the stage positive images of women, images that indicate their deep dissatisfaction with the idea of femininity that is constructed by Indian Culture and which prevailed through centuries. The prestige and recognition enjoyed by all the three playwrights is awesome. Tagore the Gurudev, is venerated within India and esteemed by the outside world as one of the greatest Indians. Karnad’s name is almost a house-hold word among the educated as an arbiter of taste in matters of art and culture. Tendulkar is famous as a gadfly of Indian theatre and his popularity has spread far beyond the Marathi stage to Indian theatre at large.

One of the things highlighted in the foregoing pages is that despite the pronounced pro-woman sympathies that mark their plays critical attention has very seldom been paid to this aspect of their work. Reviews and articles, essays and books about Indian theatre single out other aspects of these playwrights and have left their feminist sympathies ignored. This has left a lacunae in dramatic criticism. Taking, into account India’s deeply entrenched patriarchal culture, we cannot help feeling that an aspect of the above writers that threatens or challenges that patriarchy is ignored not by oversight or critical obtuseness. Rather the obvious conclusion is that there is yet another example of the gaps, lacunae and silences in the literary and cultural history that have worked against the interests of women. It is such silences and gaps that feminist criticism addresses. Critical alertness is needed not merely to reveal the misogyny at work in the production and reception of literature but also to highlight the positive images of women in literature as well as theatre cinema and other media.
The three chosen playwrights were studied against the backdrop of theatre history, where misogyny was traced as a persistent sentiment. A brief glance at successive periods of western drama was followed by a look at the history of Indian drama to establish the fact that drama has always been a patriarchal discourse, and that with few exceptions it has expressed sexist values and prejudices. Through absence of women on the stage, through misrepresentation of the female gender and the use of language that is phallocentric to the core, theatre has acted for long as an ideological apparatus of patriarchy.

The critique of the chosen plays of Tagore, Karnad and Tendulkar has shown how these three are linked together by a shared respect for women, and a deep concern at the way Indian civilization has treated women for ages. Several of the plays discussed are named after women protagonists and all of them escape stereotyping. All the three dramatists, as we have seen entertained and projected a very strong critique of patriarchy and a concept of women which was at variance with the prevailing ideology of gender. Thus in their hands, the theatre becomes a medium to question and challenge the traditional forms of representation that have repressed woman as subject. However among themselves they differ in their idea of gender relations and woman's place in society. While all of them have drawn positive images of women, these images differ, according to the aspect of woman's personality or experience that each of them valorized or wished to draw attention to. This difference is also
determined or coloured by the temperament and personal and social experiences of each of the playwrights. Tagore, poet and mystic projects the greatness of woman's soul that can make her a perfect partner of man and a great spiritual force and agent of renewal of society. Convinced that the oppositional mode of gender was neither absolute nor unavoidable, Tagore envisions a restructuring of society on the basis of complimentarity and cooperation between men and women.

Tagore was much ahead of his time in his perception of gender oppression in relation to other oppressions like caste. He gave centre stage to the marginalized characters like beggar maids or untouchable women. Tagore owed his vision to his idealistic, poetic temperament which was nurtured by the time and place that saw the development of his talents. Bengal was in the forefront of social reforms and the very air the young boy breathed was redolent with ideas of freedom and dissatisfaction with decadent social and religious practices. He happened to be fortunate in his family as well. The Tagores were quick to champion the cause of intellectual, social and religious freedom, and also to uphold the intrinsic worth of all human beings. As Tagore has said about his family, "We were ostracized because of our heterodox opinion about religion, and therefore we enjoyed the freedom of the outcast. We had to build our own world with our own thoughts and energy of mind. We had to build it from the foundation, and therefore had to seek the foundation that was firm". Naturally Tagore had an unfettered upbringing which saw the reality of human life and experience without the bias handed down by a patriarchal culture.
Girish Karnad takes up an aspect of woman that has been suppressed or dreaded by patriarchal culture — female sexuality. Indian attitude to female sexuality has been negative. While idealisation of woman as Devi or goddess and also the near deification of mother are part of our culture, there has been no willingness to look squarely at the fact that a woman's sexuality is an important part of her personality. In India women have been traditionally perceived as existing to gratify male sexual desire, and to give men children and thus to perpetuate the race. It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of Indian women marry, rear children, and live their lives of commitment and responsibility and never experience sexual pleasure. Arundhati Roy's recent novel *God of Small Things* makes this point. She shows the community in which the novel is set taking for granted a man's pre-marital and extra-marital affairs as natural gratification of a "Man's need". But when a young divorced woman has a physical relationship with a young man the result is tragic and the cruel punishment meted out is poignantly described in the novel. It is this aspect of Indian culture that Karnad challenges. He has presented his heroine as young women who break away from the sexual codes inscribed in society. Indian society perceives woman as mother or wife and mistress always existing for the gratification of man's needs, emotional and sexual. Woman as subject with strong sexual drives, and seeking gratification for these and being thus empowered is a new idea in Indian theatre.
Karnad's focusing of attention on sexuality is the result of his awareness that human life and experience are not complete if this important aspect a human personality is ungratified. Bhagavata's blessing in Hayavadana "May you be successful in your search for completeness" is very much the theme of Karnad's plays that have been discussed.

