Chapter - V

The Philosophy of Creation In Modern Indian Theatre

The Woman – From The Nurturer Of The Familiar, To The Creation Of Mutations

Writing the feminine role: Classic Archetypes vs. Subaltern Histories This chapter will demonstrate how representations of women on stage have followed a changing path – from Classical Archetypes to the more detailed excavation of the quotidian aspects of daily life. It will also include the Changing Role of Indian Women working in Contemporary Theatre.

One of the critical lessons of any modernist formation is the constant and critical awareness of the discursive baggage a creator is carrying, and the ways in which we need to actively engage with it. This was a lesson that was set into motion through Alkazi, and then brought to some conclusion by Karanth. The modernist impulse is not about “bringing it alive,” but to know that bringing it alive requires both an understanding of formalized discursive discipline and active awareness of the informal and historical formations around us. In other words, Modernism, in order to successfully translate into an Indian environment, needed to mutate from itself (only then would it transform the past), as well as mutate the dimensions and limitations of the historical around us.

Modernism, in order to successfully translate itself in the Indian environment could not be a passive set of texts and knowledge. It had to actively engage with and transform itself, by incorporating the local practices and beliefs. It also had to transform the beliefs of the practitioners and the audiences around it. As a result, modernism transformed traditional beliefs and practices into a “metabolised”\textsuperscript{226} and lived series of practices. Modernism brought the traditional alive, and tradition made modernism thrive.

\textsuperscript{226} The chemical processes occurring within a living cell or organism that are necessary for the maintenance of life. In metabolism some substances are broken down to yield energy for vital processes while other substances, necessary for life, are synthesized.
and mutate Thus modernism in India moved beyond knowledge and acquired the status of an infection (which, to be fair, was the way it functioned where it originated. The virus was introduced by Alkazi, and mutated by Karanth – hence the argument that both institutionalized and made Modernism a self sustaining system, because of how they incorporated in its Indian existence an institutional equilibrium and a constitutive, yet alien, culturally vibrant disequilibrium) This did not mean that these two stalwarts were changing the fabric of society or ideology, as much as creating new perceptions - new ways of seeing.

The lesson that we carried from Modernism is a frightening awareness of the truth of where we were, a constant evaluation of who we were becoming when we created, and a sense of ideological and philosophical direction. However, it must be noted, that this freedom of Modernism was a transformation easily accepted by the cultural matrix in the case of the male director. For women, our key vectors of evaluation revolved around the gravitational force of our gender, and what it meant.

This section, then, is the journey of a discursive re-activation, driven by a Modernist impulse, of what femininity means both in terms of the historical chain in which Women directors fit, as well as in my own work on the existing templates of gender amongst so called traditionalist forms. Mutation is not a negative force – it combines two strangers into a new being and allows it to exist and engineer its own new forms – that is the essence of modernism. And, carrying the burden of gender, it is important to note that regardless of how far we may have come from conventional templates of femininity, a woman director can only mutate form through creation – a Modern woman director can only go beyond the clichés of nurturer and creator when she truly mutates the offspring and lets it become a revolution in the fabric of life of creation. This is not so horrifying when one remembers that modernism is the activation of nascent mutations and transformations in society and creative forms that are sustained by the knowledge that society and creative forms have found their truth in radical transformation and constant revaluation. This section, with its relook at femininity, politics, performance, gender and translation will show that, while philosophically we might create or hope for a series of sensations, the daily details sometimes remind us, in their realistic and
contingent banality, that we have to keep striving. Philosophy does not fail when the real world clutters us up with banality. On the contrary, it reminds us that we have a long way to go and that we should, regardless of funding, politics, critiques or frustrations, persist.

“What is a woman”, according to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is the essential formula through which women drive their quest towards identity formation. Of course, the ways in which this question is reached is dependent on the contextual forces available to women, the forces that do not facilitate answers as much as limit them. For instance, home science, nursing and motherhood were aspirational vectors, preventing any real answer to the question. When women got smart to this, and a range of other oppressive and limiting mappings created by society for the discovery of being, our discovery was political feminism. Similarly, in the representations of femininity, a clichéd army of masculine templates were available to us, completely unsatisfactory because they did not resonate with our being. This chapter documents these templates and also documents the challenging and transformations of these templates. This chapter should not be read as a “how women took control over representations” but how “through mutations, challenges, and destruction of such representations, women activated in their own practices the essence of Modernism”. This journey, though it talks about figures, creations, narratives and themes should not be read as a journey of awakening. What must be kept in mind is that what we created in the journey is a clearing of the baggage of what a woman director is, or what a woman character is. Creative men and women discovered the secret of Modern theatre and contemporary female practice, through this offloading of clichés forms of representation. It is not about escaping the dogma associated with our gender, but by showing that the “creation” and “nurturance” and “passivity” women are burdened with is really mutation, acceleration and active transformation – and there lies the truth of being, and the essence of Modernism for Indian Woman theatre professionals.

