INTRODUCTION

I

Place of women in Drama

In England drama had its origin in religion as in Greece and many other countries. It sprang from church service just as ancient Greek tragedy had sprung out of the ceremonial worship of Dionysus. In the beginning drama was resented by the church and all along the Dark Ages no record of any dramatic activity is present. Only in the ninth century there were tropes to ecclesiastical music and they sometimes assumed a dialogue form. Then came the miracle and the mystery plays which then gave rise to the interlude and from that the regular drama of the Elizabethan age took its origin.
Till very recently the concept of the imperative of gender has been absent from dramatic criticism, yet ironically the relationship between gender and drama has been a controversial issue from the very beginning of theatre.

Women were not allowed to perform on the stage in the miracles or the moralities, neither in the Greek drama nor in the Shakespeare’s times. It was not thought proper for her to appear in such a state in public. When female characters were to be enacted, they were performed by men dressed up as women. This was a direct outcome of social and political power being primarily in the hands of men, with concomitant taboos against women appearing in public, outside the confines of family life. Not much is known about the condition of women of those times. We do not have any written record as how they lived and how much real space was assigned to them. Like Virginia Woolfe, we can only puzzle over the question as to why no woman wrote a word of “that extra ordinary literature when every other man seemed capable of song or sonnet.” Woman it seems, had no recognized rights and her only purpose in life was to get married to the man her parents had chosen and thereafter her sole purpose was to bear children. She could not take on public roles in either politics or religion. It was believed that only men could communicate with Gods. She was officially excluded from theatre and from other such arts such as religious music. “In drama she was considered immoral if she
appeared on stage until recently the term ‘actress’ and ‘whore’ were considered to be almost ‘synonymous’
There were a few exceptions of course: women took part in folk drama and were involved in Commedia Dell’Arte family troupes of the Renaissance. One also finds record of the tenth century nun Hrosvitha.

Shakespeare with his extraordinary genius for portraying human behavior depicted women within a patriarchal system, but he also created women characters who in their richness, transcend the limitations of the time. His women transcended the role of the loving subservient wife. In fact they are just the opposite. Shakespeare gave his female characters more complex, in-depth personae than that of the subordinate wife. The most vital issue Shakespeare addressed in doing this was how these women identified with the dual roles of the loving, docile wife and the free-thinking, self-motivated individual. Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, “do not seem to be lacking in personality and character.” Paradoxically in real life her condition remained pitiable. “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance, practically she is completely insignificant. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in life she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell and was the property of her husband.” This paradox where woman could hardly-
step out of the house in life, whereas on the stage equal and ever surpass men has never been explained and remains a mystery.

On the stage, roles played by women in theatre (by young boys of course) could be typically categorized into one of these categories: ingénue (such as Shakespeare’s Ophelia) matriarch (such as Lady Macbeth) or servant (such as Nurse in Romeo and Juliet). These roles fitted the roles that women played in Elizabethan society. A woman had no legal power to herself and all the rights over her laid in either her father or her husband. This seems an odd juxtaposition considering that it was a female sitting on the throne. Except for Shakespeare, other playwrights viewed women solely as plot devices to lead support to the male lead. Very few women characters in Elizabethan drama exerted power, independence or free will and of those that did, most befell tragedy in the end such as John Webster’s Duchess of Malfi.

In 1660, when Charles II was restored to the English throne, one major reform he brought about was that he reopened the theatre. Influenced by what he had seen in the French court of Louis XIV, he allowed women to appear on the stage for the first time. This was the most important and groundbreaking innovations of the Restoration stage, opening the world of theatre not only for actresses, but for women as managers and playwrights as well.
This invasion of women on the stage was also because of non-availability of trained boy actors due to the banning of theatre. It was not without its repercussions though. Ironically this veritable line-up of actresses proved to be a veritable line-up of would-be mistresses for the upper class gentlemen. More Davis and Nell Gwyn even got so far as to become the mistresses of Charles II himself. It was reported that some other actresses could even have been spies. In fact in the turbulent British social world, an acting career became attractive to women whose main concern was the acquisition of a rich husband or a keeper. But they still received lesser pay than their male equivalents. The benefits did not stop at actresses. Many women took to managing the theatre companies with or after the death of their husbands. The Dorset Garden Theatre under the management of Lady Henrietta Maria Davenant was the most successful theatre company in London. Female playwrights too emerged that included Aphra Behn, Mary Pix, Catharine Trotter and Delariviere Manley.