Karnad's bold step projecting female sexuality has been the result of certain influences. One of them is the impact of feminism felt in India in recent years. But a far more significant factor has been his own unorthodox familial background. His mother's courage and determination in walking out of the straitjacket that Brahmanical Hinduism imposes on a widow has had a lasting effect on the son's understanding of the role the female gender in Indian patriarchal establishment. His use of the medium of folk-art has also been extremely useful in his purpose of challenging patriarchy's suppression of female desire. Folk-art is often subversive and the themes that folk-lore handles show a more direct and frank handling of female sexuality. But this blend of folk elements, myths, supernatural paraphernalia together with anti-realistic techniques we have already seen take the edge off Karnad's presentation of female sexuality. Had he presented Padmini and Rani in a more realistic or naturalistic plot, it would have elicited greater attention from the public and from critics. Karnad also draws attention to the desirability of a female utterance, a female narrative coming to offset the effects of male-authored texts with their negative construction of female identity within the repressive patriarchal system of
language. In him we find a subdued form of the idea, later powerfully articulated by French feminists that a new language wrung out of women’s libidinal forces can bring about a ‘new language’ which will oppose the repressive phallic order of social meaning.

Vijay Tendulkar is unlike Tagore and Karnad in that he is an arch realist. His background and career as a journalist long strengthened his concern with the realistic representation of the life of the cities. Without flinching, Tendulkar looks directly at the social reality of Indian urban life, its middle-class, its slum-dwellers, its down-and-outs and highlights various gender and social issues. His plays sharpen our perception of social reality and give us an understanding of the ways in which society works to the disadvantage of women.

Tendulkar’s method is direct bold and blunt. He locates his women characters in the everyday setting of the middle class and lower strata of suburban of life. He rips the veil off the sacred institution of marriage and projects woman as victim of exploitation both within and outside marriage. But Tendulkar does not leave off with the depiction of woman as victim. In many cases he shows how the tables are turned and how women can use subversive strategies for her self-defence and survival. There we find a surprising strength in women who appear to be weak and docile and submissive. As a result many a stereotypical image of woman falls and shatters in Tendulkar’s hands. The message he conveys is that woman can
choose not to be the victim, that there must be a will which enables a woman to resist the oppression that is meted out her. The hidden, unsuspected strength of a Lakshmi to reduce a violent and coarse bully like Sakharam to helpless dependence, the courage of a Rama to try to satisfy the yearning of her soul and body for a child, the quiet determination of a Sarita to go on with her marriage on her terms and with no illusions, and the indictment of Indian society's hypocrisy and double standard by Leela Banare make very significant contribution to an attack against patriarchy. By projecting these woman characters on the stage, Tendulkar helps to construct 'Woman' as a sign in a way different from patriarchy's construction of the female gender.

The implications of this study go beyond the boundaries of literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism is, as has been emphasized earlier, political in its motivation and thrust. Therefore this critical analysis of three male playwrights of India can contribute to an altered perception of the reality of women and their experiences. 'Feminist critique', is the term that Elaine Showalter gives to the work of women critics examining the writings of men. This type of criticism has often given rise to negative images of women. But sometimes such investigation also yields extremely encouraging findings when man-authored texts give positive images of women. This study has been of that category. Such a discovery can enhance woman's self-image and actually severe as a powerful weapon in our struggle for gender justice. In the on-going efforts of Indian women to
emerge from age-old subordination and oppression the works of these playwrights can be of great encouragement and help. The immense prestige, popularity and stature of the authors discussed ensures that their views on women will be listened to, provided criticism draws attention to them. In India the constitutional and legal guarantees of equality of gender have not produced any dent on patriarchy. The devaluation of women continues in all its hydra-headed manifestation. The institution of dowry, dowry deaths, rape of women particularity of dalit women, the diminishing ratio of women against men, due to the prevalence of female infanticide and foeticide all go to prove that India is still unashamedly fostering an androcentric culture of a virulent nature. What constitutional and legal methods have failed to achieve can be achieved by a shift in the outlook of the people. In this, literature and theatre, performing arts and media have a great part to play. Among these it is literary texts, including dramatic texts that occupy a prime position. For literature is not just a reflection of reality and of life. On the otherhand by representing reality it gives us our sense of reality. Many things that we consider "natural" are perceived to be so because of the values we imbibe from cultural representation. Our perception of reality is shaped largely by our systems of representation, and chief of these is language and literature. Literature is the most prestigious form of representation. And feminist criticism recognizes the fact that it is a highly influential cultural practice and as such is involved in producing the meanings and values that lock women into inequality, rather than merely holding a mirror to the already existing reality of women’s lives. So women
in India who aspire to break away from the confines of a rigorous of patriarchy, and all those who sympathize with the cause of women must look towards literature and cultural representations, alertly so that what is helpful for the cause and what hampers it can be separated.

