s feminist discourse includes a perspective of the ways in which women have created and enlarged space for themselves. Michelle Perrot indicates that recent feminist research, "in its desire to go beyond the 'miserabiliste' language of oppression, subvert the viewpoint of domination, [...] has sought to show that women are present and active, that they have full roles and a coherent culture and their powers are real" (161). It is within such a perspective that one can locate the relationship of women with theatre. Of all the arts, theatre has traditionally been the one least accessible to women artists in patriarchal societies: here then, one can fruitfully trace some of the attempts by women to enter the public stage and secure for themselves a sense of identity, an identity that went beyond theatre. Moreover, the theatre reflects in the choices of its themes and characters, in what it chooses to say and what it chooses to ignore, the tensions at work in the gender equation. Here the focus will be on female agency: on women actors, playwrights and characters. The attempt is to establish traces of women's growing presence in theatre and society in the face of their marginality and repression.

4.2. Feminist Standpoints

Feminist drama and feminist theatre scholarship have taken shape in the West since the 1960s. Feminists in the women's movements fought for political and social reform that would free
them from oppression under patriarchy; equally, feminist critics fought to extend their insights into the realm of culture. Feminist Theory arose in the wake of the debates stirred by Marx and Freud, and later by critical theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Lyotard. The way was paved for the emergence of Feminist Theatre. Hélène Keyssar asserts that "although plays about women have existed since the origins of drama, and plays by women have been written and performed in the Western world at least since Sappho," it was only in the sixties that "Feminist drama emerged as a distinct theatrical genre" (1). Taisha Abraham concurs and identifies two reasons for this: "First, the resurgence of the women's movement in America; second, the avant-garde movements in European theatre that radicalized American drama in the sixties and helped create a "revisionary" framework in which women dramatists could experiment." (13)

These were powerful influences; equally influential were the seminal writings of Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex 1949) and Betty Friedan (The Feminine Mystique 1963). In the following decades women in theatre came to question dominant modes of western theatre which they denounced as predominantly male constructs.

White feminists have been accused of Eurocentricism, of imposing Western models of feminism on other cultures, and of ignoring the endogenous roots of Third World feminism, Sri Lankan writer Kumari Jayawardena argues that feminism is not an ideology imposed by the West on the Third World, but has existed, in incipient form, for long in Third World countries. She points out that there were debates in China on women's rights in the eighteenth century and movements for the emancipation of women in India in the nineteenth century. Jayawardena recalls that "struggles for women's emancipation were an essential and integral part of national resistance movements" (Feminism 8), and that women in Third World countries have developed their own endogenous feminist movements with their own specific goals. Uma Narayan, writing about India, aptly stresses that Indian women have specific problems like dowry-murder, health and communalism, that the Indian feminist movement seeks to address (13). Similarly, Chinese author Li Xiao-Jian in a paper on "Xingbie or Gender", even as she demands women's liberation as part of social progress, questions the rightness of imposing the Western construct of 'gender'
on Chinese society. This society, she believes, finds it repugnant to see nature and culture as antagonistic. The Chinese categories are more harmonious:

It is a general worldview, the Weltanschauung, with special reference to human identity that involves the relationship between women and men. In this perspective, one finds that women and men are born different, which makes human reproduction possible; that the concomitant social roles women and men play respectively contribute to human civilization and social development; and that the human needs including sex, love, marriage, and family are treated in a way that never separates absolutely social from natural or Yin from Yang (Li 99).

Consequently, gender constructions and feminist stances in China, India and Sri Lanka need to be investigated within the framework of their specific cultural locations.

In twentieth century Asia, theatre has remained to date largely the bastion of male dominance that it had traditionally been. However, wider space within theatre is available for women. Chinese women playwrights are rarely heard of; in India, a few names of women are to be found in playwriting (though many have ventured into the fields of the novel, short story and poetry): earlier Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938 - ) (Bengali), Varsha Mahendra Adalia (Gujarati), Kusum Kumar (1939 - ) (Hindi) Mamta Sagar (1966 - ) (Kannada), Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry (Punjabi), C.S. Lakshmi (1944 - ) (Tamil); and later, Mahasweta Devi (1926 - ) (Bengali and English), Dina Mehta (English), Manjula Padmanabhan (English); in Sri Lanka one reads of Nedra Vittachi (English), and Ruwanthie Chikera, a young award-winning playwright in English and Sinhala. However, in all these cultures, acting has opened its doors wide to accept women artistes; also, in India, women directors like Anuradha Kapur, Usha Ganguli, Veenapani Chawla, Anamika Haksar, Vijaya Mehta, Vimal Allana, Arundhati Rao, B. Jayashree, Padmashree Josalkar, Prasanna Ramaswamy, Shanta Gokhale, Shailaja J., among others, have recently made remarkable contributions to the Indian theatre scene; and theatre audiences are today a mix of men and women. Mention must be made of recent women theatre critics whose output has been not only prolific, but also brilliant: Nandi Bhatia (Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance) (2004);
Minoti Chatterjee (Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage) (2004); Tutun Mukherjee, editor, Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation) (2005); Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker (Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947) (2006); and Vasudha Dalmia (Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatres) (2006). In none of these cultures has a ‘feminist theatre’ per se seen the light of day.

In the following sections the situation of women in theatre is studied, first in China, then in India, and then Sri Lanka. A profile of one prominent woman in each culture is sketched: this is in the nature of a case-study of how highly motivated women found in the theatre a location for empowerment, their own or of their society. Subsequently, the plays are analyzed as to the kind of space they may have made for women.

4.3.1. Women and Theatre in China

The status of Chinese women in the feudal imperial society was considerably low. Women had no right to inheritance of property and no freedom of employment. Rural women shared equally in all the farm work, but in case of bad crops or drought, farmers often sold their young daughters into slavery. Among the urban upper classes, women enjoyed the benefits of wealth within the confines of the ancestral home. They might be taught the arts of cooking, singing and fine embroidery, and even, in some cases, reading and writing, but no woman could ever sit for an imperial examination or hold a government post. The most glaring symbol of the restrictions imposed on the woman was the binding of the feet. “Why did this inhumane custom ever get established and moreover persist for almost 1000 years? Men, for unknown reasons, prefer small feet on women” (Dun Li 86-87). Men preferred small feet on women perhaps because the steps the women would take outside the homestead would necessarily be small and few.
Theatre was, however, an integral part of the lives of all Chinese, and rural women usually attended performances by itinerant troupes in the countryside. In the cities, the freedom accorded to the womenfolk seems to have depended on the male head of the family. One Han Chinese woman relates in her autobiography set in the early twentieth century:

The house was convenient to the garden where my father worked part of the time. It was also convenient for my mother and my aunt to see the plays on the open stage across the street. My father was very strict and would not let them out to see the plays. My mother and my aunt took benches and stood on them so they could look out the high north window (Pruit 88).

Another Han Chinese woman's autobiography contains a passage about her grandmother, who was, in the 1930s, a concubine to a general: "Almost the only time she was allowed out of the house was to go to the opera. Otherwise, she had to sit at home all day, every day. She read a lot, mainly plays and novels, and tended her favourite flowers" (Chang 44). The avenues for women of the gentry to enjoy theatre were thus rather limited, except when the operas were performed within their own courtyards on certain festive occasions like weddings, or rarely in a temple in honour of the gods.

Women were generally not allowed to be part of actors' companies, as strict segregation of the sexes was enforced. Female roles, called _tan_, were usually played by men (except in rare all-female troupes) (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 24). Unlike Peking, districts known as the 'foreign concessions' – the areas controlled by foreign powers by trade treaties – did allow actresses on stage by the early twentieth century. However, 'sing-song girls' often sang and provided some kind of theatrical entertainment to guests of tea-house theatres. These were generally prostitutes. The social status of the actress was extremely low and it was an accepted norm that "decent women did not appear on the stage" (Mackerras, *Chinese Theatre* 69). However, the situation changed drastically when the Communists came to power and the practice of teaching boys to play women's roles was stopped altogether. Henceforth men and women acted together on the same stage. Social security benefits were provided to the theatrical
profession and dramatic activity was frenetically stepped up as an instrument of education and socio-political reform. More and more women became actresses, first in theatre, then in the cinema. One such prominent woman was Jiang Qing, later Madame Mao.

The Communist Party succeeded, in great measure, in enhancing the status of women in Chinese society. As the Party gained control of the administration, it advocated equal status for both genders. However, as time passed, practice did not always tally with precept. Richard Evans notes the attitudes of Mao: "Mao had been an ardent champion of women's rights (his concern had been reflected in the Marriage Law of 1950, which gave women equal status with men in relation to property and divorce). But he knew that prejudice against women rulers was very strong in the Chinese political culture" (194). So when it came to grooming a candidate to replace Zhou Enlai, whose political authority radicals were keen on destroying, Mao did not consider any woman for the post, not even the ambitious Jiang Qing, his wife, but set his eyes on Deng Xiaoping.

The next sub-section shines a light on the entry of Jiang Qing through theatre to power.

4.3.2. Jiang Qing: An Actress Catapults to Political Power

One glaring instance of a woman who astutely amassed for herself an unbelievable amount of power and used and abused it to the detriment of many, is Jiang Qing, or Madame Mao as she was called. Daughter of a concubine, the young girl defied her mother by refusing to have her feet bound. It was an act of rebellion that impelled her to further steps on the road to freedom. She fled the poverty and misery of her early days into the excitement of the life of an actress with an opera troupe. She gained access to the cut-throat competition of the cosmopolitan world of Shanghai theatre, where she played Nora, in a translation of Ibsen's *The Doll's House*. Through the complicated political reverses of the Nationalist-Communist tug of war and through numerous liaisons with influential men, Jiang Qing found her way to the rising
political star Mao Zedong. Her life took on an operatic quality, as the emerging new hero of China became her lover, and later, her husband.