In male written Restoration comedy, women were objectified. The new comedy of manners heavily featured almost stock characters, stereotyping women into few categories. But while the male playwrights did take into account the new station of women, it seems as if they didn’t quite know how to find the middle ground and in some cases, made the characters “almost bipolar in relation to each
other. In the Comedy of Manners, the chief characters are usually members of high society. “It tends to feature recurring types—the graceful young rake, the faithless wife, the deceived husband and perhaps a charming young heroine who is to be bestowed in the end to the rake.” An independent female character could be seen off and on, but she was almost balanced out by being so witty that she almost came across as bitter. In comedies ‘the newly enlightened woman’ also was mocked at.

The new roles for women in theatre however were not reflective of the new roles for women in society and culture. Women were still expected to live under the laws of their father or husband and women’s growing awareness of their limitations and their aspirations for more freedom in expression did not translate into a change of female legal status until the following century. Although philosophers like Hobbes were talking about self interest and individualistic rights, these philosophies very rarely made it to practice for the average Restoration woman. Playwrights like Catharine Trotter and Delariviere Manley did introduce strong intelligent heroines in their works. Aphra Behn is considered the first woman in England to make her living solely by writing. As a middle class widow, she turned to plays as a means to support herself and repay her debts. In *The Rover* she presented the most independent female character seen till that time and who still reads as an almost contemporary figure. Thus some
limitations notwithstanding, restoration theatre was a breakthrough for women as actresses, managers and playwrights.

In what is called the British Romantic era, the contribution of women as female playwrights, actors, translators and critics cannot be overlooked though it has often been marginalized. This was an age of prominent theatre women like Elizabeth Inchbald, Joanna Bailie, Sarah Siddons among others. Like Hannah Cowley whose comedy The Runaway in 1776, Haima More’s tragedy Percy in 1777 and Sophis Lee’s comedy The Chapter of Accidents in 1780 were all runaway successes. Also there was the rise of female controlled theatre spaces in the first four decades after 1800. Indeed the 1770s are particularly significant because there was a shift in perception of female actors as less sexually suspect.

In Victorian period there was a lot of discussion about the role of women both inside their homes and outside. This was what the Victorians called “the Woman Question”. The extension of franchise by the Reforms Bills of 1832 and 1867 stimulated discussion of women’s political rights. Although women in England did not get the right to vote until 1918, petitions to parliament advocating women’s suffrage were introduced as early as 1840s. Equally important was the agitation to allow married women to own and handle their own
property, which culminated in the passing of Married Women’s Property Acts (1870-1908)

The Industrial Revolution resulted in changes for women as well. Lower class women started working in factories and this new kind of labour and poverty that arose with the Industrial Revolution presented a challenge to traditional ideas of woman’s place. Ironically, Queen Victoria, the matriarch of the Victoria era, was no supporter of women’s rights issues. She symbolized Duty, Family and Propriety and those who did not convey these foundational principles of the times were denounced for their “mad, wicked folly.”

Women in Victorian Theatre had to be a monster and an angel both at the same time. In the Victorian era, the theatre was a way in which women could survive. It gave them the freedom to live their own lives. They did not have to subjugate themselves to a man or be at the mercy of their lovers. The greatest part about being on stage was the attention. In those days, women were meant to be seen and not heard. However when women were on stage, everyone listened. Sure, they were playing a part written by a male, but they had the power to convey those ideas in ways that people would listen. A great performance was measured by the silence of the audience or the sound of their weeping. This power that they held over their audience was both magical and frightening. Men often left a performance feeling
mixed emotions. On the one hand, they had been incredibly moved by the performance, even to the point of tears, on the other hand, it was a woman that had such control over them, and that was a frightening realization. After years of seeing men playing women roles, hearing a woman speak and watching her move, was shocking to most. Some actresses held such a commanding presence and got so involved in their characters that it led some critics to be uncomfortable. Max Beerbohm, one such critic, felt this uneasiness from Eleonora Duse, a popular actress of the time. As they saw these women act, they feared that gender roles and social codes were being jeopardized before their very eyes. Indeed, women were changing some standards. Many actresses chose not to marry or have children for the sake of their careers. Ellen Terry, one of the highest paid actresses of the time, said “I don’t see how you can rock the cradle, rule the world, and play Ophelia perfectly, all in the day’s work.” Those who did marry were expected to give up their lives on the stage and to be subject to their husband’s will. In a play called Merely Players, the heroine describes an actress’ marriage as marrying into a new role in a different kind of drama which is domestic life. Acting is a time consuming occupation, and sometimes it consumed the actress until she didn’t know where the character ended and she began. Women immersed themselves into their character with daring abandon. In the Victorian period, men were not the only ones cross-dressing. Women sometimes played male roles, usually by their own choice. They believed that male characters offered
a more challenging role and allowed them to expand their range. Men approved of this cross-dressing for artistic purposes, and liked it as long as they could see the woman inside the man. However, they drew the line when women closely resembled men. Men felt that women were denying their identity and femininity by totally immersing themselves into their character. These were just some of the problems that actresses had to endure in the Victorian period. As time went by, they began to exercise more control over their lives. Some even went on to own their own playhouses and write their own plays.