Drama makes its appeal in two ways as literature and as performance. In both ways it has the capacity to influence public opinion. The theatre, as Shaw pointed out long ago, is “where two or three are gathered” and is therefore uniquely placed for the dissemination of new ideas and the dissection and discarding of obsolete ideas. In India theatre has been able to reach out to a vast public not always directly but through the cinema which has tremendous mass audiences. This is because cinema borrows ideas projected by drama. A positive empowering representation of woman and a more just and healthy gender relationship on the stage will be passed on to the general public with all its stratification. Hence the dramatists discussed need to be acclaimed from this point of view of social restructuring. The critical lacuna has to be correlated and awareness of their contribution to a new understanding of man-woman relationship in the family as well as the community at large has to be inculcated.

The theatre has recently become a powerful medium in the hands of Western feminists. Women writers have presented several powerful plays that try to sweep away stereotypical images and all false images of women that have been foisted on the audiences through main-stream drama.
Criticism has not lagged behind, and as a result we have a number of excellent critical assessment of the newly born "feminist-theatre". Feminist critics of the theatre have also restored from oblivion a tradition of women dramatists and their efforts in different periods of the past to offset the misrepresentation of their gender on the stage and to expose the reality of the social oppression that women have suffered. In contemporary Indian theatre there is no woman writer of any standing. We have not produced a major woman playwright, let alone formed a feminist theatre. This puts the onus of championing the woman's cause on playwrights like Tagore, Karnad and Tendulkar. Of these, Karnad and Tendulkar are at the peak of their powers and can look forward to many more years of creativity. An appreciative critical elucidation of the aspects of their works discussed can inspire them to greater creative output that can help society. Tagore though dead lives in our minds. But it is as the poet of Gitanjali, as the educationist who founded Shantiniketan, and as a great mystic that we remember and revere him. Many people do not even know that Tagore wrote plays. Criticism, by dwelling on the symbolism of Tagore's plays, and by discussion of their stage-worthiness or otherwise has not been very helpful in removing this ignorance.

Delivering the key-note address at a seminar organised to commonorate the 125th birthday of Tagore, Sasikumar Das denounced the lack of interest taken by Indians in this great son of India. His words, spoken in frustration still ring with truth and deserve to be quoted in full.
Barring a few, Tagore is to most only a symbol of cultural pride or pretensions, a piece of decoration and for decoration. Tagore the poet, musician and painter, Tagore the critic, dramatist, translator, educationist and social thinker - all get blurred and what emerges is a vague and distorted apparition, a shadow without substance, a poet who used long words and had a long beard. And outside the Bengali-speaking area Tagore is still known only through a few English translations... as a poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. ... A life of eighty years of incessant creative activity that was Tagore's is so easily summed up in a few clever and sophisticated phrases and that too only when he is remembered on occasions.³

A Bengali poet once wrote in deep pain, addressing Tagore, "Tumi Shudhu Panchishe baishakh ar baishe shraban, you are only a birth anniversary and petrified figure, a venerable one, a Gurudev, but cold and mummified.

It is time to revive Tagor's work and to draw on his revolutionary ideas. The relevance of Tagore's dramatic themes to what is happening in India today has to be shown. When rape and assault on tribal women is on the increase with no effective check from anywhere, Tagore's respect for the "untouchable" women must be projected through staging of his plays. Even in contemporary politics where the greater representation of women
remains as idea and a promise, Tagore's powerful portrayal of Chitra and Queen Sumitra when made known to women, can galvanize them. Karnad and Tendulkar are taught in college and Universities. But their plays should be made accessible to the less privileged Indian public. While popular culture and its forms still cling to the age-old stereotypes of weak or wanton women, the reality of woman as perceived by these men playwrights can have a corrective force. Constructing a positive identity for woman is necessary to contest the internalization of degrading images prevalent in the mainstream culture, and to produce political group consciousness and activism. Seminars and small theatre groups and play reading sessions can do a lot to arouse Indian consciousness on gender justice and achieve what fifty years of independence and all the mechanisms of law enforcement have not been able to do. Literary criticism has a great part to play in this. A great collaboration between writers and critics is called for in this critical time of our nation’s history. Eliot pointed out that the function of criticism is the elucidation of a work of art and the correction of taste". Feminist literary criticism would go beyond the aesthetic dimension and add an ethical component to this. The function of criticism we would urge, is the elucidation of a work of art and the correction of taste as well as faulty perception of reality, especially reality involving gender relations. This study of three major Indian playwrights is presented as a small attempt in this direction.
END NOTES


2 Ibid 4.

2 Girish Karnad "Hayavadana" Five Plays.

3 Sisi Kumar Das, Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenge of Today ed Rhudeb Chowduri and K.G. Subramaniyam (Shimla Institute of Advanced Study 1988) 3.
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