Jacques-Marie-Emile Lacan (1901 – 1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who made prominent contributions to psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literary theory. He gave yearly seminars, in Paris, from 1953 to 1981, mostly influencing France’s intellectuals in the 1960s and the 1970s, especially the post-structuralist philosophers. His interdisciplinary work is Freudian, featuring the unconscious, the castration complex, the ego; identification; and language as subjective perception, and thus he figures in critical theory, literary studies, twentieth-century French philosophy, and clinical psychoanalysis.
The failure of masculine domination to create an adequate and affirmative space for women, beyond cliché and submissiveness, should not be seen as evidence of our victimhood. The failure to express the "real woman" should be transformed into a critical tool of liberation, not as a sign of oppression. So when you read the discursive manifestations below, keep in mind that what is changing is not the manifestation (the character, the grant, the social acceptance), but the essential question is being answered. "What is a woman theatre director in India today?" is now clear – an active creator of aesthetic and cultural mutations that are not horrifying (as the name mutant might suggest) but challenging and new in ways that have never been imagined.

This chapter will focus on the inherited, assumed and created representations of women in post-independence Indian theatre. It will be discussed on two layers - the first will interrogate the image of women in the written text and the second aspect will involve the training of female actors, developing female characters, and writing stories from the repertoire of female daily experience by women directors. While most work done on the subject investigates theatre that explicitly frames itself as feminist or activist, there are elements of feminist theatre theory that this chapter works through. It is difficult to work as a woman in Indian theatre without becoming interested in what makes feminine experience different in India, and it is this difference that I will investigate.

In contemporary feminist theory in the West, what is called feminist theatre presumes political intervention on the part of the director, while what is called 'women's theatre' is seen as the poor cousin, less radical and less directed. Feminist theatre was written and directed by women, and was mostly informed by issues of political concern - unequal opportunities, lesbian rights, domestic issues, male domination, crèches for children, maternity rights etc.

---

228 The need to examine the work of women directors and practitioners as an independent area of exploration, is being done, but the body of references are fairly scanty and have not existed for long enough for it to merit an independent area of enquiry.
But all women involved in theatre did not view themselves as doing feminist theatre, and to name all theatre done by women as feminist theatre would definitely confuse the issues involved. 229

For me, then, anything named feminist theatre refers to the sort of experience that may not have found visibility until now. Because of this the specifics of that experience, whatever its contours might be, are in the process of being mapped. What does it mean to be a woman director? Does it indicate women in general – such as those who are acting their role within the conventional formulations - or does it suggest a group of women who are holding a certain political position within a performance, and their vision, and artistic choices? In my own work I often pick up plays that specifically relate to the questions I am asking myself as a woman. A woman director implies a certain amount of ghettosization - the simple fact that one is talking about women in theatre shows that it is an issue. It suggests that in some way we are different. Soon this will change, winds of change are already blowing, and the time has come when women directors will be regarded as people and artists working in a certain period and not as a representative of a gender.

The range and breadth of work done in these three decades by women directors, who, through their work, engendered fresh forms, structures and devices in an attempt to reconstitute new meanings and ways of seeing in their work. They have pushed the boundaries of a representational system, by critically interrogating and recreating its boundaries. This has created a subject position for women, where the familiar lines and signs are dissolved for a spectator in how to ‘read’ a play.

229 In contemporary feminist theory in the West, what is called feminist theatre presumes political intervention on the part of the director, while what is called ‘women’s theatre’ is seen the poor cousin, less radical and directed. Feminist theatre was written and directed by women, and was mostly informed by issues of political concern - unequal opportunities, lesbian rights, domestic issues, male domination, crèches for children, maternity rights etc. But all women involved in theatre did not view themselves as doing feminist theatre, and to name all theatre done by women as feminist theatre would definitely confuse the issues involved.
Representations of women

