CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

The awareness that institutions of culture are not neutral or unbiased but steeped in ideology was first powerfully urged by Marxist criticism. And ideology itself came to be redefined as something more than consciously held system of belief, something that embraces the way we perceive reality, and as such pervades and permeates our lives. Indeed Althusser had this understanding of the scope and depth of the term when he said that "We live and move and have our being in ideology". Feminist criticism, making use of such insights, has pointed out that literary texts have served and continue to serve as "ideological apparatus", legitimizing and perpetuating the systems and values of the ideology, patriarchy. Since literature and theatre are seen as social constructs, feminist criticism insists on scrutinizing them for bias and distortion of reality in their representation of women and women's experiences. Since this present work brings to the study of Indian drama principles of feminist literary criticism, it would be necessary to state very briefly the sense in which terms like 'Patriarchy' and 'feminism' are used here. 'Patriarchy' is the term applied to the 'pervasive and self-sustaining structures of power by which women's interests are always subordinated to men'. It is the system which privileges the male and treats women as 'the second sex' a term that Simone de Beauvoir gave wide currency to. Feminism is the result of the realisation that women are subordinated, oppressed and devalued in diverse ways and for no reason other than that they are women.
"Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, sexual, political and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women’s position as outside the dominant male discourse".¹

Feminism is political, in the sense that it seeks to alter the power relations in society — the power underlying gender relations. When feminism entered the world of academia and revealed the sexism embedded in the very source of knowledge the academic discipline known as Women’s Studies came into being. Women’s Studies transformed academic disciplines by exposing the androcentric bias in them. This bias, it was found, had caused the marginalisation and total disappearance of women from fields such as History and Economics. Literature when subjected to the scrutiny of feminist critics was shown to be guilty of gross misrepresentation of women. Misogyny was seen to be an established literary convention.

Feminist literary criticism was born within the context of academic studies when Mary Ellman started reviewing male authored texts in her literature classes with her students. The process resulted in the book *Thinking About Women* (1968). Not long after that came Kate Millett’s highly polemical *Sexual Politics* (1971) which took to pieces works by male authored and exposed the deeply ingrained sexist bias in them. Feminist criticism now began increasingly to address itself to male authorised texts bringing new critical tools for their evaluation. The results of this engagement of feminist literary criticism with the acknowledged masterpieces of literature have given rise to what Adreine Rich calls "re-
vision" of these texts. Not only does this re-vision bring to light the prejudices, the false representation of women, and the overt and covert expressions of misogyny, but sometimes reveals positive images of women as well. Such surprising results of feminist enquiry, though rare are uplifting for women and invaluable for their cause. These positive images of female experience and qualities can be used to raise women's self-esteem and to lend authority to their political demand.

It was after sharpening its tools on the genre of fiction that feminist literary criticism came to the scrutiny of theatre. In theatre study critics have now isolated different areas such as drama as literature, theatre history, theory, and practice. In all these feminist criticism has made significant contribution. The present study belongs to the first category namely critique of dramatic texts. Three male dramatists of Indian theatre are taken up for study — Rabindranath Tagore, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar. Their selected plays are studied from the point of view of the representation of women and female experience. The repeated appearance of positive images of women in these is a striking exception to the general misogyny in the construction of "woman" in Indian literature and cultural artefacts. For these three dramatists have either depicted women as independent, intelligent and even heroic or drawn attention to the way patriarchal systems victimize women driving them to all kinds of strategies of subversion and survival. What they give is an alternate perception of woman that does not conform to the construction of gender in patriarchy.
This calls for special critical attention because of the highly phallocentric culture in which all the three of them lived and wrote. Besides, the theatre itself has been down the ages a site for phallocentric values. With a few exceptions here and there theatre history is a record of misogyny in many forms — absence of women from the stage, exclusion of women playwrights from the tradition, the false ‘construction’ of women, misogynistic images identified as "the Bitch, the witch, the vamp and the Virgin/Goddess".

In order to evaluate the pro-woman drama of Tagore, Karnad and Tendulkar, it is necessary to take a backward glance at theatre history and have a quick over-view of the depiction of women in the various periods of drama, Western and Indian. Seeing them in perspective will enable us to realize how important their contribution can be to women’s battle against distorted representation in literature, art and the media, as well as oppressive social codes prescribed by patriarchy. For, one of the assumptions of which this study rests is the theatre’s power to influence and shape public opinion. Drama has always been recognized as an effective means of social criticism and the vibrant periods in drama have been when, in addition to entertainment, plays afforded food for thought and correction of social evil.