The twentieth century opened with the Edwardian period and the Georgian period. Many social and aesthetic changes were already marking the passing of the Victorian era. There were many educational reforms that increased literacy and the feminist movement gained ground. J.S. Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) had earlier swept the masses consciousness and became the bible of feminism. Mill had strongly advocated woman’s right to vote. As a result, woman’s suffrage societies sprang up all over Europe and the United States. The foundation of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies in London in 1897 intensified the agitation for Women’s suffrage in the parliament and outside. The English Prime Minister Asquith in 1917 hence, had to enfranchise women.
The fight for suffrage was the first step towards women's fight for equality and its triumph signified a step forward in the realisation of its goals. Next, feminists insisted that men and women are identical in capacities and responsibilities and also rejected the idea that there were distinct male and female sphere. What they demanded next was equality in the Church, state and family. In 1898 Gilman in her treatise *Women and Economics* voiced the opinion that house was nothing more than a prison that confined women and forced upon them the role of a servant. She believed that it was woman's economic dependence on men that created the chains of servitude. Freedom, she said, could come only if wives and daughters went out into the world to earn for themselves. Work, she believed was the "essential process of human life" and until women entered the field they would remain 'near-sighted', 'near-minded' and 'inferior'.

The twentieth century thus saw more women invading the universities, medical profession, law, engineering and other professions that were previously reserved for men. *The Natural Superiority of Women* became a best seller in 1953; it soon became clear that the woman's voice was not a voice in wilderness. A trend was soon gaining ground that everything a man can do, a woman can do better. Another major influence on literature of the twentieth century was World War II. After the war, a large number of women continued to work. But the emphasis still was on conventions whereby the domestic
maintenance was done by women and the structural maintenance by men. The horrors of the war and the utter meaninglessness of human existence was brilliantly expressed in a class of drama known as 'theatre of the absurd'. Then came the group of angry young men, and women writing was marginalized by this 'renaissance'.

However an important outcome of the twentieth century was the emergence of feminist theatre that was a direct result of the feminist movement. That it failed to be hugely popular was because it is categorized as being exclusively by, about and for women. Feminist theatre allows the audience to identify with the dramatic action through the shock of emotional and personal recognition and in the process implement a social change. Their goal therefore was not to entertain, but to improve the quality of life in the society. It sought to demythologize the myth that man is the universal representative of humanity and woman is the unnamed and the invisible. Gradually feminist theatre has grown in importance and its relevance has been positively viewed. But this development is slow. Traditional theatre, dominated by male characters, gives little thought to an accurate portrayal of the female experience.

Though some plays have major female roles, the fact that they focus on women does not necessarily mean that they provide an accurate and balanced picture of women. The first play to exhibit
feminist characteristics was perhaps Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. At the end of the play, Nora decides to leave her husband and children as she reaches the conclusion that the loss of self worth is not an acceptable price to pay. Her slamming of the door was a shock that was "heard around the world". To an audience in 1879, such feminist action was almost incomprehensible and consequently the play was banned in many countries. Interestingly, Nora continues to shock even the modern audiences.

In conclusion, feminist theatre is important for the simple fact that never before has there been a theatre movement led by women. It is important also because it presents truthful images of women and the women's experience through a growing body of drama which specifically focuses on women. Feminist literature in general and feminist theatre in particular has yet to realise their goals. But it has done a major job in raising consciousness in gender-related issues. It has also helped to demythologize the myths that had since ages helped patriarchy to extend its influence. And the first task before them today is to prevent patriarchs from getting away with their habitual tricks of silencing the opposition. Struggle over meaning of the sign is to be made.
In the second half of the twentieth Century, many different types of plays came up – the Kitchen sink drama, Neorealistic drama, Absurd drama, Comedy of menace, Dark Comedy, Drama of Cruelty, etc.