Once a young struggling small-time actress, Madame Mao became a powerful figure standing a step behind Chairman Mao to liquidate his enemies and crush the old order. Madame Mao heard of a play by professor and historian Wu Han that dramatized the historical fall of the emperor Jian-jing. She convinced Mao that it was a not-so-covert criticism of his leadership. She got him to call for a national denunciation of the play. The Cultural Revolution was proclaimed. She organized the national Festival of Revolutionary Operas, a thirty-seven day festival for some three hundred thirty thousand people (Min 244). Madame Mao banned all forms of entertainment except for eight model operas. She procured funding from the National Treasury to turn her operas into films. She gathered powerful allies and as the Gang of Four they let loose a flood of violent revolution. They commandeered five hundred thousand Red Guards who unleashed terror on the land. The meteoric rise of Jiang Qing to the status of Madame Mao and a powerful producer of a big cultural drama did not last forever. Mao’s health declined, his opponents in the Party thrived, Mao died, the Gang of Four was arrested. Jiang Qing died in jail in 1991 after fifteen years of imprisonment, a heroine to very few.

This woman, it must be admitted, does not represent the millions of women in her day in her country. Although Mao insisted that “women hold up half the sky”, although Communist China did greatly liberate women from feudal oppression, the majority of women negotiated their quests for power in very restricted circumstances, as a spate of autobiographical works by Chinese women today, such as *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang, and *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Cheng reveal. The stage, by itself, offered a narrow passage, but a passage, nonetheless, into a wider social sphere.

The Chinese plays will be considered next. A telling and interesting fact is that these are all written by male authors. It is interesting to ask how men constructed their women characters.
4.3.3. The Chinese Plays:

The White-haired Girl

The first play to be considered is *The White-haired Girl*, an opera in five acts. The title appears to place woman centre-stage. In a sense the play does focus primarily on a young woman, Xier, the daughter of Yang, a tenant of Landlord Huang. Also, the authors depict a cross-section of female characters: a peasant woman who struggles to support her family despite crushing poverty; the landlord’s aged mother, cruel and oppressive; the old servant in the landlord’s house, who protects Xier and helps her flee. The young Xier who is driven to escape from civilization into a cave in the mountains; superstitious village women afraid of the white-haired goddess. Most of the characters are stereotypes. The character of Xier, the protagonist, is not extensively developed. Her vulnerability is underscored and her bid for survival is celebrated. But the victim is turned into a victor through the agency of male saviours. The women in the play are endowed with fortitude but with little self-reflection or awareness.

Xier, slave turned ‘goddess’ is the ‘protagonist.’ Yet the play does not seem to be primarily concerned with the plight of a woman, rather, the plight of a peasant. The young girl’s body becomes the site of exploitation and oppression. The authors investigate the exploitative relationships of landowners with the peasant workers. The liberation and emancipation of women, then, from the Chinese Communist’s perspective is part of the larger question of the liberation and empowerment of the millions of impoverished and victimized peasants. The play celebrates both the liberation of the peasants by the Red Army and the fierce spirit of the masses that helped them to endure and prevail. Seemingly, the ‘woman’s question’ has been neglected; but from another perspective, this refusal to treat women as a separate category may be read as a freeing and empowering process.

One is tempted to find parallels with Mahasweta Devi’s stance of subsuming the stories of women under the ‘wider’ category of the oppression of tribals of both genders. But there is a
noticeable difference: the woman playwright depicts strong and evolving women characters who
glow with personal charisma.

*Teahouse*

The next play to be considered is *Teahouse*, by Lao She. *Teahouse* went on to become a
fair favourite with Chinese audiences in Communist China. Written in 1951, it spans half a
century (1898-1945) in the course of which the far-reaching social, political and economic
changes affecting China are dramatized. In *Teahouse* the 'post-Liberation' society is asked to
watch, and reflect on the fall of the Manchu Empire, the rising intrusion by foreign powers and
the rule of the Kuomintang. From the perspective of the Communists, this is a period of scant
progress, or rather an era of chaos heaped upon chaos.

With reference to the status of women in China, the Communists could indeed be proud
of having made monumental strides forward. In line with Chairman Mao’s famous statement that
“women hold up half the sky”, Party cadres and officials all over China were recruited equally
from among women and men. Men and women were required to work with equal responsibilities
in commune farms and factories. At all but the highest levels, Party workers belonged to both
genders. This was a situation never hitherto experienced by Chinese society.

The women one encounters in *Teahouse* are generally victimized and powerless. Except
for Wang Shufen, the wife of Proprietor Wang Lifa, who wields a certain amount of responsibility
in running the Yutai Teahouse and commands some respect, the other women have no rights
and no privileges. A peasant woman begs for food for herself and her starving little daughter,
since the peasantry is in dire straits. Poverty drives Sixth-Born Kang to sell his young daughter to
an elderly palace eunuch for the paltry sum of ten taels of silver; in another part of the teahouse
a pocket watch is being sold for five taels of silver. Rich men are willing to pay high prices to
acquire talented concubines for themselves. As Director Shen and Little Pockface Liu take over
Yutai Teahouse and announce that they will proceed to renovate it, their first move is to find
themselves 'come-on hostesses' and Ding Bao is their first prey, a seventeen year old without a family. She confides to Wang Lifa: "You're right, Old Proprietor, I'm traitor's property too. I have to wait on whoever has power and influence. Son-of-a-bitch! I'm only seventeen, but I often wish I was dead. At least my corpse would be my own. But this kind of work – I'm slowly rotting away" (49). In a country undergoing extreme social stress, the woman is depicted as being one of the first and worst victims of exploitation.

Lao She writes and performs his plays after the founding of New China. His *Teahouse* reflects the degeneration of Chinese society in the years past and hints at the coming of hope from 'the Western Hills', the rising sun of Communist rule. Writing in the 1950s, Lao She, an ardent supporter of the Communist ideology and Party, could not have foreseen any of the excesses that would be committed in later years, by Party workers, for instance, against women teachers and writers; or the instigation of children by the Party to perpetrate violence against 'reactionary' parents. Nor could the playwright have foreseen that he would himself be a victim of such harassment. He was later to commit suicide in 1966, after ill-treatment by the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution.

*Cai Wenji*

The play to be considered next is *Cai Wenji*. Guo Moruo, writing after Liberation in 1949, revisits history, and re-interprets it for his contemporaries. Very conscious of the Chinese sense of historicity, Guo delves into tales from China's history and myth to re-inscribe them with meaning relevant to his own day and contemporary political ideology. In accordance with Mao Zedong's request to "make the past serve the present", Guo sets his plays in turbulent periods of Chinese history which mirror the turbulence of existence in mid-twentieth century China. In *Cai Wenji* he explores the theme of racial and tribal unification. And within this larger circumference he centres the question of priorities in loyalty. The title foregrounds a woman who is both mother
and scholar. Cai Wenji is the female protagonist, a woman torn between her love of her family and her duty to scholarship and service to the community.

Cai Wenji is depicted as a loving mother, just as she is also a dutiful wife, and was a devoted daughter. Torn between love for her young children whom she has now to leave behind to return to the Han kingdom and her sense of duty to her community, Cai Wenji learns to accept the higher duty of serving her state rather than only her family. One is tempted to wonder what might have been the consequences of a possible refusal of a ruler's 'request' by a woman.

The protagonist is characterised as a scholar and a poet. In line with Communist Party policy, women are assigned important responsibilities in the state. Since the action of the play takes place in the years 208 -216 AD, the hierarchy of the feudal society is maintained, with patriarchy prevailing. However, the playwright takes pains to portray women as forceful characters unafraid to follow the dictates of their conscience and common sense. But the traditional duty of self-sacrifice by the woman to her family is now shifted to the service of the larger community and the state. Cai Wenji is set up as a model to audiences in early Communist China: a woman who subordinates her private feelings to a goal loftier than family loyalty, i.e. loyalty to the country. This is a re-interpretation of history, and a rejection of the traditional Confucian values which are primarily family-oriented. Here the theatre re-defines the 'value' of the woman in terms of the unquestioning service she offers her country. The playwright's penchant for re-visiting history and creating vigorous women characters is seen at work in his other plays as well: in Wu Zetian, he dramatizes the life of the single woman to ascend the imperial throne as an Empress; and in Qu Yuan, the playwright fashions unforgettable female characters in the scheming Queen Zheng Xiu, and Chan Juan, the lovely and lively student of the famous poet Qu Yuan. In Guo Moruo, we find a Chinese advocate of women's emancipation.
The fourth Chinese play, *Nocturnal Wanderer* is set within the internal world of the protagonist, the Traveller on a train journey. Written in an absurdist mode, it moves from the Traveller's brief encounter in the actual train with a woman and a few men, into encounters with their corresponding characters in the nightmarish world of his imagination. As he wanders through half-deserted city streets, encountering violence, desire, death and good and evil, the Traveller discovers his own consciousness.

There are three levels of consciousness in *Nocturnal Wanderer*; the real and objective world of the train, where the Traveller speaks in the first person; the level where the Traveller become the Sleepwalker, and speaks in the second person; and a level of self-reflection where he observes a world that he finds difficult to understand.