The beginning of Western dramatic tradition has been traced to the Dionysian festivals of ancient Greece. The chorus that danced through the town singing dithyrambs was composed of both men and women. But towards the fifth century BC when the dithyrambs had evolved into tragedy
and the three brilliant tragic writers of ancient Greece — Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides - and their counterpart in comedy, Aristophanes, were taking Greek drama to great heights, women had already disappeared from these performances. Feminist scholarship has been engaged in tracing the reason for the disappearance. Nancy Hartsock in her book *Money, Sex and Power*, offers an explanation. She argues that the Greeks defined the household as a private apolitical space quite distinct from the public political space restricted to men. Women were confined to the private sphere or the domestic space. In this domestic space labour and bodily needs were dominant, whereas the masculine area was characterized by political debate, activities of the intellect or the Government. It is their separation of the private and the public spheres — a legacy that to this day has been working against the welfare and interests of women — that pushed women out of the Dionysian worship when it had become crystallized into tragedy performed on stage before the public.³

In addition to thus confining women to the house as per the explicitly stated laws of Solon, the ancient Greeks developed a cultural code prescribing gender role. The sanction for what became oppressive social restrictions came from the sacred myths of Greece. As sue - Ellen care has pointed out,

This history of the gods explains why genders are opposite, locked in conflict, and why the male gender must defeat the female. The myth of the primeval goddess and earth mother
Gaia is a story of the dangers of the womb. In the end Zeus is victorious. He swallows his wife, Metis, in order to gain her power of reproduction and then gives birth to Athena. Athena represents the end of the dangers of the womb, for she has no mother (breaking the maternal line and subverting the identification with her own sex), has no sexuality (she remains a virgin), defeats the Amazons, allies herself with the reign of Zeus and Apollo, and thereby brings order to Athens.  

It is this goddess Athena that pronounces the most damaging judgement against women in the play *Oresteia* which Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett describe as ‘the mythical rendering of patriarchal take-over’. This trilogy of Aeschylus is considered to be the central text of misogyny. Much of this misogyny finds expression in the choric utterances, especially in the first part of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*. The elders of Athens who constitute the chorus bewail the misfortunes of Agamemnon, who had to go and fight a war because of a promiscuous woman Helen. Helen is projected 'as the cause of all ruin. It was this archetypal destructiveness of Helen that Marlow was later to express in the immortal lines, "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships / And burned the topless towers of Ilium?" Incidentally archaeology in the turn of the century has urged the idea that the Trojan war was one of the trade wars common in that period, but myth must attribute it to a woman. The murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra is again lamented by the chorus as the destructiveness of the female.
It is however in *The Eumenides*, the last part of the trilogy that misogyny reaches its peak. Orestes, the son of Agamemnon is being chased by the avenging Furies for the murder of his mother Clytemnestra. Athena intervenes and during the trial of Orestes for the crime of matricide she decrees that Orestes is not guilty. Her justification for this is that the mother is not the parent but the nurse of the child. This public rationalisation of misogyny condemned women to an even more subservient role than before. In the history of drama, however, this play is a great classic of the canon enjoying an elevated position and it is hailed as the dramatization of the so-called beginnings of democracy, and of the new order of civilisation which created the Western tradition of reason and fair play. Feminist scholars find this ironic. When in the conclusion of the play Athena drives the avenging furies to a distant, secluded cave and converts them into the Eumenides or the 'benevolent ones', the nails are driven into the disempowerment of women. The reduction of women to subservience was further achieved by the employment of men to act female roles.

Though the plays of Sophocles are marked by a shifting of emphasis from the gods to man, misogyny continues to be present even in them. Writing in the golden age of Pericles, Sophocles was the great spokesman of humanism. Hamlet's famous rhapsody "what a fine piece of work is man!" is said to be taken almost entirely from Sophocles. Yet even Sophocles upholds the sexist values of his society. In this play *Antigone* patriarchal authority is represented by Creon, king of Corinth. Antigone who, defying the decree of the king buries her brother, is presented as violating
patriarchal norms. The Chorus predicts her doom for such violation. In Ismene, Antigone's sister, Sophocles presents the ideal code of conduct expected of woman.

Euripides, the third of the great greek masters of tragic drama wrote during the bitterness and disillusionment of the Peleponesian War. He was an atheist and realist, and as such disliked by many of his contemporaries. Feminists have now critiqued his plays and found them full of false images of women. Euripides's women include Alcestis who consents to sacrifice her own life to save her husband's and Electra, presented as a vamp, nurturing for years bitter hatred and thirst for revenge. Aristophane's comedy Lysistrata has aroused a lot of interest in recent times. This play in which women end a war by denying sexual favours to their husbands is seen as a misogynistic satire on female sexuality. A feminist reader identifying with her gender, finds herself reading against this text, for she discovers that this play, with burlesque jokes about women, portraying them as sex-objects, and insulting their personhood is meant only for male readers and audience.