The image of women seen through the male gaze is contextualized within the discourse of Modern Indian sensibility and cannot be interpreted or analyzed through any essentialist or absolute framework. Up until the 70’s most of the representations of women on stage had been constructed and imagined through the eyes of men. These were male ideas of women which were based on their own concept of ‘the feminine’ (often these concepts were disavowed parts of the male ego). The intended audiences for these representations were indeed men, and thus confirmed their views about how women should be seen. Women were meant to be objects to-be-looked-at and sexually admired. Their presence on stage was one of mere artifice, artefacts whose only function was to capture the audience’s gaze. Even when women started representing themselves on stage, they could not free themselves from this perception of what constitutes an actress – a vacuously beautiful bimbo. Fortunately, certain women theatre directors and actors recognized that they did not relate to these representations, which seemed completely alien and unfamiliar to their own feminine history, daily contexts and inherited traditions.

Whether women were being represented as goddesses, or middle class housewives, their presence on stage was formulated through imagined ideals of femininity. Whether in the role of Shakuntala or Vasantsena, women enacted their

On film spectatorship ‘The male gaze’ Laura Mulvey (born August 15, 1941) was educated at St Hilda's College, Oxford. She is currently professor of film. Whilst these notes are concerned more generally with ‘the gaze’ in the mass media, the term originates in film theory and a brief discussion of its use in film theory is appropriate here. As Jonathan Schroeder notes, ‘Film has been called an instrument of the male gaze, producing representations of women, the good life, and sexual fantasy from a male point of view’ (Schroeder 1998, 208). The concept derives from a seminal article called ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ by Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist. It was published in 1975 and is one of the most widely cited andanthologized (though certainly not one of the most accessible) articles in the whole of contemporary film theory.

231 Most women directors chose plays and characters that relate to issues concerning the woman, and that most of their creativity stems from their experience of being a woman. It is about the reality one has access to. What does a woman experience in her so called ‘private’ sphere? Daily life, with its subtle movements and multitasking – all of this, when it comes on stage, is taken from the reality that a woman is part of.

232 Sanskrit Play written by the great poet Kalidasa
roles, keeping in mind the ideals of classicism ‘the pursuit of beauty’. An erotic, enactment of these archetypical roles was the only blueprint available to the director and actor— through the full-blooded voluptuous images of classical beauties as gathered from temple sculptures, (Goddesses and dancers) as well as the kitschy version of the coy and demure ‘ideal woman’ through the popular calendar art, became the visual iconography through which women characters were depicted on stage. The women playing these roles had their characters laminated upon them, and the passion and strength of legendary female characters from theatre were bleached into submission.

The word director had a male resonance and seems to suggest male authority, and because of that, acting became the obvious career choice for women. In the past if you were poor but pretty, or came from a family of dancers, musician - or if you were hard-up with no useful skills, but had an attractive face and body, then theatre was a good alternative to penury. Even though some of the women left their mark on the professional stage, women never came into positions of power, restricted by the blatant prejudice of not allowing women any say-in the decision making process. Acting was associated with harlots and women of easy morality whose role on the stage was to give lascivious glances, and seductive pouts, that threatened the concept of ideal Indian women. Yet actresses despite being viewed as ‘home- wreckers’ and ‘seductress’ were completely disfranchised in the hierarchy of the power structures in the theatre. Defined this way by the society that exploited their charm, but confined them to a marginalised status, women were robbed of their own representation throughout Modern theatre history.

In the traditional forms of performing arts, especially in dance and music, there existed the Devadasi234, Nagarvadhush235 in ancient and medieval times. These women

---

233 Vasantasena, a courtesan from the famous Sanskrit play Mricchakatika written by Sudraka (c.200BC). About the love between a Brahmin Charudatta and the courtesan Vasantasena.

234 Devdasis system existed in most of the temples. Dev (God) Dasi (slave) means marrying the god and devoting your life to the deity and serving in the temple and performing its rituals for the rest of your life. Devdasis existed right from the age of ancient Vedic times to help in temple rituals. Apart from that the devdasis used to also sing and dance. For this ritual practice families donated their younger girl child to the temple. Status of devdasi was high in society and she was known as the divine girl. As time passed, the system changed and they were used for sex obligation for the high caste people.. Major percentage of low caste and tribal girls were forced into this practice under the cover of religion and some came into it as their families had a history of being part of the Devdasis system.
were extremely accomplished and had mastered the art of dancing, acting and music. Despite the nature of their profession, these women were never equated with the common prostitute. It is also documented that most processions, religious, or social had the courtesan or the Nagarvadhus ("bride of the city") lead the procession in the village. This was a tradition followed in some parts of ancient India, and women competed to win the title of a Nagarvadhu. The most beautiful woman was chosen as the Nagarvadhu and she was respected like a goddess, but in fact she was a courtesan; and people could see her dance and sing. A Nagarvadhu's price for a single night dance used to be very high, and she was only within the reach of the super-rich -- the kings, the princes, the lords.