The two female characters are the Woman in the train, and her counterpart in the dream, the Prostitute. The Sleepwalker meets the Prostitute in the nightmare streets of his consciousness. His only wish is to take a quiet stroll in the streets by night; however, he is inescapably assailed by evil. The Prostitute tempts his soul. In an absurdist sequence, he sees her walking off with the Thug and is very disturbed at the thought that she may be raped; she later returns to him and he wavers between desire and indecision; he pushes her into a doorway and unwittingly causes her to come in the line of a gun that is fired; but though he is convinced she has died, and is accused by the Thug of having killed her, the Prostitute later returns to become his friend and exposes the lies of his life.

Gao Xingjian is, self-confessedly, an intensely private person. Consciously rejecting the Communist attempt to collectivize, Gao "forces his way into the self and compels it to reluctantly admit to its own inadequacies, its fragmentation, its impotence to act, and its inability to eradicate the evil in and around it" (Fong xv). *Nocturnal Wanderer* illustrates Gao's journey into the psyche of the protagonist. The Young Woman in the train for instance, is metamorphosed into the Prostitute of his dream. For Gao it is not socio-political or religious ideologies that need
representation, it is the “images of the heart” which control consciousness that need to be revealed. Gao comments: “What I strive to capture is the reality of the feelings of the psyche, a naked reality which needs no embellishment, and which is larger and more important than all the exeges on religion, ethics or philosophy, so that human beings can be seen as more human, and their true nature can be more fully revealed” (Gao, “Another Kind of Drama” xxxvii-xxxviii). Thus, gender and gender politics, do not engage the attention of this playwright as external realities. They permeate the inner consciousness of his characters.

The road that the woman had to walk in the course of the last decades in China was far from smooth or easy, and theatre documents and examines some of the struggles along the way. The woman’s body is depicted as the site of exploitation and violence in the patriarchal society of imperial feudal China. The vulnerability of the woman, specially the young girl, in periods of social stress like drought and civil war is forcefully underscored, particularly in plays like The White-haired Girl and Teahouse. In the cause of the creation of a national identity and unification, the woman is posited as a model of transformation, one who is required to subordinate other age-old profound loyalties like the family to the highest goal of national service. Cai Wenji dramatizes these national goals. Woman is also seen as the inner energy that both seduces to evil and exposes self-deception, the yin that cannot be excised from the yang, as the encounters in Nocturnal Wanderer reveal. A study of the Chinese theatre in the last fifty years of the century does all this and more. It indicates that women – as actors – entered the newly found opportunities offered by theatre to explore its space as both leisure and work. Theatre is even seen as the launching pad for the exceptional woman’s bid for power.

However, these plays do not throw light on the woman’s more recent use of her newfound space in the social sphere. Theatre does not seem to explore the breadth of this space. Sources other than theatre indicate that women in China today are negotiating the tightrope between modernization, economic independence and material comforts on the one hand, and tradition and state coercion on the other. The Beijing Women’s Conference of 1995 notwithstanding, women’s rights in China today are circumscribed by the Chinese negotiation of
human rights vs. state control. Melinda Tankard Reist, who has investigated and documented the abuse of women in international family planning programmes, reports: "In the People's Republic of China, a woman's body is not her own. China enforces an intrusive one-child-per-couple birth control policy (only slightly relaxed in outlying regions) with fertility decisions controlled by the State. [...] The heavy hand of the Government reaches into the intimate lives of Chinese women and their partners with merciless precision (359-364). Theatre has failed to record such suffering. The State is vigilant and exercises stern surgical control over the arts and the media. The complex situation of women in China entering the twenty first century seems to be more than the theatre can handle.

One fact to be noted is that hardly any women playwrights are referred to in the literature about twentieth century drama or theatre, the more public of the arts. A single volume of plays by three contemporary women finds mention in the relevant literature: The Women Trilogy, edited by Bai Fengxi. An anthology of women's writing published in Beijing in 1985, Seven Contemporary Chinese Women Writers, features seven fiction writers, but no playwright. In her article entitled "The New Era for Women Writers in China" Bettina Knapp, writing in 1991, lists the names and reviews the work of contemporary women writers. Her list includes novelists, short story writers and poets and one single woman connected with the theatre: Zhang Xinxin (1954 - ) "... one of China's most popular writers and theatrical directors, and also a poet" (Knapp 436). Zhang Xinxin is the author of noted novels like Orchid Madness and On the Same Horizon. She is the director of Beijing's Popular Arts Theatre. However, she is not a playwright – and this startling fact begs a question.

4.4.1. Women and Theatre in India

The discourse about gender in India is far from monolithic; as one surveys the field one discovers diverse strands. Anjum Katyal remarks on the deep tensions fissuring the area: "The divide between activists and theorists/writers/intellectuals is one of them. The divide between
rural and urban perspectives is another. That between differing politics and ideologies is a third; that between the upper and middle-classes and lower classes a fourth. The result is many differing forms and directions of feminist activity, one could say many differing feminisms" (52-53). These stances and positions are simultaneous and are discernible in the work of female and male writers in India.

The debate about women’s place and space was far from peripheral to Bengali intellectuals, social reformers and writers. It claimed their attention inseparably from their nascent nationalist aspirations and urge for socio-economic reform. Banani Mukhia accurately puts this problematic within a larger perspective:

In the turbulent intellectual milieu of nineteenth century Bengal, it was the women’s question that came to occupy the central space from Raja Rammohun Roy to Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and beyond. This space was marked by a growing tension between the existential reality of women’s abject subjugation to men’s authority — enlarged and sanctified as a social norm — and the rising aspirations of the reform movements which predicated general societal advancement upon at least partial emancipation of women — a transition between history’s inertia and imagination’s soaring momentum (15-16).

The growing visibility of the woman’s question was due to various contributory factors. Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and other reformers viewed the treatment of women, including child marriage, the plight of widows, and sati, as a national shame. Intellectuals exposed to Western liberal thinking and practices grew aware of the weaknesses in the Indian social system. Later, the Brahma Samaj reformers and others widened the scope of the effort to embrace education and roles within the family. These issues were nuanced and passionately debated, as for instance, it came to be observed that education for women was primarily meant to provide better housewives for men. The departure from ‘feminine ideals’ and the ‘baneful’ effect of Western culture and education on women aroused much ire in conservative circles. By the end of the nineteenth century a number of women from the wealthy families in
Bengal like Hiranmoyee Devi, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Swarnakumari Devi, and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani had ventured into writing poetry, biography, stories and essays for magazines (Bhattacharya, M. 1-16). This was incontestably a bid for power. Tanika Sarkar notes that the anti-colonial effort in India offered some liberating opportunities: "[...] the emergence of the political woman and her alliance with male-dominated politics loosened up many of the material constraints of patriarchy, even when they were not explicitly named" (Sarkar xiv). However, the literature of the first decades of the twentieth century, including journalism and fiction, witness to the still fragile status of women's 'empowerment'. The theatre, particularly, reflects the resistance of patriarchy to contestations by women.

4.4.2. Women and Theatre in West Bengal

Traditionally, the theatre of rural Bengal was an exclusively male stronghold. Jatra, the most popular folk theatre, was produced by men, with a cast of men. The stories did, of course, include women characters, and women did form part of the audience, but the perspective was entirely patriarchal. If this was true for rural Bengal, the scenario was somewhat different in urban circles when the westernized proscenium theatre made its appearance in Calcutta in the late nineteenth century. As playwrights like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Girish Chandra Ghosh burst upon the scene with their prolific writing and passion for the theatre, they opened the doors of theatre to women. Until the advent of girls on stage, the female roles had been played by men, and less frequently, by boys; the male impersonators were bhadralok (upper middle class men), whose traditional occupation had never been theatre. The breakthrough came when Madhusudan Dutt insisted on hiring women to act in his play Shormishtha. The first four professional women were Golap, Shyama, Jagattarini and Elokeshi, all from the prostitutes' quarters. In her introduction to the biography of the famous actress Binodini Dasi, Rimli Bhattacharya indicates the process of the transition:
For one, women as actors were now in demand: Madhusudan stated that "clean-shaven gentlemen just would not do any more for [his] heroines." Also, "despite impressive social reform movements, increasingly, seclusion of women itself became a marker of respectability. Correspondingly, the taint of money – or 'professionalism', in what was perceived as art or a nationalist enterprise, was held against those who came to the theatre simply to earn a living" (11-12).

Women were now extremely vulnerable. The young girls who joined the theatre came from a-bhadra ('dis-respectable') households. Widows, poor women from the lower classes and discarded wives of high-caste or kulin men trooped to Calcutta to make a living. Ashis Nandy notes that "one marker of kulin status _ was hypergamy,” and records that Madanmohan Bandopadhyay had “established his kulinhood” by marrying fifty-four times (52).

Actresses like Binodini gained great renown for their powerful acting, singing and dancing; they often earned tidy sums of money. However, they were totally dependent on their male directors/managers/playwrights. Very often their sustenance depended on whether they had a regular 'Babu' or patron. It is not surprising that these actresses used their sexual favours to secure for themselves challenging roles on stage, and conversely used their careers to gain themselves wealthy and generous patrons. But however successful and glamorous she may have grown to be, Binodini Dasi was ever marginalized in the world of theatre. She invested most of her savings in the project of building a new theatre that would belong not to a commercial board but to the artistes themselves. She was broken-hearted when the men back-tracked on their promise of naming it after her, and called it the Star Theatre. She was betrayed, she believed, because she was a woman, a prostitute – though she was one of the chief elements of the spectacle, and a much toasted actress of high theatre circles.