Greek drama, in short, projected an image of women that was shaped by patriarchal prescriptions. The texts are strongly coded with phallocentric values. The sum and substances of the code is that man has complete authority over woman who has to be put in her proper place, which is the domestic sphere. Hence Agamemnon who rapes Cassandra and sacrifices Iphiginea is not blamed for any of this. But women who transgressed the bounds set by patriarchy like Clytemnestra, Pheadra, Media or Antigone,
are punished. The dramatization of the rape and the mutilation of Philomele (her tongue was cut out by her brother-in-law, the rapist) is a metaphorical representation of the silencing of women. This silencing of woman was a legacy that Greek theatre bequeathed to Western drama in general.

However some critics have pointed out that the depiction of women on the Greek stage is powerful. Wondering about the forceful presence of a Clytemnestra or a Medea on the stage F.L. Lucas writes:

It remains a strange and almost inexplicable fact that in Athena's city, where women were kept in almost Oriental suppression as odalisques or drudges, the stage should yet have produced figures like Clytemnestra and Cassandra, and Atossa and Antigone, Pheadra and Medea, and all other heroines who dominate play after play of the "misogynist" Euripides. But the paradox of this world where in real life a respectable woman could hardly show her face alone in the street and yet on the stage woman equals or surpasses man has never been satisfactorily explained. In modern tragedy the same predominance exists.⁵

But as we have seen these women characters though allowed to appear bold and defiant and heroic for a while are eventually given the punishment they deserve. Their death is then shown as a necessary step to restore order and root out the evil of the deviant woman. Clytemnestra is
murdered by her own son and it is not even regarded as the killing of a parent by a son, an act morally and legally reprehensible. Moreover in answer to Lucas one can cite the gap that paradoxically exists between fictional portrayals of woman in different periods and genres of literature and their actual denigration and devaluation in real life of the corresponding periods. For instance commenting on Trevelyan's remark that Shakespeare's women do not seem 'wanting in personality and character', Virginia Woolf writes in her, *A Room of One's Own*:

Professor Trevelyan is speaking no more than the truth when he remarks that Shakespeare's women do not seem wanting in personality and character. Not being a historian, one might go even further and say that women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time. Indeed if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance, very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme, as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact, as professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room.6

The Peleponesian War brought about the end of Athenian supremacy and the death of Greek tragedy. Rome tried to take its place and the two writers of comedy that Rome produced were Plautus and Terence - two
playwrights responsible for some of the stereotypes of women that persist in comedy to this day. These are the meek and helpless maiden, the shrew and the Virago as well as the wife that henpecks her husband. When Roman civilization was in ruin and Roman theatre in decay, it took centuries for drama to come up in Europe. This happened after the Dark Ages when in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Gothic cathedrals rose towering in the sky and a strange mixture of religious plays spread from the churchyard to the market place. Miracle plays, dealing with the central myths of Christian view of man and human history came to be written and acted during this period. But the church, struggling hard to establish a fully celibate priesthood, urged the clergy to shun "The two legged she beast" woman. Woman was perceived as a voluntary sexual snare engaged by the devil, and moralists started restraining women from "Seeing and being seen". Hence these plays were saturated with misogyny. As Allardyce Nicoll has pointed out in his History of British Drama, not even the adoration of Virgin Mary could stop woman from being mocked and despised on the stage. The medieval play The Deluge, depicting the biblical story of the Great Flood pays considerable attention to the depiction of Noah’s wife as a shrew and a gossip, who is a plague on the life of the great patriarch and has to be beaten into submission. As the Morality Plays evolved characters were abstractions such as Goodness, Kindness, Good Deeds etc. Women were further denigrated and the female gender was located within the context of sexuality. The blame of male sexuality’s transgressions was traced to women who, it was alleged, instigated men. Even metaphorical representation of women in the plays of this period
became charged with misogyny. As the secularisation of drama gradually took place and a new genre called *The Interlude* came into being there was greater scope for playwrights to indulge in misogynistic representation of women. John Heywood's *The Fours P's* does this with great wit and sophistication. It tells the story of four professionals — the Palmer, the Pedlar, the Pardoner and the Pothecary — entering on a wager as to who can tell the greatest lie. Every body tries hard to invent falsehood but the Pedlar carries the prize with his assertion that in all his experience with women he had never seen a woman "out of temper".