Here we see a divide between 'public' and 'private' space. Revered in public, but living on the fringe of society, the identity of a Nagarvadhu is historically positioned and as they are inherited, you can only understand them by putting them in a crisis.

In tribal societies dance and music is a vital form of expression and in agricultural societies women took part in daily life and also participated in music, dance and acting. But the situation was diametrically opposite in urban theatre, were the notion of the professional women in theatre was synonymous with that of the prostitute. Marked as dancing girls' a nomenclature evocative of the characteristics of the dual role of being both an entertainer and a courtesan, the dancing girls or actresses held the contradictory position of privilege and derision in Indian society. But somewhere around the early turn of the twentieth century the reviled female performer has been transformed into a ubiquitous symbol of Indian national culture. The dulcet voice of MS Subbulakshmi that mesmerized Nehru, to the image of the ideal Indian women through the iconic performances by film actress Nargis in Mother India, epitomizing concepts of virtue,

235 Nagarvadhus” or “brides of the city”

236 Madurai Shanmukhavadivu Subbulakshmi, (1916-2004) was a renowned Carnatic vocalist. She was the first musician ever to be awarded the Bharat Ratna, India’s highest civilian honor.

237 Nargis (1929-1981) She was born on June 1, 1929 as Fatima Rashid in Rawalpindi, British India, daughter to Jaddanbai and Uttamchand Mohanchand, a Hindu Mohyal Brahmin. Her mother was a well-known dancer, singer, actor, composer, and director. This is what paved the way for Fatima to become a child artiste (Baby Rani) as early as 1935.
justice and honor, made the performing woman artist respectable and hence acceptable. These representations carefully balance glamour with propriety, and helped in changing attitudes and perceptions of the performing female artist. This was not a simple process of easy acceptance but a result of a complicated and tedious process of negotiation, wherein the performer’s status and image had been reworked to include appropriate signs of respectability and Indianness.

This transformation in attitudes was made possible through the Parsi theatre, where the entry of women played a critical role in the construction of new norms of Indian womanhood. In the Parsi theatre, the first time a woman acted in a play was Indrasabha (1913). Initially there was fierce opposition to women acting on stage, and even though Kaikhushro Navroji Kabraji, was a vehement spokesman for women’s rights, but when it came to practical implementation, he also took the position of being against the inclusion of women on the Parsi stage. As his beliefs and theoretical ideating could not be translated into action, due to fear of censure and social ostracisation. In popular journals during that period this debate would be constantly aired and columns of for and against would be hotly debated, and passionately defended. Dadi Patel is said to be the first to have taken the bold step of introducing a woman in Parsi theatre, by bringing a Muslim woman from Hyderabad to act in Parsi theatre. The woman whose name was Latifa Begum was a consummate dancer and her role in the play Indra Sabha

---

238 Parsi Theatre: Highly influential movement between the 1850-1930. an aggregate of European techniques, pageantry, and local forms, enormously successful in the sub-continent and beyond, it may be seen as India’s first commercial theatre. As the name indicates, it was subsidized to a great extend by the Parsis, the Zoroastrian community of Persian origin, that had migrated to Western India over the centuries. Engaged in shipbuilding and trading, the Parsis had become an important business force on the west coast by the nineteenth century, and began to cultivate the arts and philanthropy. The first Parsi’s production is dated on October 1853, by the ‘Parsee Stage Players’ at the Grant Road Theatre. They may have had many Parsi financiers, managers, performers and patrons, but their personnel was by no means exclusively Parsi. Considerable cross-regional and cross-linguistic movement of artist and writers led to a heterogeneous mix at a broadly national level with the result that the Parsi companies not only worked in Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi and English, but inspired theatres in virtually every corner of India. The form was highly eclectic and of unlike parts, taking stories from Persian legendary Shahnama, the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata, the fabulous Arabian Nights, Shakespeare tragedies and comedies, and Victorian melodramas. The social drama was equally popular but the issues were elaborated within the family-problems about equality, sexuality education, and inheritance enacted within domestic terms. (Anuradha Kapur, Parsi Theatre-page341)