Rimli Battacharya indicts the theatre for obliterating the work of the actress towards gaining worth in/through work: "Bindoni can only be cast as either patita ('fallen woman') or bhadramahila (middle class woman) or both, but little or no space can be accorded to her sense of identity as a worker who is a woman” (195). Indeed, below the surface of its apparent
liberality, the metropolitan Bengali theatre in the nineteenth century made rather conservative statements about women.

This is not to say that women were not contesting patriarchy in theatre even at such a point of time. Another section of women was entering theatre through other doors. A substantial number of plays were written and published by women at the turn of the nineteenth century. Swamakumari Devi, an elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore, wrote not only novels, short stories, poetry and articles for the press, but also plays like Paak Chakra and Koney Badal (Mukherjee 31). Sukumari Dutta (185?-1890) wrote and produced a play at a time of personal financial crisis, in 1875. She also participated in the Hindoo Female Theatre, an all-woman company which performed in the 1880s and which unsuccessfully tried to organise an acting school. Tarasundari Dasi (1875–1948) taught acting and financed many productions. Niharbala (1898–1954) a versatile singer-dancer-actress choreographed dance sequences and trained actresses. Tripti Mitra opened her own drama school in 1983 (Battacharya 43). Also, 'respectable' women did act in the amateur theatre of the day, where productions were mounted by individual playwrights or upper class families like the Tagore family at Joransanko. It was commonplace for daughters and daughters-in-law of the Tagore family, for instance, to perform in the private theatre hall at their estate at Joransanko. In large part this freedom derived from the fact that these were private performances and that many of the Tagore clan were members of the Brahmo Samaj, a progressive reformist organization. The Brahmo Samaj encouraged the education of women and actively involved them in literary activities including journalism and the theatre, and saw the stage as a forum for discussion of women's issues like sati and widow remarriage. This was however, viewed by the bulk of conservative Hindu Bengali society as an aberration and an instance of corrupting westernization threatening the fabric of Indian society.

Thus, the stranglehold of patriarchy over theatre in Bengal did not go unchallenged in the first half of the twentieth century. The stretching of the traditional boundaries came from two diametrically opposite quarters: the prostitutes who came as professional actresses to the public stage, and the educated reformist upper class in the private theatre. It was not, however, until
the post-Independence period, that women actors came into their own in Bengali theatre. Among the contributory factors for this growing agency of women were the inclusion by political leaders of women in the freedom struggle, and the resultant self-confidence; the gradual empowerment of women through the new democratic Constitution; and the ideology and practice of the nascent Communist Party in Bengal. In the second half of the twentieth century women actors and directors had found their place in the sun. Usha Ganguli is a prominent name among theatre directors and actors in Kolkata. Women like Seema Ganguly and Rohini Mukherjee of the Jana Sanskriti empower other women through the grass-roots Theatre of the Oppressed. However, despite the surge in the current of women writers in the fields of the short story, the novel and poetry, the realm of writing for the theatre has not been widely accessed by women in India.

4.4.3. Usha Ganguli: directing, acting, translating

Usha Ganguli is a well-known figure in theatre circles in India. She has been leading the theatre group Rangakarmee which performs generally in Hindi. Born in Jodhpur, she relocated to Kolkata in the 1950s. A lover of dance, she trained in Bharat Natyam, took a Master’s degree in Hindi literature, and joined the Kalamandir Theatre Group. Unhappy with the unprofessional functioning of the group, she eventually became a founder member of Rangakarmee, a group that has worked consistently for the last twenty-eight years. Usha Ganguli dances, acts and directs. Her solo performance in her own original play Antatyatra (The Journey Within) was very well received, and has elicited wide debate. Ganguli spearheads Hindi theatre in Kolkata, wooing Hindi-speaking and Hindi-knowing audiences in Bengal, a feat on its own; among her many performances one of her favourites is Rudali, which she has translated and adapted from Mahasweta Devi’s story into a play and turned into a powerful women’s text. Ganguli’s themes often highlight social injustice and exploitation of the weak. She has been honoured with innumerable awards including the Safdar Hashmi Puraskar from Uttar Pradesh’s Sangeet Natak Akademi and the national Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1998.
This director is entirely serious about her work in the theatre, and gender must not be allowed to cloud more important matters. Ganguli remarks: "There is a place beyond masculinity or femininity where our artistic selves are. I feel bad when I am described as a 'mahila kalakar' [woman artiste] or 'mahila nirdeshak' [woman director]. I feel I am being demoted in stature. A director is a director; a male director is not called a 'man director'. [...] That is one place in the artistic world where we rise above gender ("Colloquium" 154).

Yet, Usha Ganguli is deeply concerned about the exploitation of women and many of the plays she has directed and acted in witness to this commitment: Lok Katha, Mahabhoj, Beti Ayee, Court Martial, Holi, Mukti, Rudali, Himmat Mai and others (Mukherjee, Tutun 32). It is this keen interest in women's stories that leads her to Mahasweta Devi's Bengali story Rudali. With the author's stamp of approval, she translates it into a play in Hindi. In the process, the discourse turns from that of class, which is Devi's choice, to a woman's narrative. The play is metamorphosed from a tale of rural exploitation to a story of an exploited woman, and staged in proscenium theatres for an urban audience. Like Devi, Ganguli refuses to sentimentalize or romanticize her characters. Through deft adaptation to a realistic style of presentation, she creates a powerful account of the struggles of women in rural India. Commenting on the transformation of Rudali, Anjum Katyal writes about the different focus of each of these two women:

Here we have two important women practitioners in the field of cultural production, who see themselves as progressive, and who are responsible for works which are widely perceived as feminist – or, if one quarrels with that term, as important from a woman's perspective. We see how their texts are shaped by an agenda, by priorities which are in turn determined by a basic ideological position and by the purpose of the text: in one case, activist intervention, in the other, performance for an urban audience. The metamorphosis of 'Rudali' allows us to address the simultaneity and asymmetry of feminist stances and positions in this country today (53).
Not least among the achievements of Usha Ganguli is the fact that she translates across the Indian languages and stages plays in many parts of the country. This is a significant trend in India today, a recognition and celebration of the multilingual nature of contemporary Indian society. Aparna Dharwadkar strongly states her views in this respect:

(M)ultilingualism and circulation in their post-independence forms have had a pioneering effect on dramatic authorship, theatre theory, and the textual life of drama. Playwrights who conceive of themselves as literary authors write with the anticipation that the original text of a play will soon enter the multilingual economy of translation, performance, and publication. [...] All these playwrights construct authorship and authority as activities that must extend across languages to sustain a national theatre movement in a multilingual society. [...] Thus, for both authors and audiences, the total effect of active multilingualism and circulation is to create at least four distinct levels for the dissemination and reception of contemporary Indian plays – the local, the regional, the national, and the international (Dharwadkar 83-4).

This is an intelligent and positive reading of the situation of the theatre scene in India, to which a director like Usha Ganguli, for one, has been making a noteworthy contribution for the last quarter of a century.

4.4.4. The Bengali Plays:

**Evam Indrajit**

The appearance of *Evam Indrajit* on the stage in 1965 resounded in the minds and hearts of theatre practitioners and theatre lovers in India. Rejecting realism, it presented in an absurdist vein, the mirror image of their own inarticulate angst. In the words of Satyadev Dubey, "It was about the Indian reality as they knew it; it was a theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations gnawing at the
hearts of the educated urban middle class” (90). This startling awareness that the play produces, includes a more than fleeting glimpse of the woman in Indian society.

She makes an appearance in the very first line of the play, as Auntie enters to berate the Writer for scribbling away to the neglect of basic necessities like eating. She is a stereotype, perhaps intended as a prototype. The stage directions/comments declare: “‘Auntie’ enters. She is called ‘auntie’ here only for convenience. She could be ‘mother’, ‘elder sister’, anything. She is frantic because she can’t make any sense of her boy’s behaviour. But then, not being able to make sense is the prerogative of ‘aunties.’” The Writer is feverishly in search of material for a play. As he tears sheet after sheet of his manuscript, Manasi makes her appearance — the woman who is his inspiration. Manasi has been viewed as “‘the creation of the mind’ and perhaps an Indian counterpart of Jung’s anima” (Dubey 90). The Mother/Auntie and Manasi present two dimensions of the feminine in Evam Indrajit.

Manasi and Indrajit have been friends for a long time and find companionship together. They walk in the park and talk of marriage but Manasi is unable to decide. They are cousins, their families will oppose the marriage and a girl must go by the rules. Eventually Indrajit moves to Bhopal and away from her. Later, when Manasi veers towards marriage, Indrajit is moving out of the country. He does marry, years later, when he returns, but he marries another woman, another Manasi. Manasi is the generic name assigned to the wife of Amal/Kamal/Vimal, the happy young wife in a recent marriage, the disgruntled middle-aged wife caught in an insipid marriage, the enraged and bitter older woman ranting against an irresponsible husband. Manasi (as well as Auntie/Mother) is everywoman, the caricature of every woman in the urban audience.

Manasi speaks for the undimmed spark of life in the human race. To Indrajit’s claim “To seek a break in the unchanging rhythm of death is perhaps the most foolish and futile attempt of Man in this world”, Manasi responds with “I may be a germ, but still I seek, seek without shame. The audacious assertion of life claims immortality in its brief spark.” (41) The relevance of Manasi to his writing and to life does not escape the Writer. He declares that he is planning to call his play ‘Amal, Vimal, Kamal, Indrajit and Manasi’. He pontificates:
Indrajit and Manasi. As you all know, different conditions, different cultures, different countries have produced plays about Indrajit and Manasi. [...] The love of Indrajit and Manasi. An immortal dramatic theme...(15-16)

However, this grandiloquent pronouncement finds no corresponding space in the play. The love of Indrajit and Manasi peters out with a whimper. Like Amal, Kamal and Vimal, Manasi too, fails to make it to the title. But like the rest of them, and Indrajit, she has to go on walking. As Manasi insists repeatedly, “You have to go on walking”, since “there is no escape” (55).