In Elizabethan time theatre flourished. Drawing on the splendour of the Renaissance spirit drama reflected a liberal humanism. But it was a humanism restricted to the male characters. Women were generally denigrated. Marlowe whose 'mighty line' gave splendid expression to the aspirations of Renaissance man had no understanding or sympathy for women. His women characters are shadowy figures and when one like Queen Isabel, wife of Edward II emerges as strong from the pages of history, she is portrayed by the dramatist as a vindictive and malicious wife. No blame rests on Edward's homosexual doting on his minions, humiliating and wounding the queen. Isabel takes a lover, Mortimer and together they have the king murdered but when her son assumes power she is imprisoned in a secluded tower. The lesson is that even queens survive only with the support of males.
Webster, unlike Marlow, has portrayed splendid women — the beautiful Duchess of Malfi and the bold Vittoria, nicknamed 'The White Devil'. Both are defiant of patriarchy either openly or secretly and try to assert their autonomy. Tragic consequences follow. The deviant woman in either case is destroyed and removed and patriarchy reasserts itself with renewed vigour. Among the Elizabethan, Jacobean playwrights, Shakespeare stands like a towering giant. In his knowledge of women's nature, and his respect for women's strength, courage, heroism, wit and loyalty, he is equally above his contemporaries. So impressive is his array of women characters that John Ruskin was moved to exclaim, "Shakespeare has no heroes, only heroines" Even feminist scholarship has paid homage to Shakespeare's women who are emancipated and self-sufficient and who evade stereotypes. Apart from Shakespeare's own genius, the spirit of the time is given credit for this. To the Renaissance spirit of intense questioning of many orthodoxies, was joined the protestant ideology that inaugurated new attitudes to women, and these together are reflected in the modernity of Shakespeare's treatment of women. But all this notwithstanding, feminist "re-visions" of Shakespeare's works trace a certain degree of misogyny in them. Taking into account not just the texts alone, but also theatrical practices some feminist critics detect strong but subtle anti-women messages in the plays where men in drag perform the female roles. For example they say that in As you like it, when Rosalind, played by a boy disguises herself as a boy and then pretends to play the part of a woman in a mock wooing scene opposite her lover Orlando, also performed, by a male
performer there is a display of male homoerotic flirtation. This kind of cross-gender casting occurs in other plays like *The Merchant of Venice*, *Cymbeline* and *Twelfth Night* notably in scenes of love and desire. Lisa Jardine in her book *Still Harping on Daughters* writes, "Whenever Shakespeare's female characters in the comedies draw attention to their own androgyny... the resulting eroticism is to be associated with their maleness rather than their femaleness." Taking into account the sexual implications of cross-gender casting (which escape mere analysis of text) Feminist theatre critic Sue-Ellen Case writes

These feminist critics (who praise Shakespeare for his portrayal of women) do not deconstruct the powerful misogyny found in the image of a man playing Lady Macheth and saying 'unsex me', nor do they account for the double negative in 'Twelfth Night' in which two boys court one another playing female characters.

A glaring point to note in connection with misogyny in the theatre is the fact that for centuries the theatrical achievements of women remained largely invisible. Stifling women's artistic and literary attempts and restricting their creativity to child bearing alone was one of the many ways in which women were controlled. Feminist literary historians have now unearthed works by many women playwrights in the past. A notable example is that of Hrotsvit Von Gandersheim, a woman who lived and wrote plays in the Middle ages but remained unknown for more than a
thousand years. Her plays upset the Terentian dramatic tradition and reversed the male dramatic perspective. In plays like *Dulcitius* she made women strong and resourceful and the laughter was directed against men. But Hrotsvit, and her work were pushed into oblivion because she did not have the stamina to resist patriarchal suppression and assert herself. But that kind of stamina was possessed to an extraordinary degree by the Restoration woman playwright Aphra Behn, the first woman to make a living by writing for the stage. She held her own in the world of Restoration theatre and was as popular as, if not more, than the men playwrights of the age like Etherege, Wycherly, and Congreve, she defended herself against charges of immorality and licentiousness, saying that she was only claiming for herself the freedom and the right that were ungrudgingly given to men dramatists. She thus created a role model of a woman who stood up for her rights and resolutely left her mark in an aggressively phallocentric arena. Literary historians, however, removed her name from the canon and had it not been for the committed research of feminist scholars Aphra Behn's works would have remained inaccessible. Recognizing her tremendous contribution to the cause of women Virginia Woolf wrote in the first half of this century " . here begins the freedom of mind .... for now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could say "I can make money by my pen.... All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behan for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds." 12

Restoration comedy known as Comedy of Manners was lewd and vulgar and openly inverted morals. Women were portrayed as frail, silly,
coquettish, frivolous sex-objects who enjoyed the debauched life of the libertine world. Sue-Ellen cose aptly comments:

The fiction of the female gender has been securely invested on real women. This age marked a transition from the Virgin goddess Athena and the Virgin Queen Elizabeth to the sex-goddess of the twentieth century. Either way women did not escape the role of merchandise in the world of male exchange.¹³

Restoration drama introduced female actresses on the stage. They appeared in bawdy, lustful roles, expressing loud hatred of Puritans who had for a few years before the Restoration ordered the closure of theaters. But reaction against this licentiousness was soon to manifest itself. A new comedy known as Sentimental Comedy used the stage as a moral platform. Women were portrayed as either extremely good and angelic, reforming straying men, or as corrupters of men and temptresses. Marriage as an institution was treated with great respect, and women’s place within marriage was defined as patient, long-suffering and infinitely loving and moral. Feminist critics find these plays priggish and moralising, the moral code being strict and oppressive for women and relaxed and open for men.