239 A famous Parsi play (Indra’s Court)
240 A producer of Parsi theatre
241 Rast Goftar- a journal was full of these debates
played to packed houses, due to the novelty of seeing a woman on the stage for the first time. It is said, that one day a male member of the audience, enamoured by her infinite charm whisked her off the stage, by wrapping her in a huge overcoat, hoodwinked the management and fled with her in his waiting carriage. Two other actresses who became famous during that period were Amir Jan and Moti Jan, two sisters both Punjabis, and good singers. Amir Jan was accomplished in singing Sufi ghazals and many business men tried to court her. Finally one of them married her, and she left the stage. Her sister Moti Jan felt abandoned and soon quit acting. The most popular actress of the Parsi stage was, Mary Fenton or Mehrbai (as she was called) whose father was an Irish soldier who after retirement presented magic lantern shows around Delhi for a living. She met Kavasji Khatau while he was rehearsing for a performance and they fell in love. She then went with him to Bombay and started performing in his theater and became one of the most famous, successful and popular actresses of her time, paving the way for many women to work on the stage. When women finally came on the stage, they came from foreign groups such as Christians and Indians Jews; this was true both of the Parsi theatre and the silent cinema. This racial "Othering" of the heroine wove in very neatly with the colonial preoccupations with "whiteness," this in a certain way also helped in distancing the stigmatized performer from the legitimate viewer, both the female as well as male. It created an image of the Indian women that got visually standardized as a cross-dressed man or a fair-skinned woman, both alien and hence paradoxically, acceptable.

The inclusion of women in the pantheon of this male dominated industry has been a slow and silent revolution which was long overdue. It was inevitable that very little notice was taken about the events that precipitated it. Today women in theatre have acquired visibility, the National School of Drama has twice had a woman Director at the helm: Kirti Jain and presently Anuradha Kapur, along with Amal Allana (2009) as the chairperson. Vijaya Mehta is presently (2009) heading the National Centre for
Performing Arts at Mumbai—yet numbers tell a fraction of the story. What does the slow yet obvious shift really signify? It just reflects a trend that sees women in many more positions than it did earlier, not only in the field of theatre but also as doctors, lawyers, pilots, corporate heads etc. This to some extent became the byproduct of the women’s movement, which encouraged more women to study direction, start their own companies, and to some extent this inadvertently challenged this male bastion. Women at the helm showed a sense and sensibility, and a spirit of adventure that was definitely feminine. Her openness to ideas and capacity to take risks, by exploring the improbable, were aspects of not having a fixed template before them.

Yet, does this ripple change the ‘real’ landscape in any fundamental way? These are unspoken questions, tantalising and provocative. Questions like—does gender effect the success and failure of one’s work? Has the bias against women theatre directors vanished? Do women coming from different regional and social proclivities share anything in common, beyond their biology? Are they accepted on the same platform as men and viewed through the same lens? Are the rules for both the same? The funding? The privileges? The sponsorships? It is difficult and problematic to arrive at anything even vaguely accurate to all these questions—as notions of Simone de Beauvoir ‘second sex’ still reverberate and added on to this is suffix of being the ‘inferior sex.’ Yet while talking to a whole range of women directors one common element that does emerge, is that it is always much harder for women to create their space in a work situation than men. Also as this topic is so emotionally loaded and so complicated and tangled, that sometimes it is near impossible to arrive at any conclusive truth, as stereotypical baggage exists on both sides. Issues, which could be based on community dynamics, do get a gender bias when women are in authority. Is this really a gender issue, or an issue to do with group functioning?

In this chapter, I must say on the onset, that we cannot assume that all women’s theatre is the same, and neither can we make the error of saying that this is what it means to be a woman (caring, nurturing, loving) and this is what it means to be a male (aggressive, macho) a trap that needs to be avoided. What I would be exploring in this chapter is the idea of a women’s voice in theatre.
This radical departure from existing modes of expression, in women theatre may have happened due to a variety of reasons both conscious and subconscious. It also, to a great extent, had to do with the socio-political economic changes that were happening in the world of women. These changes gave more independence, confidence and a sense of self-determination to women. I don’t think that women set out to be different, but it was the urge to tell their stories in their own particular way, from their own point of view, in their own voice, that created this genre known as women’s theatre. It is not to say that women were not telling their stories before that, but they seemed to be more on the fringe, creating a peripheral contribution, while men were clustered at the top of the echelon.