In Badal Sircar’s play, the woman is assigned a fair amount of space. Her several avatars are presented: nurturer, friend, wife, mother — all roles she plays vis-à-vis the men in her life. She is straight-jacketed by rules and roles, and fits into stereotypes, like her male counterparts Amal, Vimal and Kamal. However, unlike them, she is endowed, close to the end of the play, with a degree of awareness of her own condition and that of humankind. This is a growing reflectivity that she seems to have in common with the Writer and Indrajit. Woman shares with Man the absurdist’s location on the ‘unromantic’, ‘un-lofty’ walk on the road.

*Mareech, the Legend*

*Mareech, the Legend* by Arun Mukherjee does not touch upon gender issues. It does not make place in its rather eclectic cast for a single woman character. And except for a reference to a story in the Ramayana – where Ravana’s sister Surpanakha is wounded by Lakshman, and Ravana sets out to take revenge on Rama by abducting Sita – the entire play is totally devoid of themes or viewpoints that consider women. Surpanakha is spoken of as “beloved by all.” Mareech, the demon, decries her humiliation at the hands of mere mortals. But when he learns that it is Rama who has rebuffed her, Rama, whom Mareech admires and worships, he changes his tune with a stereotypical sexist accusation:
MAREECH. Who in the name of God
Asked her to offer her love so shamelessly?
A human has rejected
The advances of a demon-damsel
I see nothing amiss here. (541)

Mareech refuses to help abduct Rama's wife, Sita. Ravana reminds Mareech that his own mother was killed by Lakshman and Rama and offers him this opportunity to avenge her. But Mareech will not weigh even the loss of his mother against his loyalty for Rama. He declares his mother's "irksome antics" were to blame and she lost her life in battle and he will not hold Rama and Lakshman responsible. Mareech, repulses Ravana, but eventually does obey him and dies at the hands of Rama. The women in the play are not characters, they are only talked of. And they are projected merely as excuses for action by men.

Why are there no female characters in the play? The Ustad provides a facetious answer. When the dancer who is supposed to do the golden deer dance does not show up, since he has sprained a leg, the Ustad rants: "If there's one thing I know, it's that girls are best at all this singing and dancing." But the girl he had hired was snatched away by a circus party manager. "Good riddance, in a way. Because when she danced, some people would whistle — some would throw burning glances and some would even throw coins, and the real idea of the show would be wiped out" (564).

Perhaps leaving out women characters was a choice made in response to the exigencies of the performance situation. Mareech, the Legend was written to be staged by travelling troupes, and male characters might more easily be found. Or perhaps the cursory treatment of women is a satiric reflection of the social reality. These questions are unresolved, but beg to be asked when one remembers that Arun Mukherjee was an active member of the IPTA, which propagated the empowerment of women in Independent India.
In contrast to Arun Mukherjee's near total exclusion of the gender dimension from his play, Utpal Dutt, a committed Communist Party member, devotes considerable space in *Hunting the Sun* to issues and themes that relate to women. Three major characters in the play are women, and one may even be justified in suggesting that the protagonist is Indrani, the Shudra disciple of the Buddhist monk Kalhan. Counterpoised to Indrani, the heroine, are Mahasveta, the outspoken and worldly-wise prostitute, and Urmilla, the Empress with insatiable sexual appetites and the cunning to satisfy them.

If *Hunting the Sun* explores questions of power, as the title indicates, then women are accorded wide space within the scope of the play. The portrait of Mahasveta, the prostitute, servicing rich clients, dancing in the street in honour of the gods by royal order, and bribing the officials to keep from being thrown into prison indicates a class of women who manage to fend for themselves by their sexual favours. Mahasveta is depicted as a woman not without sensitivity, but in the last analysis a woman without honour, in that she is prepared to go to any length to save her skin, including presenting false testimony in court against Indrani and her Guru Kalhan. The Empress Urmila is the butt of ridicule not only of General Hayagreeva whom she shamelessly pursues, but even from Dardura, the Vidushaka, the court fool. In contrast we watch the young Indrani, low born but highly principled and high spirited speak forthrightly for the teachings of her master and in opposition to superstition and blind faith. She dies for her totally unacceptable subversion of caste hierarchy and challenge of political authority, but not before she is imprisoned and tortured, and not before she gains the respect and passionate love of General Hayagreeva. She manages to salvage some of her Guru's books and though she is unable to protect her beloved teacher, she dies for what she believes. Indrani and her lover are trampled upon by an elephant in a grand public spectacle.

In *Hunting the Sun* women are not portrayed as weak or as victims. Each of the characters faces psychological and social pressures but eventually makes considered choices.
Mahasveta, the prostitute is touched by Kalhan's sensitivity when he addresses her as mother, but eventually chooses to betray her better self. Urmila succumbs to the temptations of unbridled power and passion. Indrani chooses to follow her best lights, even though this leads her to death. Utpal Dutt has drawn forceful women characters and has placed them on par with men. He has done this from a male perspective, 'raising' women to the level of men in the social milieu, to dramatize his theme of rejection of superstition and oppression. One cannot claim, however, that in *Hunting the Sun* we find women's perspectives. The women we meet here are generally exceptional women; on the other hand, the universe of the common woman in the grind of daily work, exploitative relationships, and struggle for survival, finds no place in Utpal Dutt's play.

*Water*

Mahasweta Devi has centred the tribal community and its unacknowledged suffering in the vast body of her literary work. By her own admission, class and tribe considerations far outweigh her other perspectives, including that of gender. Nonetheless, a reading of her stories, particularly her *Breast Stories*, and of her plays, including *Mother of 1084* and *Bayen*, reveal a thick vein of concern for the voice of woman. Here we find fertile material on offer for a gendered reading of her work. We note too, that Mahasweta Devi is one of the few women playwrights in India today – though, as we noted earlier, she dismisses the claim that she is essentially a woman writing. Her play *Water* depicts a wide range of male characters, including Maghai the old water-diviner of the Dome tribe who gains heroic stature. Counterpoised to this focus on the male stance, we meet the mytho-poetic figure of the Charsa river, the holy mother, the nether Ganga, which flows into significance in the title of the play. Here is nature as the feminine, and Maghai has had a lifelong affair with the river. It is a deep love-hate relationship which provides a sub-plot within the larger framework of the story of oppression of the
untouchables’ by the upper classes. The river is a “whore” forever enticing Maghai, never fulfilling her promise of abundant water. She is a co-wife to Phulmani, Maghai’s wife.

The river is a goddess, the deity who commands Maghai’s unflinching devotion and obedience. He draws his identity from his service to her. “This husband of mine is a water-diviner, he worships the water, draws out the hidden water.” (103) For Maghai the goddess is a mother who prevails over, and provides for, her children:

MAGHAI. Then, from the bowels of the earth, the nether Ganga herself (raises his folded palms to his head), the mother deity of all the hidden waters, spoke: You’re my chosen priest. I’m the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you’ll gather the offerings, pray for water, and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig. (111)

Maghai is the priest mediating between the divine and the community. He agonizes over his failure to provide water to a tribe dying of thirst, while the upper caste Santosh monopolizes all the wells. He cannot refuse to be the water-diviner for Santosh. When he does invoke her, Maghai looks inward and discovers her indwelling presence within him. “Nobody has seen her ever, no one knows how she looks, my goodness! So there’s no idol, no puja for her. When I pray for the sign for water, I pray to her in silence, within myself.” (112) When he does receive the insight to decode the offering of perennial water that the river has been making to him all his life, the courage to do what he must gushes from within.

The knowledge of the great and powerful abundance of the river waters empowers Maghai with confidence in himself and his role in the community. He grows in stature as he leads the people to build a dam that will ensure their perennial supply of water. Inevitably, the authorities – male and aggressive – hit out at the threat of a community maturing in courage and assertiveness. They shoot Maghai, whose body is finally snatched away in the enraged embrace
of the waters that burst forth from the broken dam. "Look at her, there she goes, there, there, carrying Maghai away" (146).

Maghai, the water-diviner is depicted as an impotent and frustrated man until he listens to the promptings of the river – who finally makes herself heard through Jiten, the schoolteacher. It is when he does hear the voice of his wife/whore/mother/goddess, the voice within, to which he prays, that Maghai can rise to his full potential and become an effective leader. When the feminine principle within himself is acknowledged and responded to, the leader gains potency, the community gains muscle. The establishment is, of course, too strong to be easily resisted, but the subversion has begun.