When the audience got a bit tired of this excessive moralizing and sentiment two writers of comedy appeared — Sheridan and Goldsmith — whose avowed aim was to bring back laughter to the stage. But the laughter was at the expense of women and comedic situations involved
women who were exposed as unfaithful, silly, shrewish or gossipy. Women, especially wives and mothers are portrayed as foolish, nagging and vulgar. The famous screen scene of *The School for Scandal* centres round the silliness of young Lady Teazle who is bored with her marriage to an old man. In Goldsmith's *She stoops to Conquer*, Mrs Handcastle is made the butt of laughter. She is ridiculed by her husband and fooled by her son Tony Lumpkin whom she adores.

The latter decades of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century saw the rise of great actors and actresses in England. But there was no improvement in the position of women in these plays. The values of patriarchal society internalized by the male writers are reflected in these plays. It is towards the end of the 19th century that things began to change. The genre known as realistic problem plays came to be popular and discussions of social issues marked them. The role of Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright was of paramount importance during the period. Bernard shaw, an ardent admirer of Ibsen, wrote *A Quintessence of Ibsenism* and wrote plays which shared many of the social concerns of Ibsen, chief of them being what came to be known as "the Woman Question". This period saw the rise of the first wave of feminism. Women had fought for and won a number of rights. The agitation for the right to vote was long and hard. The "Suffragette Movement" as it was called enjoyed support of a few men. George Bernard shaw was among them. His plays expressed his conviction that women are strong and autonomous and quite capable of knowing and getting what they want. In a number of
brilliantly witty plays he created powerful women characters - Major Barbara, Ann Whitely, Candida, St. Joen etc. *Mrs. Warren's Profession* Shaw’s moral study of the economics of prostitution is considered as one of the most revolutionary plays. Here he defends prostitutes and blames society, arguing that unless women are educated and self-reliant they will remain as victims in the male dominated society and will have no autonomous existence. Shaw’s prodigious dramatic output had a great impact on the society of the twentieth century. "What is a play but a clinical lecture on society?" he once asked. Shaw’s plays were more than clinical lectures on society. They were brilliant and practical acts performed on the stage and they had a powerful impact on society, especially when women’s rights and feminist issues were much debated. Shaw’s high opinion of women owed a great deal to his belief in Creative Evolution and the Life Force. He believed that Life Force used women as its agents, and therefore Shaw rejected as myth the romantic idea of woman being wooed and won by man.

Feminist scholars are not entirely happy with Shaw’s understanding of woman’s nature and role in society. According to them the idea of woman being driven by Life Force, is too deterministic, and deprives woman of the capacity to be autonomous. The portrayal of a woman asserting her independence and deciding what to do with her life was done by Ibsen. His play *A Doll’s House* is acclaimed by women today as the definitive feminist play. A transformation of Nora the heroine of the play from a domesticated doll to a strong independent emancipated female, capable of making an
autonomous decision to abandon her family and go out into the world in search of a true identity becomes the principal international symbol for woman’s emancipation. Ibsen’s contemporaries recognized *A Doll’s House* as the clearest and the most substantial expression on the Woman Question. Havelock Ellis was so impressed by the daring and integrity of Nora, Ibsen’s heroine, that he proclaimed that she held out nothing less than "the promise of a new social order".\(^1\) In *Pillars of Society*, acknowledged to be one of the most radically feminist works of the nineteenth century, Ibsen took the stereotypical figure of an old maid usually the butt of society’s ridicule, an object of pity and contempt and transformed her into a heroine. This heroine Lorna Hessel, rejected as unfit to be a wife, refuses to sacrifice herself to a surrogate family and escapes to the New World where she leads an independent authentic life.

With Ibsen drama took a huge leap forward in its commitment to social criticism. While in England Shaw, most notable among Ibsenite playwrights, kept up the commitment, on the continent it was Brecht who wrote powerful plays of great social relevance. Brecht’s women characters are evidence of their creator’s interest in and support of the woman’s cause. Grusha of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and the Mother in his play *Mother Courage* are both strong women who make autonomous decisions at crucial points in their lives. Brecht’s intention was to inspire a simple working class audience but he succeeded in moving an excited and international audience of intellectuals.
While the Western drama was thus moving towards great social relevance, the theatre in India was slowly establishing itself as an important cultural activity in the country. Drama actually has a very venerable and ancient tradition in India. An elaborate and detailed treatise on drama-\textit{Natyasastra} attributed to the sage Bharatha goes back to antiquity. According to this work Drama was the gift of Brahma himself to man. This faith in the divine origin of Drama gave to \textit{Natyasastra} the sanctity and importance of the sacred scriptures, and in fact, caused it to be regarded as the Fifth Veda. It has also had effect on the theme, conventions, performance and the site of performance of drama. Classical drama used as its medium Sanskrit, the sophisticated classical language of India. The themes of Drama came from the great epics, \textit{The Mahabharata} and \textit{The Ramayana}. Drama as in ancient Greece was performed as part of a great ritual and on important religious occasions. It became mandatory that it should end happily and not in tragedy.