“Feminist thought and activity can be divided into two historical moments. The first moment, which began in 1800 and lasted until the end of 1930, was largely concerned with gaining equal rights between men and women. The second, which began in the late 1960’s, has developed a range of theories that stress the psychological variances between men and women, their differences, and is mindful of women’s exigencies. Feminist theatre is politically aligned to the idea of the post-1968 women’s movement and is concerned with ways in which women’s perceptions have been resolved by the particular nature of the female body. It is interested in seeking new ways of making knowledge from the viewpoint of the body. I use the term, feminist theatre, as a tentative designation for dealing with the sort of experience that may not have found visibility until now; which is also to say that the manner of saying and the specifics of that experience are in the process of being voiced. Further, I see the articulation of such experience as not attempted by women alone.”

The difference between ‘feminist theatre’ and ‘woman’s theatre’ has been a topic of debate. Feminist theatre seems to indicate a definite and pointedly political way

---

243 Anuradha Kapur: ( Anuradha Kapur: A WanderingWord, an Unstable Subject….Theatre India; p5) Director of The National School of Drama, Delhi Her writings include the book Actors, Pilgrims and Gods: The Ramila and Ramnagar(1990) Seagull Publications. Has her own theatre group called Vivadi. Theatre India page 5

244 Woman theatre – has proposed the idea of a ‘woman language’ in theatre. New dramatic structures which stress collective and cooperative working process by giving precedence to performance rather than to the playscript have come into circulation. These are experiments with the process and form of dramatic
of working. The term feminist theatre clearly seems to be reserved for discussion on text that seem to be aligned to the woman’s political movement, with specific aims and objectives.

There is a problem when the two terms feminist theatre and woman’s theatre are lumped together and devolve into each other, to mean one and the same thing. Attaching the feminist label to all theatre done by women can be a complicated business, not only due to the changing definition of this term, but also in terms of sifting priorities and concerns of individual artistic concern at different stages in one’s career. Most feminist theatre is radical and has as its motive ‘action’ rather than ‘art’. ‘Feminist theatre’ uses the platform of theatre to promote issues of identity of women, to create an awareness of the issues of feminism and to seek corrective methods to achieve their aims and beliefs, irrespective of dramatic canons.

Feminist theatre is based on the established concerns of the organised women’s movement and their demands. These demands were – equal pay, equal education, equal opportunity, free twenty four hours nurseries, free contraceptives and abortions on demand, financial and legal independence, an end to discrimination against lesbianism and a woman’s right to defend her sexuality and freedom from violence and coercion. The first four demands were part of a feminist charter in 1970, the rest was added on later in 1978, indicating a more militant approach to sexual choices and preferences.

This, in a certain way, led to a revaluation of a woman’s role within society by moving towards the creation of a new set of social structures in which the roles of women and men in their social formation had to be redefined. To come back to the main issue of woman theatre versus feminist theatre, I have noticed that in perception both these terms are used randomly. The first could be viewed generally, while the second is definitely a more radical and politicised view of theatre. The woman theatre asserts that a woman’s writing, and put in place a different set of authorial and professional relationships. I am here concerned with thinking about these. Does a woman’s language produce different narrative stories, plots and characters? Another perception of time and temporality? An otherwise nuanced experience? Another sort of work process? (Anuradha Kapur Theatre India: Number three; Page 6)
experience is not necessarily common to each and neither do they speak the same theatrical language, but somewhere most of them belong to a family of minds.

My own personal experiences as a theatre director has me recalling that the male actors find it much harder to take instructions from a woman director than the female actors. Also there is this continuous undermining of the codes of discipline and suggestion regarding the way the male characters are interpreted. Male actors find it problematic to layer their roles with emotions of tenderness or compassion or bring conviction to actions such as bathing a child, or washing the utensils, as these were not considered male activities, and contradicted their social sense of manhood.

I remember one actor playing the role of the Naga/husband in Naga Mandala by Girish Karnad in 1990, had to, as an action in the play, help his wife in the kitchen (to show his concern, involvement of being the romantic partner), I overheard his aside during the rehearsal, when he thought I was not within listening range 'let the director say what she wishes during rehearsals, in the show I am the master and I will do exactly what I feel about my character'. Needless to mention, that I promptly threw the actor out of my group.

Also it was much more problematic for a male actor to surrender, to change, to be playful, to re-examine set behavioural clichés. While I found the women actors more responsive to change, and much more emotionally receptive. But this malaise also existed in women actors regarding different issues. Women actors were locked in by some sort of imagined beauty scale of being too thin, or too fat. Women actors are also bogged down by imagined representations of the ‘ideal’ woman, the ‘virtuous’ woman, this then got exacerbated by stereotypes that exist in both the genders. To make the actors completely flexible and responsive, the director has to intuit what is weighing them down. A woman, as well as a man, are both constantly conscious of how they are looking, how they are representing not only their character, but also their gender. The exploration of the mindset of both men as well as women is the primary material for most groups.