Water is peopled with the shadowy women of the village who live their lives in poverty and hard work, scratching the bed of the river with their fingers to collect a little water overnight. But the lack of water is the enemy of domesticity or joy, the children die of starvation and thirst, Dhura cannot contemplate getting married when he is unable to offer his wife a comfortable existence. The only rounded female character is that of Phulmani, Maghai’s wife. She is no delicate submissive housewife, but a compelling personality, agonizing with the men-folk at their terrible emasculation by the upper caste Santosh who denies them access to water, pays them low wages for their labour and siphons off the ‘drought-relief’ provided by the government. She can easily be roused to anger by the injustice of the situation of her family and community. She weeps when she considers that her son Dhura too may die in the violence and hunger that has claimed many young men, including her own four sons. She despairs of ever having a grandchild to hold in her lap. She is loud in her protest, even against her husband’s docility and fatalism, but will not allow her son to be disrespectful to his father. Phumani is often the voice of sanity and wisdom in the community. She prods and cautions the men, leads the women with their pots to the river, and leads them in their ritual lamentation in the nature of a Greek chorus:

There’s none to care for us,

For our hearts bleeding. (106)
Though her short stories and novels, and to a lesser extent her plays, have been seen by scholars as sites of feminist discourse, Mahasweta Devi herself clearly intends that gender be subsumed into the discourse of class. Samik Bandyopadhyay, who interviewed Devi, comments that to emphasize gender at the expense of class is a "denial of history as she sees it" (Introduction 16). Devi states her perspective unequivocally: "When I write, I never think of myself as a woman... These are stories of people's struggle, their confrontation with the system... I look at the class, not at the gender problem" (Bandyopadhyaya, Introduction 16). Critic and translator Anjum Katyal comments that Devi's text "shows us that gender and class need not be viewed as polarities; that one's discourse can be informed by class and simultaneously be gendered. One political stance need not rule out the other" (17). In Mahasweta Devi's plays, gender and class perspectives complement and enrich each other. Her preoccupation with the struggle for the rights of the oppressed bring her into close contact with the common folk — including unforgettable women. She confesses that the lives of bonded labour have provided her with a character like Dopadi and believes that their stories also impart a narrative immediacy to her language.

Mahasweta Devi locates women within a discourse of subalternity that includes both genders, into the domain of tribal oppression where men as well as women are seen as marginalized. But within this framework, one can read a kind of 'sub-subalternity' in the disempowerment of women, revealed in the "entrapment of female characters in an unyielding, traditional society" (Mukherjee 20). Some of the impotence felt by Phulmani can be heard in her cry:

PHULMANI. (raising her hands skywards): Could I turn into a thunderblast and pierce the hardened earth, or turn into a cloud and pour into the ravines, I'd find solace. God, you are not there. If you were there once, you're dead now. Else how'd Santosh alone have all your water, your gift to all living creatures? (106)
Of all the plays under consideration here, Water is the one that comes closest to genuinely touching upon the daily experiences of millions of nameless women, and weaving them into a larger context of social exploitation. It has been noted earlier that theatre in China failed to do justice to crucial aspects of the lives of present-day women. A shortcoming of a similar nature can be laid at the door of Bengali theatre.

4.4.5. The Women of Bengal that Theatre Forgot

How did Bengali theatre respond to the cataclysmic events around the Partition of India in 1947 — and Bengal in particular? The political dismemberment of India along religious lines into India and Pakistan had far-reaching effects in every sphere of the lives of the people of Bengal, the public as well as the private spheres. The pain and suffering caused in the process was on a scale unprecedented in South Asia.

Women have always been at the receiving end of great cruelty in any catastrophe that has befallen the human race, whether war, natural calamity or poverty. The experience of Partition was no exception. Urvashi Butalia records: "thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders [...] were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced into marriage, forced back into what the two sides defined as "their proper homes", torn apart from their families once during the Partition by those who abducted them, and again, after the Partition, by the state which tried to 'recover' and 'rehabilitate' them" (17).

A chapter that explores the relationship between theatre and women seemed to be the appropriate place to study how theatre had responded to the unspeakable suffering of women in Bengal around Partition. This study yielded only silence. To the unspeakable suffering of women, theatre responded precisely by not speaking. This is a most unsettling finding, indicating the total and complete absence of theatre writing and performance in West Bengal from the 'Partition literature' that gradually arose on both sides of the border.
Stories like Sa'dat Hasan Manto's "Mozel", Satinath Bhaduri's "The Mass Leader", and Sulekha Sanyal's "The Confrontation" register the brutal attacks on women's bodies and identities. These short stories give voice to the nature of individual experience. They represent a shift away from the debates of high politics and hegemonizing discourses and the history of blame. It is the short story, as a genre, that ventures most courageously into the terrain of women's lives and the catastrophe that shattered them. Some of them attempt to map the groping trajectories of women re-discovering their selfhood and re-defining their identities in the face of forced migration, rape, violence and blame for acts to which they were forcibly subjected. More recently, autobiographical accounts are beginning to surface. Old Maps and New: Legacies of the Partition (2004) by Kavita Panjabi is one such journal by a woman who today teaches at the Jadavpur University in Kolkata.

But theatre in Bengal seems to have chosen to forget, or to maintain a studied and stubborn silence in voicing women's experiences around Partition. This refusal to embrace the trauma of the women in their society sounds extremely uncharacteristic of a people who vigorously debated women's issues like child marriage, widow remarriage, women's education and political participation a few years earlier. The apparent amnesia is confirmed if one surveys the themes of the major theatre productions in the entire fifty years under study. In a detailed list of productions in Bengali theatre from 1944 to 2000 compiled by the Seagull Theatre Quarterly, the sixty six titles run the gamut of themes from the mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy to famine ravaging the land, from translations of Pirandello to adaptations of Chekhov. But one fails to find a single exploration of the experience of Partition in general or of the excruciating suffering of Bengali women in particular. What could be the reasons?

Journalist Pamela Philipose, trying to gather views of painters, writers and theatre personalities, concludes that Indians have, by and large, been unable to come to terms with what is the most catastrophic moment in their recent history (Ravikant 161). Partition seems to have been relegated by the vast body of creative artists for more than half a century to near total oblivion. Writers might have been apprehensive that any attempt at characterization and
contextualization would be interpreted as partisan. Objectivity would be a difficult proposition for anyone who has lived through that traumatic experience. Another factor responsible for this abysmal omission may be the fact that the social and political agendas that caused Partition are still unshakably in place. While historians and academicians calmly discuss Partition as a “transfer of power” and debate “whether Partition was inevitable”, theatre persons may be only too aware that passions are still raw and sentiments too volatile to risk igniting yet another of the recurring communal riots that traumatize the nation. Unlike a novel or a short story that is read in the privacy of one’s home, theatre uses public performance spaces and addresses large audiences that could be provoked to raging violence and carnage. Years earlier the famous Bengali actress Binodini Dasi (1863-1941) relates in her autobiography incidents when the audience was carried away by similar communal passions: at a performance of Jyotirindranath Tagore’s play Sarojini (1876) with its stereotypes of Hindus and Muslims, “the entire audience grew so agitated that they could not restrain themselves anymore and leapt over the footlights crying murder” (Dasi 152).

The theatre person who has come closest to touching upon this issue is Usha Ganguli, in the trilogy Badnam Manto, Sarhad Par Manto and Manto - Aur Manto, (2004) adaptations from stories from the Urdu short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). This writer of short stories had lived through the horrors of Partition and had never really recovered from them: but the stories he wrote in Lahore have given voice to his experiences and his perceptions of women. In an interview with Ranjita Biswas in July 2004 Usha Ganguli dwells on her choice of subject:

RANJITA BISWAS: Why have you chosen to tackle Saadat Hasan Manto after all these years?

USHA GANGULI: Because he’s still so very contemporary. Manto’s stories on the Partition, the Hindu-Muslim divide, his humanist outlook are as alive today as at the time when he wrote them. Manto has always been an inspiration since I read his translated work in
Hindi (he wrote in Urdu) but frankly I didn’t have the courage to tackle this vast and complicated subject. His comments on society were very subtle; he was never into politics yet the sensibilities were political in content. To turn them into a play was also very challenging. After my last play Kashinama, which took away a lot of my energy, I read and re-read Manto’s work and wondered anew at the relevance of his work today. Besides, 2005 will be Manto’s 50th death anniversary. It is a kind of tribute to the great writer and humanist.

RANJITA BISWAS: Is it also a response to our times when a Gujarat happens?

USHA GANGULI: Yes, in a way. The Gujarat incident made me feel helpless. It brought me closer to Manto as I delved into his book Why I Write. In a way, it seemed that what he had written about and foreseen continued to happen even 50 years after Partition (Interview with Ranjita Biswas, The Hindu. Sept. 2004)

Ganguli’s play is the nearest that theatre in Bengal has come to looking in the face at this particular instance of pain.

In the next section the scenario in Sri Lanka is investigated in terms of women’s relationship with the theatre.

4.5.1. Women and Theatre in Sri Lanka

Women in Sri Lanka had no connection with any theatre tradition. Folk forms of theatre like the Nadagama, and the Kolam did exist in various regions of the land. No women acted in any of these performances, but there are records of some women in the audience.

However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that a significant urban theatre movement took shape in Sri Lanka, and women gained entry into it. As in Calcutta, in Colombo too, the middle class came to be exposed to visiting British drama troupes performing
Shakespeare and other European classics. No less was the influence of the Parsi theatre that visited Sri Lanka from Bombay, and fired the imagination of the urban elite with the possibilities it suggested for a local theatre. It was through the initiative of men like John de Silva and Charles Don Bastian that the new Nurti form was nurtured and popularized in the first few decades of the twentieth century. To begin with, women's roles were performed by male impersonators of women, but as the Nurti plays developed into a flourishing commercial enterprise, and audiences needed to be wooed so as to ensure financial success, the stage was set for the new enticement: the entry of Sri Lankan women into theatre.