Before we turn to some of the most celebrated Indian classical plays, it would be useful to understand how deeply the denigration of women is written into the sacred texts of India. It is these texts that serve as the bedrock of Indian culture, and have determined for ages the nature of gender-relation within the culture. There is a great deal of ambivalence in Hinduism's attitude to woman. Perceived as the energy or power absolutely essential for creation and sustenance of life woman is exalted to the position of a Goddes or \textit{Devi} and venerated. But this is only in the realm of abstract idea. In practice, woman is deemed worthy of and demanding absolute male
control. Female power is considered dangerous unless it is brought under male authority. Hindu goddesses are looked upon as benevolent only when their power is brought under the authority and control of their spouses. Thus, Kali, when uncontrolled is ferocious and dangerous, but when restrained and manipulated by Siva, she becomes a benevolent deity. This parading of gender relations among the gods was extended to the social relationship of marriage. The man became the husband and lord of woman and under his absolute control her power was reduced to harmlessness and benevolence. What is this power in the female that Indian Society, like other primitive societies, feared? The unambiguous answer is, sexuality. So, from the beginning every attempt was made to control and circumscribe female sexuality and bring it strictly within the bound of marriage and domesticity. Hindu texts repeatedly emphasis the point of woman's innate depravity. Woman is again and again represented as lacking in virtues and abounding in vices. The Rig Veda says, "With women, there can be no lesting friendship; hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women." (Rig Veda 10.95.15) Again, "Truly there is no friendship with women, and theirs are the hearts of hyenas. "(Satpads Brahman 11.5.1.9) "Falsehood, Vain boldness, craftiness, stupidity, impatience, greed, impurity, and harshness are natural qualities of in this life. Again Manu is an oft-quoted authority for this; "By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world; (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases, (the punishment for her sin). "(Manu 7 165)
With such enormous spiritual backing patriarchy reigned supreme in India. Hindu women’s religion was to look upon her husband as God, to hope for salvation through him, to be obedient to him in all things, never to desire independence, never to do anything except that which was approved by him. Thus a whole code of conduct was evolved that put women in strait-jacket. According to this Stridharma, the woman is defined primarily in relationship to her husband and her household. An ideal woman was presented as submissive, beautiful, loyal and totally dependent upon her husband. Chastity became the most important component of the wife’s behavior. A chaste wife was "Pathivritha", a worshipper of her husband and such a woman was flatteringly and cunningly credited with supernatural power. To be unchaste was to invite all kinds of dire consequences, curses and supernatural punishments. The life of the ‘Pathivritha’, allows a woman the opportunity to pursue three or four aims. Viz. ‘Dharma’, (religious duty), ‘Artha’, (wealth) and ‘kama’ (pleasure) within the bounds of marriage. By fulfilling this ideal role, a woman will be led along a path of righteous conduct and moral perfection which will lead her to ‘moksha’ or liberation.

Individual woman is placed at different scales of the social ladder according to her marital status. At the top is the married woman whose husband is alive and who has borne several children. She is called the auspicious woman (Sumangali). At the bottom of the scale is the widow, for, she is considered highly inauspicious. The spinsters, fall somewhere in the middle. The Indian concept of woman ‘Stri’ as in ‘Stribhava’ the inherent nature of women, is almost invariably negative. In religious terms, the only
answer to being a female is to become a perfect wife. Widows are victimised. They are forced to lead a servile life, devoid of dignity. They are given the choice of escaping from widowhood by committing 'Sati'. In this act the widow is burnt alive on her husband's funeral pyre. In doing so she can wipe out all her sins and she is worshipped as a 'devi'. Modern feminists renounce this act of self immolation of the widow as a 'sadorital' evidence of patriarchal atrocities against women.

The 'devadasi' or the courtesan was considered more auspicious than even the 'Sunangali' in ritual terms. Two reasons are given. First, her individual female powers are merged with those of the goddess. Second, she is dedicated to a divine husband who can never die. She is married to male deity and hence she can never lose her auspiciousness. She is called ever auspicious "Nitya Sumangali". The traditional repertoire of the 'devadesis' provides songs and dances for entertainment of the Lord. They had the duties for warding off inauspiciousness and creating a mood of 'Bhakti', by regular communication with the divine through worship. Gradually their roles dwindled into those of courtesans and concubines of the kings and the aristocrats.

Having discussed the central tenets of the Hindu world view in relation to women we can come back to the question of the representation of women in classical Indian drama and subsequent manifestation of culture. Natyasasthra, setting down in detail the conventions of Sanskrit drama stipulates that the inferiority of women should be maintained even on the stage. As a result, we find dramatic dialogue spoken by kings and other male characters in Sanskrit, whereas women and servants were made
to speak in 'Prakrit', the unrefined language of the masses. The themes of
the plays also reinforced the sexism underlying the Hindu view of life. This
will be made clear if we take a brief glance at some of the renowned plays
of Indian Classical repertoire.