245 Karnad, Girish Raghunath (1938-) Kannada actor-playwright and film director.
One also realises that an analysis of this nature cannot be sociological or anthropological, but more to do with individual creativity. Being a woman may not reflect on your working style, but certainly gets reflected in the choices that you make. Actually as a reverse to this, posing gender issue to women directors in a way diminishes the larger issues, that are involved- the art that is created.

The Women That Men Created for the Indian Stage.

"The Woman as the hero is a creature quite distinct from the "heroine"246. Her presence defines a body of literary work that can be placed in time like any other. The woman hero, in this period post-independence became the embodiment of the male writer's artistic vision. There was a feminisation of the male vision, in the centrality of its female characters.

. The way women were represented on stage can be viewed as the way male playwrights saw women and the way they constructed-women from their own textural interpretation of how women would behave in a given situation. I will be referring to a few plays that were written in Post - independence India, or during the process of the freedom struggle (hence the inclusion of Balwant Gargi's247 plays) where, due to the social and political transformations during the struggle for independence, women had played a meaningful and active role. Suddenly women became visible in literature and drama, not in a stereotypical way, but more as participants in decision making and as controllers of her own destiny. These were tentative steps, which nevertheless were significant in an attempt to move towards a modern interpretation of Indian women on the stage. But as most of the plays, whether western or Indian, have been written by men, the male affiliations were in evidence, no matter how radical or subversive the character may be. Even though some extraordinary classic have emerged from the male pen, yet provocative unspoken questions come to mind. Is there a fundamental difference in respect to male and female aesthetics and style of working? As most of the women

characters had been created and constructed by the male playwright, the staging inevitably followed the same pattern.

Balwant Gargi (1916-2003) was the first Punjabi playwright who used women as central figures in his narratives. This is not to suggest that earlier playwrights or directors had not used women in their playwriting, but that women in some of the earlier Punjabi plays were being used as props for social and political messages, but Balwant Gargi was the first Punjabi playwright to open Punjabi theatre to the language of desire, its non-sequential logic, displacement, sharp shift and incoherence, this was evident in his first play Loha Kutt (The Blacksmith 1944). It was a stark portrayal of rural Punjab, with its superstitions, poverty and anxiety ridden landscape. Firmly grounded in rural Punjab, he had no problem in putting women centre stage and attacking oppression with a degree of compassion and anger that was uniquely his own. He created empowering, vital and above all believable women, who acknowledged their female desire and sexuality. This was unusual in 1944, when writing a play like this could have been subjected to a barrage of vitriolic attacks, which I believe did come his way. However, in a certain way he broke the stereotypical image of the women as being either a mother, sister, wife or whore in Punjabi playwriting and individuated them. In Loha Kutt the mother recognizes that sex, desire and love have been experienced by her daughter. By accepting this she also accepts the existence of these emotions within herself as well.

As he was a male writer, living and writing in the 1940’s, it was difficult for him to move beyond his male alliances. Even though the central characters in his plays are women, the male eye is evident. And despite his female characters’ struggle to free themselves from the codes of patriarchy, they were still trapped by the fact that their desires and experiences were being interpreted through a male eye and voice.

The drama of Mohan Rakesh248, Vijay Tendulkar249, Girish Karnad,250 Mahesh Elkunchwar251 and Mahesh Dattani252 is associated with the status of patriarchy,

248 Mohan Rakesh(1925 – 1972)), The most significant Hindi playwright of independent India. In the play Adhe-adhure, he talks about the fast changing values of middle-class urban life.

249 Tendulkar, Vijay (1928-) trailblazing Marathi playwright he has written twenty eight full- length plays and one novel, seven collections of one act plays, six children’s stories and four short stories.
aesthetics of modernity and modes of social realism that extended the experience of women protagonists into urban and semi-urban situations. In their imagination women are suppressed, marginalized and exploited due to feudalism and a changing world order. Women were trapped in this transitional space and sandwiched between sentimental notions of the past, with the urges of the present to push them to experiment with their own emotions, fears and passions. As these emotions were explored through a male lens, the women did have the whiff of belonging to a ‘foreign land.’