The Nurti plays undertook a nationalistic project. At a period of history when Sri Lankan aspirations for freedom from colonial rule were escalating, the theatre was recognized as a fulcrum of the nationalist agenda. Here was an opportunity for the media to influence hundreds and thousands of people, even those who could not read the print media, to be impacted by mime, song, dance and dialogue. In the process, large numbers all over the country could enter into, and reinforce, assumptions, world-views and cultural practices held in common. At this point of time theatre in Sri Lanka grew into a powerful vehicle for propagating ideology and commenting on the socio-political situation. Sinhala women became an intrinsic part of this nationalist project in more ways than one.

Sinhala playwrights like John de Silva and Charles Dias exploited the space offered by theatre and used language and stories selected and adapted from mythology, history and other sources to a conscious political end. Neloufer de Mel elaborates:

Their goal was to forge a Sinhala consciousness among the audience which would be central in the anti-colonial/British drive that gathered momentum in the late 19th century. In this project Sinhala women, as embodiments of the community, took on particular roles. From Sita in the Ramayana to the queen in Daskon Natakaya (1888), Sirisangabo's queen in Sirisangabo Charitaya (1903) and Ehelepla Kumarihamy in Sri Vickrama Rajasinghe (1906), queens and aristocratic ladies drawn from historical legends and Buddhist Jataka stories perform the roles of dutiful wives, good mothers and chaste
partners. The aristocracy, by its very nature was inaccessible, distant and therefore to be “aspired” to. The constructions of aristocratic feminised identity were therefore formulated to fit a patriarchal framework metonymic of a large nationalistic discourse and design. They would inculcate respect for the indigenous culture, show up the foreign ones as debased, and inspire the audience, through the personal sacrifice, decorum and selflessness enacted on stage, to be courageous participants in the nationalist struggle for independence (58-59).

As de Mel indicates, women in Sri Lanka at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth became an important location on which nationalism was constructed.

Playwright John de Silva was on the forefront of this movement to define Sinhala identity and culture with reference to women. Not unlike the situation in West Bengal, the education of women was looked upon in an ambiguous light. Neloufer de Mel clarifies some of the issues at work:

Counterpoised to the chaste and dutiful woman as embodiment of the nation are those who have come under the influence of western colonial rule and culture. They are pilloried in the nationalist theatre as in John de Silva’s Sinhala Parabhava Natakaya (A Satire on the Modern Sinhalese) performed in 1902.[...] Women were disallowed the cosmopolitanness permitted to men, and their duty to nurture future generations in Sinhala culture, language and the Buddhist religion was reiterated with greater vigour (59).

John de Silva was himself a product of the new cosmopolitanism shaping Sri Lankan society. His bi-culturalism is visible in the fact that he adapted Shakespeare even as he wrote original plays in Sinhala. This cosmopolitanism was not allowed to benefit Sinhala women. It was not reflected in the characterization of women in de Silva’s plays. Woman became a site for the construction of stereotypical Sinhala identity, and patriarchy saw the need to fix her as a repository of tradition and a bearer of values for the future. When women in Sri Lanka began to ask for an English education, they came in for satire and ridicule in theatre.
In the years of nationalistic awakening and resistance to colonialism gender became symbolically interlinked with nationalist discourse. In Sri Lanka, as the ethnic antagonisms hardened, the Sinhala Buddhist conservatives devoted all their efforts to maintaining the hegemony of the majority within the country and subordinating the ethnic minorities. Kumari Jayawardena reveals that gender can be viewed as a core element in the ethnic issue. The post-Independence effort to re-inscribe a national identity developed on deeply ethnic and religious lines and women came to be looked upon “as upholders of cultural and religious identities and as the progenitors of a pure unpolluted community through their roles as good wives and mothers” (Religion and Political Conflict 162). Women were postulated as mothers of heroic males, in opposition to the Tamil separatist struggle.

In the next section a prominent theatre woman, Annie Boteju, is briefly placed under the spotlight in a bid to explore the gendering of theatre in Sri Lanka.

4.5.2. Annie Boteju: portrait of the first Sinhala actress

Annie Boteju joined the Tower Hall stage in 1917 as the first professional Sinhala actress. She can be viewed as a significant figure in the national theatre in Sri Lanka; as a contributing agent in the modernization of the country’s theatre; and as a visible sign of the gendering of the nation. She gained huge acclaim as an actress-singer, had her voice recorded on gramophone for HMV and other reputed companies, and was employed by two rival theatre companies. She was highly paid, received awards and trophies and gold sovereigns from her doting audience. In later years, Annie and her second husband Edwin Perera ran their own theatre company.

Like the playwright John de Silva, who was also her patron, Boteju was an avowed nationalist, and theirs was a nationalism that carried deep racist and communal overtones. (Amunugama 288) Like de Silva, she voiced anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim sentiments, as did other members of the Tower Hall theatre. Her painstakingly constructed persona was that of the staunch nationalist, the personification of all things Sinhalese, the icon of Sinhala womanly virtue.
The personal life of this celebrated actress belied the image of the traditional 'respectable' Sinhala lady. Her sexuality was transgressive and certainly not in keeping with traditional bourgeois respectability. Neloufer de Mel seeks to interpret this problematic oscillation between stage respectability and off-stage promiscuity. "Why [...] did the Tower Hall patrons and playwrights, desperate to make the theatre "respectable" and acceptable to middle class morality, accommodate such transgression? The answer lies in the fact that actresses had, by this time become valuable capital" (89). The actress found herself commodified in the theatre. Paradoxically, this very commercial value strengthened the hand of the actress, and she gained leverage on the bargaining table. Annie Boteju claimed that the salary she received was unjust and forcefully negotiated contracts with rival companies, the Vijaya Ranga Sabha and the Arya Sinhala Sabha. The woman, in this case jettisoned the identity of victim, and ensured that theatre companies weighed their obligations. The theatre of the twentieth century offered her many possibilities — including tradition and modernity — and the actress asserted her agency. During her years on stage Annie Boteju was a very rich woman. When she died, in 1982, around eighty two years of age, she was a near pauper, forgotten by everybody. The tides of her life had risen and fallen with the early nationalist Sinhala theatre as she sought to reconcile the pulls of private and public spheres, the demands of personal life, of theatre, and of nationalist ideals of womanhood.

In the next section the plays from Sri Lanka come in for examination. What light do they cast on women in Sri Lankan society and theatre?

4.5.3. The Sinhala Plays:

_A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy_

The family in _A Somewhat Mad and Grotesque Comedy_ includes a Mother and a Grandmother — and they do not as much as exchange a single word. Written in the absurdist
genre, the play features four paste-board figures for characters, without any depth of characterization. The four characters are almost allegorical, with Ranjit and his dead brother Upali clearly indicating the Biblical fratricidal relationship of Cain and Abel. Father and Mother are modern man and woman – he, harried about sales conferences and club meetings, she, as preoccupied with making a good deal with some “auction people” who “came for the cane furniture” as she is about the fact that their son Ranjit has just killed their son Upali. Father and Mother bicker and quibble over trifles, until the Father cracks under the strain. They then admit their grief and anxiety and mourn the loss of their son.

It is the Grandmother who, stone deaf and bemused, juxtaposes the fratricide against news reports of mass graves in Bangladesh and Carnival in Rio, and sings out of tune ‘O come and mourn with me a while’, a hymn sung only on Good Friday. The Grandmother, a chorus-like figure, is the voice of wisdom and spirituality that refuses to conform to the horrifying mundane reality. But the Grandmother is shooed away into her room, and the voice of sophia or wisdom is blotted out of earshot. The play uses Christian imagery, and if Ranjit and Upali represent Cain and Abel, and their parents stand for Adam and Eve, the Grandmother may embody the Spirit of the divine mourning for creation run amuck.

The two women in the play, the Mother and the Grandmother stand in stark contrast to each other. The Mother, flustered and restless, fusses with the same nervousness about the furniture, the tea, and her son’s murder by her other son. She seems to represent a generation that is materialistic and confused about its values. The Grandmother, who might be seen as somewhat crazy and out of touch with ‘reality’, actually reveals greater perspicuity. She grasps the absurdity of mass murders and Carnival celebrations being reported side by side in the newspaper. She mourns – not just the death of her grandson, but the suffering of humanity. Tragically, the Grandmother’s chanting of hymns and the Mother’s worries about ‘cleaning the mess’ of her son’s death never seem to find a meeting point. They are representatives of generations with very different values.
The Golden Swan

How does a play by the most noted Sinhala playwright, rooted in a Jataka tale, construct women's images? The Golden Swan draws for its story-line on a Jataka tale, the rich fund of stories of many births of the Buddha before enlightenment. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke acknowledges, "This ancient collection has proved an inexhaustible source of nourishment for Sinhalese literature and Sinhalese culture, and has shown itself to be perennially relevant" (Modern Sri Lankan Drama 8). Prof. Sarachchandra is the most honoured of Sinhalese men of letters, a diplomat, a one-time ambassador of Sri Lanka to France. In the post-independence decades he becomes a spokesman of Sinhalese culture, and his plays reinterpret cultural values and re-establish Sinhala identity. The Golden Swan was written in the author's seventy-fifth year. The playwright satirizes the acquisitiveness and commercialism of the new society and juxtaposes them with ideals of simple living and loyalty to one's kin. The Brahmin Woman in the play, having lost her husband, battles against poverty and struggles to raise her two young daughters. A reincarnation of her husband visits them, a Sanyasi by day, a golden swan by night. He leaves an exquisite golden feather for them each time he comes. Despite her children's remonstrations, the Brahmin woman sells the feathers for household expenses. As her avarice swells she binds the swan and plucks all its feathers for cash — even as she understands who the swan is and the fact that her rapacity will destroy him. The Brahmin Woman is the representative in the play of the rising tide of commercialism that brushes aside nobler consideration for beauty, gratitude or love. The Sanyasi embodies traditional Buddhist values of selflessness and serenity. The daughters represent the new generation that witnesses the clash of conflicting values and is helpless before the surge of avarice of their mother.