The new drama in England began with John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* which was an outstanding success and the date of the first night of the performance of the play, i.e. 8th May 1956, is recorded as a landmark in modern theatre. The hero was believed to be voicing the protest of the angry young men of the period. It was thought to reflect the contemporary frustrations of the youth of the fifties. The labour Government of 1945, the boom of a classless form of science and technology—all these had seemed to promise a post-war, class-free
Britain. But things did not reach the desired end. The labour Government soon fell, Atlee became an Earl and the Establishment could be seen refurbishing its image. All this naturally bred anger, depression and frustration. *Look Back in Anger* and other plays of the period were seen to be reflecting all this.

However in the 1950s and 1960s there was also tension with regard to sexual mores. The two world wars had a strong impact on the social and the economic sphere. The collapse of the war economy meant the incidence of unemployment on a mammoth scale. Another impact that the war had was not very apparent. It was successful in demytholizing the myth of established gender roles. With their men away in war, women also had to take up the role of the bread earner in addition to looking after the family. The men in the army, on the other hand, did all the jobs that in the peacetime would have been done by women. All this served to crumble the age old myth of the established gender roles whereby women were expected to stay inside their homes and men were expected to go out and earn. With this, a redefining and rejigging of the gender roles took place. As the war came to an end, the women were not willing to give up their jobs and refused to revert back to their homes.

A consciousness had already taken root in society with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* and J. S.
Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. This consciousness materialized in some achievements for women. Women got the right to vote, the right to abortion, the right to property etc. But much remained to be done. All the aspirations and frustrations of 1950s got reflected in the drama of the period. However, modern British drama does not focus on a single method. Because it has all the tensions and complexities of life of the working class in Britain in 50s and 60s, it is also called the “working class drama.”

The voice for the classless form of society, the anger and frustration of the period was noticed by the critics, but the tension between the sexes was largely overlooked. Viewing plays from this point of view, gives new insights into the meaning of the plays since “the gender of a character defines not only his or her biological characteristics, but also implies imaginative and social assumptions about her/his personality, power and place in the world.”

This thesis takes up selected plays of four playwrights of Modern British Drama to study the role of women characters in a sexist society. To study the women characters would require studying the men characters as well, in order to reflect on the relationship between the two. It seeks to see how much space has been given to women—whether they are central to the action or marginalized—how much freedom do they enjoy, how much are they able to define their
individual identity and how much say do they have in matters of vital importance. Seeing the plays in the light of questions asked by feminists in recent years can expand “horizons of meaningful aesthetic pleasure and the interpretative possibilities of plays”\textsuperscript{12} and in some case enable us to arrive at a more accurate understanding of how exactly how a particular play works.

John Osborne’s \textit{Look Back in Anger} brought him into prominence overnight. A better understanding of the play ensures once we see it not only as a play that talks of class struggle, but actually a play of war of sexes. In \textit{Dejavu}, a play that Osborne wrote much later, one would have expected Jimmy to have mellowed down a little, but he doesn’t. Only this time it is the daughter at the ironing board that symbolizes endless drudgery. He is even more prone to monologues and mounts extensive attacks on feminists and the likes.

Arnold Wesker is generally considered a writer of political action and his plays especially the \textit{Triology} is seen as a play of political struggle. This socialist play becomes more interesting when analyzed to see how much space has been accorded to women in this ambience of struggle for equality.

In Doris Lessing the tension between the two sexes becomes more pronounced and apparent. The female protagonist here finds the role of being a mother increasingly burdensome and alienating.
Caryl Churchill on her part, raises the pertinent feminist question as to what extent can the 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles be compartmentalized. She also has a combination of images of women from the 1950s/60s and a new representation of women. The female protagonist has liberated herself from attributes like dependence, and passivity. She seeks to achieve a mode of behaviour which is predominantly 'masculine'.

Two male and two female playwrights have been taken and the way the women characters are treated at the hands of the two is analyzed.
Notes


3. Woolfe, op.cit., p.43.

4. Ibid., p.43.


12. Ibid., p.7.