The most celebrated Indian playwright of classical time is Kalidasa
and his acknowledged masterpiece Sakunthala has received the delighted
admiration of the entire world for its poetic and artistic beauty. These
beauties however do not cover the multitude of sins toward women that is
encoded within the play. The plot of Sakunthala centres on the infatuation
of King Dushyanda for the lovely maiden, Sakunthala, who has been
brought up in a hermitage. In her innocence and passion for Dushyanta,
Sakunthala agrees to a secret marriage after which the king returns to his
Kingdom promising to send for her later. Lovesick and pregnant,
Sakunthala waits for the summons to her husband. She waits long, for a
twist in the story tells us that the king has forgotten her as a result of a
curse that Sakunthala has drawn upon herself. However the imperatives of
the Classical Indian Theatre bring about a happy ending and Sakunthala
is united to her husband, King Dusyanda. But the interval of her ordeal and
anguish throws a great deal of light on the double-standard that governed
gender in India. The stigma of illegitimate pregnancy (illegitimate because
the marriage was secret) affects Sakunthala alone. Dushyanda is not in
anyway burdened with shame or guilt about this. The plight of a discarded
woman is most pathetically illustrated in the anguish of Sakunthala. Time
and time again we see variance of these themes acted out on the Indian
stage as well as in the reality of everyday life in India.
Another archetypal instance of this theme of discrimination and double-standard occurred in the masterpiece of the playwright Bhavabuti's *Uttara Ramacharitha* (the later history of Rama). In this play the dramatist traces the plight of Sita which bears a close resemblance to that of Sakunthala. The Archetype presented is that of the "Pathivritha", the meek, submissive, eternally obedient wife who never questions her husband's will, no matter how arbitrary, unethical and unjust it is. This archetypal image of Sita has been brandished over Indian womanhood down the ages. Indian women have been brain-washed from childhood do interiorize this impossible standard of wifely devotion. How impossible and debilitating to women the standard set by Sita is can be fully understood from this passage from *Ramayana* of Valmiki, the source for Bhavabuti's play. Here Sita is made to speak thus:

"For a woman it is not her father, her son, nor her mother, friends, nor her own self, but the husband, who in this world and the next is ever her sole means of salvation... I shall willingly dwell in the forest as formerly I inhabited the palace of my father, having no anxiety in the Three Worlds and reflecting only on my duties towards my Lord. Ever subject to thy will, docile, living like an ascetic in those honey-scented woodlands I shall be happy in the proximity, O Rama, O Illustrious Lord.

The subsequent story shows that Sita's happiness by the side of her Lord does not last for ever. She is abducted by Ravana, the King of Lanka. Subsequently rescued, Sita's chastity is doubted by King Rama and his
subjects and Sita has to undergo the humiliation of a fire ordeal. Innocence of the archetypal Indian woman was not enough. Patriarchy demanded unequivocal proof of chastity.

Classical Indian drama thus served as the ideological apparatus in the hands of the dominant philosophical systems of Indian culture at large. Women were represented in classical plays in a way that patriarchy demanded, a patriarchy that conferred limitless power on the male and made woman almost a slave.

Ancient Indian society however had some empowered women. These were the courtesans who were ‘Devadasis’ or vestal virgins wedded to a deity. Their position in society was quiet different from that of the virtuous housewife and ironically enough, they enjoyed prestige, power, wealth and influence. This social aspect of ancient India is reflected in a Sanskrit play of enduring popularity. *The Little Clay Cart*. This play which has found favour with the modern audiences has served to bridge the gulf of millennia and brings classical Indian drama nearer to twentieth country audiences. The play revolves round the love of Charudatta, a Brahmin merchant for a rich and beautiful courtesan, Vassathasena. True to the dictum that ‘true love never did run smooth’, Charudatta has to face great intrigue and opposition and threats and dangers. However the play ends happily. The relevance of *The Little Clay Cart* to the students of Indian Theatre is in its depiction of a free and empowered woman, Vasanthsena, who however is not altogether free from or secure against violence to women. The play indeed has a great social significance as it sheds light both on issues of cast and gender that permeated society in those days and still do.
The 10th century marks the end of the Sanskrit theatre as an active force in Indian art. After that, there was a lull in the dramatic field for centuries due to the various political developments in the country. In the medieval periods beginning around the fifteenth century drama emerged again in India through a dazzling array of village theatre forms. A major catalyst for the reemergence of theatre was the "Bhakti Cult" which believed that man may approach God directly rather than with the aid of rituals. The themes of these folk forms are basically idealistic.