Like John de Silva in earlier decades, Sarachchandra finds in theatre an effective medium for reinscribing the Sinhala culture and stereotypical identity in the young nation. The frame of reference for this author for an exploration of human relationships, is the traditional Buddhist value system. Sarachchandra writes, "Greed and the attachment to worldly possessions have
been condemned in all religions, but in the Buddhist system of values, which guided Sinhalese society in the past, they acquired special emphasis. Today such values are despised (Development 5-6). Clearly, Sarachchandra is critiquing the emerging social values, abhorrent to traditional Sinhala society. Interestingly, in The Golden Swan the threat to the traditional values comes from a woman, and the grieving over the loss comes, too, from young women. As in other traditional cultures women are here seen as vital repositories and transmitters of cultural values.

**The Bearer of Woes**

*The Bearer of Woes*, first performed in 1990, focuses its plot on a set of theatre persons — director, actors, sponsor — pressurized by circumstances to halt their performance and intervene in a quarrel between a Man and a Woman. The play problematizes the impact of theatre on ‘real’ life, and the audience watches an inconclusive ending, where the Man poses an ultimatum to the Woman to go back to him, but where the Woman gives him a long look and walks away — with him following her in confusion. Though on the face of it, it is the Man, writer and idealist, who is the bearer of woes of the title, in another sense it is the woman who bears the greatest woes, and the play is a feminist statement.

Prasannajit Abeysuriya writes in the thick of social and political upheaval in Sri Lanka in the 1980 and 1990s. His play has a distinct flavour of social critique, his very theme exploring the capacity of theatre to connect to the insistent social suffering surrounding it. Pivotal to this investigation is the woman’s perspective to the twists and turns society is taking, and the intractable dilemma of the relationship between her harsh reality and the Man’s idealistic quest. The feminist perspective is created from a collage of fragments, small in the eyes of the dominant culture, but significant to the playwright’s purpose. As the Woman disturbs the performance and seeks shelter in the theatre hall, the reactions are varied.

1st ACTRESS. Hurry up. Do whatever you have to do and let’s get on with the performance. I have to go home alone after the show tonight.
1st ACTOR. Don't worry. You won't die from a short walk home alone. You call that a problem? Look at what this woman has to face!

SPONSOR. Such questions are irrelevant. Throw the woman out and let's get on with the show. (168-9)

But the Woman's problems will not go away. The Man stands there trying to persuade her by argument and main force to return to him, but she sees no future in a relationship where a Man cannot provide for her and her children. The Director proposes that they delve into history for enlightening solutions. The actors enact the story of Queen Madri who sacrificed all including her two children, so that her husband, King Vessantara, can attain his goal of Buddhahood. But history has no appeal for the Woman here and now.

The satire is unremitting. The Guards pounce upon the Man and exorcise him, parodying the draconian measures employed by the administration in Sri Lanka to restore law and order. Solutions are not in sight, everything has been attempted, persuasion, parody, violence. The Woman walks out, the Man follows her hurriedly. Undoubtedly, the specific problems of the woman caught in the throes of a war-ridden society have engaged the imagination of the playwright. Within the social satire in The Bearer of Woes, the problematic gender issues remain as usual, problematic.

4.6. Conclusions

A discussion of theatre and its manifestations in times of social transformation is enriched by a study of how gender has been recognized or problematised. In Asia, as elsewhere in the world, the woman's question has made its appearance in diverse forms. The education of women came to be a major item on the agenda of nationalists in West Bengal; the emancipation of women in the socio-economic-political arena was central to Chinese Communist ideology and practice; the Sri Lankan woman was posited as the embodiment and transmitter of Sinhala identity. How did theatre respond to the forces of change?
Women, who had traditionally been denied, almost totally, access to the profession of theatre, gained entry into it. Many women ventured into acting and over the years dispelled many of the prejudices connected with performing in such a public space. In the last few decades women directors and theatre critics have done a significant volume of creative work in India and Sri Lanka. A few exceptional women carved out for themselves, through theatre, spaces of undeniable power. Vast numbers of women in the audience discovered in theatre entertainment, debate and leisure spaces hitherto denied to them. Dramatic texts in China, West Bengal and Sri Lanka have located women well within their central discourses, generally nationalistic in character, as the discussion of most of the selected plays reveals. The theatre has been stretched in many directions and women have been given, and have appropriated for themselves, diverse and significant roles within it.

However, the doors of theatre have opened to women only by a narrow crack. The coercive nature of gender roles unmasked by Simone de Beauvoir and a stream of writers after her, the paradigm of knowledge and power indicated by Foucault, the silence of the subaltern underscored by Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, all these continue to prevail. One glaring lacuna on the theatre scene is the insignificant number of women playwrights in each of these Asian cultures even as the twenty first century begins. Though women short-story-writers, novelists, poets, screenwriters and theatre directors have burst upon the scene with voices and stories that demand to be heard, there is a dearth of women writers for theatre. Uma Ramachandran discusses the gendered nature of 'censorship' in India. She believes that women censor themselves in deference to social acceptance, fear of rejection by family and friends, and restrictions imposed by fathers and husbands. The censorship spills into the public sphere too.

But the market and literary establishment have their own subtle and unremarked forms of censorship, and equally subtle manipulations that sometimes barely conceal outright bias. More than one writer said she had been advised by literary 'well-wishers' to avoid certain subjects (feminist poetry, sex, politics, religion) if she wanted to be published — but if she was arrogant enough to persist the attacks could be vicious (5).
Ramachandran quotes Malayalam poet Sugatha Kumari in her view that poetry by women may be tolerated because "society considers poetry a harmless activity, like buying a sari" (5). This kind of censorship is insidious and appears to have effectively silenced potential women playwrights who would have had to contest a much more public sphere.

Is part of the explanation to be found in the fact that drama is written to be performed; and that women recognize the logistics of production to be beyond many of them in a society still dominated by patriarchy, not only in economic circles but also in artistic spheres? Tutun Mukherjee concurs with such a view: "Theatre seems to reflect, like other cultural activities, an institutional structure in which artistic and administrative control still remains largely in the hands of men. Although this does not necessarily suggest a deliberate conspiracy of exclusion, it nevertheless reveals the existence of a complex consequence of received assumptions about the roles of the sexes in the social sphere" (4). These assumptions concern the perceived polarity between the public sphere, 'appropriate' for men, and the private sphere, 'natural' to women, and the work that is done within these domains.

Arguably, women may not push their way onto the playwriting scene because they may believe, like the Writer in Evam Indrafit, that they know no one and nothing. They may be deterred by the apprehension that their private realms of experience, their labours and relationships within their restricted worlds may fail to resonate with the public at large. One major consequence of this near absence of women playwrights is that women's experiences and women's worldviews do not really make it to the stage. Among the playwrights studied here, it is Mahasweta Devi who comes closest to entering women's lives in her work. Mother of 1084 looks at the incomprehension of a mother of a murdered Naxalite young man; Bayen exposes the plight of Chandidas who is ostracized as a witch by superstitious villagers; Devi's story Rudali, adapted by Usha Ganguli into a play, enters the minds and hearts of professional mourners and sex-workers; and Water brings us the vibrant figure of Phulmani whose struggle for drinking water combines the domestic and the public domains. Until more women write for the stage, play-scripts will voice perspectives that are inescapably masculine. In retrospect, we note that
when theatre has performed women’s lives, this has been generally done within the dominant masculine discourses of national and cultural identity, skirting vital issues concerning women.

The emancipation of women within and beyond theatre in each of the three cultures being studied here is not easily quantified or understood in comparative terms. However, it appears that Chinese theatre and society have made, in the last fifty years, enormous strides in empowering women — economically and artistically — as audience, actors, or members of society in general. But this has been done within the highly controlled and regulated structure of the modern Chinese Communist political system, which valorizes unquestioning conformity over individual rights. The Sri Lankan theatre, moving, for the first time, out of the confines of religious ritual and folk celebration, has offered ample opportunities to a new class of educated women, as actors, researchers and critics. The Buddhist respect for learning and tolerance of debate, coupled with the urge to modernise Sinhala society seem to have accelerated the process. But the most positive indication of changing attitudes is apparent in India — and not only West Bengal — with the emergence of women directors of high caliber, grass-roots theatre workers and very recently, women playwrights. The democratic set up and the access of higher education to growing numbers of women have certainly been instrumental in this. Some ground has been gained for women on stage, and elsewhere in the theatre, but more spaces await exploration.

The gendering of theatre in China, India and Sri Lanka is a measure of the small but significant bid by women to challenge marginalization and move towards greater empowerment. The response of conservative societies to women in theatre and women’s emancipation, repressive for many centuries, seems to have relaxed, but only marginally, in the twentieth century. Women have often taken stances of negotiators. They have played upon the fact that they are important assets on stage; that they are seen as repositories and transmitters of social values vital to the construction of a national or cultural identity; and that they are professionals among professionals in theatre work.
Notes

1 The Brahmo Samaj is a social and religious movement founded in the nineteenth century movement known as the Bengal Renaissance. Its reforms included attempts to abolish the caste system, the dowry system, to bring about the emancipation of women, to abolish child marriage and promote widow re-marriage.

2 The story of Cain and Abel related in Genesis, the first chapter of the Bible, Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, commits the first murder by killing his brother Abel out of jealousy.