The rejuvenation of the folk theatre under the influence of Bhakti Cult was followed by translation of Sanskrit plays into regional languages. At the same time, the establishment of British rule in the country marked a search for a new theatre. The desire of educated Indians to imitate the West, added to their urge for finding a new theatre sowed the seed of the modern movement. Bengal which has been the scene of a cultural Renaissance and social reforms in India gave the lead in the emergence of the theatre as well.

For the first time in the history of modern Indian Theatre, two comedies *Disguise* and *Love is the Best Doctor* were translated from English to Bengali by Lebedoff (a Russian) and Goloknath Das, and were staged in Calcutta in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The first Bengali Theatre (*The Hindu Theatre*) was established by Prasanna Kumar Tagore in 1831 and some English plays were also staged there. As a natural consequence of this dramatic development professional theatre flourished in various parts of the country. The *Parsi Natak Nandali*, the *Elphinstone Dramatic Club* and the *Victoria Natak Mandali* and many other theaters were soon established.
The pre-independent period witnessed the birth of several dramatic organisations like The Indian National Theatre established by Kamala Devi Chattapadhyaya and Ebrahim Alkazhi's *Theatre Unit*, and *The Bharathiya Natya Sangh* an other regional theatre. After independence, the Indian Theatre gained momentum with the establishment of bodies like The National School of Drama, The Sangeeth Natak Academy, The Adyar Kalakshetra in Madras and Dharpana in Ahmedabad.

A brief survey of Indian plays and playwrights could conveniently be divided into two broad sections ie. pre-independence phase and the post-independence phase. In the pre-independence phase there were major playwrights like Sri. Aurobindo, Kailasam, Harindranath Chattopadhya and Tagore. A cursory glance at the plays of these dramatists shows that their themes and plots were derived from the epics and myths, though in their hands the old, familiar stories and myths acquired new dimensions and significance.

Sri Aurobindo is one of the foremost writers of Indian English literature of this country. In this plays *Perseus The Deliverer, Vasavdutta, Rodogune, The Viziers of Passore* and so on, Aurobindo emphasises the enslavement of his country by foreign rule. A passionate love of freedom marks these plays. Another playwright T.P. Kailasam wrote several plays like *The Burden, The Purposes, Fulfilment. The Curse of Karna Keechaka* which seem to be motivated by a quest for greatness which he finds only in epic characters. Chattopadhyaya has to his credit a number of plays like the *The Window, The Parrot. The Evening Lamp* and so on in which he deals
with pressing social problems. Mention must be made of women writers like Bharati Sarabhai who wrote outstanding plays like *Two women* and *The Well of the People*. But unfortunately these plays are a strong endorsement of the traditional role that Indian Culture has always allotted to women.

Tagore, one of the chosen dramatists of this study belongs to the pre-independence group of dramatists. But he stands on a different pedestal from these writers. Not only did he bring to his dramas the tremendous wealth of his poetic imagination, but he also presented ideas that were revolutionary. His idealistic fervour for the creation of a just society made him put on the centre stage women and other marginalized characters. His extraordinary range of women character links him for the purposes of this study with two other playwrights separated from him by a few decades.

In the post-independence period, particularly in the last two or three decades, the tendency to introduce the element of contemporaneity is more evident. Among these playwrights the output of Asif Currimbboy can be singled out. He has written on various themes. His plays *The Captives*, *The Dissident M.L.A.* deal with contemporary politics. In plays like *The Doldrummers* he portrays the lives of ordinary people. Nizzim Ezekiel’s one of India’s leading contemporary poets wrote prominent plays such as *Nalini*, *A Marriage Poem* and *The Sleep Walkers* all of which deal with social problems. In fact regional theatres in post-independence India are preoccupied with the social or political questions. In Kerala, for example, the theatre was a very powerful means for putting across Communist ideology. It is with the advent of the cinema and its enormous popularity
with the masses that there was a diminishing in the appeal of the theatre in most parts of India. But in important cities like Calcutta, Mumbai and Chennai the theatre has been kept alive by a few committed playwrights and a small but enlightened audience.

Towards the second half of this century a veritable dramatic renaissance took place with Badal Sarcar, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar in the lead. Drama was re-defined as something not confined to the proscenium art theatre but as some thing that could be staged anywhere. With Badal Sarcar's alternate theatre using any available space, Karnad's daring, and Tendulkar's fierce anger, drama entered a new stage of social criticism. The recognition of drama's potential as a means of consciousness raising came about rapidly. Young dramatists, especially Karnad and Tendulkar proved themselves to be receptive to the wave of feminist thinking that was infiltrating into India from the West. In their own separate ways they showed evidence of this receptiveness in their plays.

When one studies the theatre of Karnad and Tendulkar, one is struck by the remarkably pro-woman stand that they have taken in their plays. Immediately the mind connects them to Tagore with the conclusions that emerge from the separate criticism of the three playwrights. The two living dramatists were good enough to grant me an interview at the beginning of this investigation and the transcript of the interviews is given as appendix to the study.
END NOTES