In Marathi theatre, modernism in theatre was spearheaded by Vijay Tendulkar, Satish Alekar and Mahesh Elkunchwar. Their theatre challenged the establishment and the unequal power relationships between the two genders. Gender discrimination was the running leitmotif in the plays, and forms an intrinsic aspect of their ideological position. Vijay Tendulkar’s women are mostly pessimistic, bordering on the nihilistic, and while reading his plays, there is always a lurking sense of the women having been violated, because they chose to function outside conventional norms. In his play Kamala, as well as in Shantata Court Chalu, the women are conceived as passive receivers of violence. In plays like Sakharam Binder and Ghasiram Kotwal, the women are marked by sexual violence, while exposing the society that endorses violence.

Mohan Rakesh’s Adhe – adhure (neither half-nor whole 1969), has a contemporary setting without resorting to any symbols from the past. It constructs in its central figure the woman Savitri, who has moved beyond the boundaries of being the nurturer and shifted her position to being the provider (a role normally reserved for men)

250 Girish Raghunath Karnad (born 1938) is a contemporary writer, playwright, actor and movie director in Kannada language. A recipient of Jnanpith Award, which is the highest literary honour conferred in India.

251 Mahesh Elkunchwar (born 1939) is an Indian playwright with more than 15 plays to his name, in addition to his theoretical writings, critical works, and his active work in India’s Parallel Cinema as actor and screenwriter.

252 Mahesh Dattani (1958) is an Indian director, actor and playwright. He writes plays in English and notable amongst them are Final Solutions, Dance Like a Man and Tara to name a few.

253 Alekar, Satish (1949-) Marathi dramatist, actor and director.
This contradiction between instilled values, and values acquired due to necessity, fractures the stability of the home, and leads to a complete break-down of family structures and a disintegration of what is conventionally perceived as the values of domesticity. The clash between the working wife and the unsuccessful husband creates a dysfunctional domestic scenario, with confused and belligerent children adding to the woes. Despite being hailed as one of India’s first modern plays that engaged with the “changing values of urban middle-class life”, Mohan Rakesh in this play is concerned with questions about the working woman, her financial and social freedom, yet it is that freedom, that made the men that came into her life to turn away from her.

This, then, once again brings us to the fundamental question, about the position of woman. The men in the play, unable to handle the changing role of the women in the new urban Indian landscape, turn the narrative violence on her. However, a contradictory note is established in his play Ashadh Ka Ek Din. The main protagonist Mallika, the beloved of the poet Kalidas, is conceived as a sacrificing, self-effacing woman, internalizing her separation from her beloved Kalidas in the mode of the woman who waits for her lover to the point of self-abnegation. As she says, ‘I have wed feeling with feelings’ in the spirit of self-denial, reinstating the conventional stereotype of the idealized Indian woman. Sacrificing her life for the sake of an unresolved and selfish love.

Mahesh Elkunchwar in his family centric play Wada Chirebandi (Marathi 1985) with its structure and content seeped in realism, had for its starting point the image of a tractor. “Wada Chirebandi came to me one day while I was talking to Satyadev Dubey. He told me about a feudal family that owned a tractor but never used it. Slowly it sank into the courtyard. The tractor was destroyed and so was the family. It was this image that started me off to Wada Chirebandi.” This play is rooted in strong theatricality with a passionate and poetic exploration of cowardice and conviction within a domestic setting. A family environment with uncles and aunts, brothers and wayward

256 Satyadev Dubey is an Indian playwright, screenwriter and film and theatre actor, and film director. He was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1971.
sisters, avarice and ambition played against the backdrop of a crumbling ancestral home as a metaphor for the collapse of the emotional interiority of the characters, with the sinking tractor as a leitmotif to the emotional and spiritual disintegration both in the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ spaces of the characters. (The tractor in the courtyard, which is a space that is both within and without (the mansion) runs parallel to the development of the story). Elkunchwar’s capacity to transform mammoth and complex issues into a vital living theatre is nothing short of awe inspiring.

The understanding of the feminine psyche is manifested in one powerful dramatic moment when Vahini (urged by her husband) covers herself with the family jewels in the cover of the night. Adorning herself in the glittering necklaces, earrings, bangle and rings, she, in one brief theatrical moment conjoins herself with all the female ancestors of the family who have left residues of their history, memory ‘their sweat and smell’ on to these family jewels (the family wealth). This wealth which is part of feminine possessions, is stolen/taken by the daughter of the house Ranju to satisfy her ambitions to live in Bombay and became a film star. Betrayal, rancor, family tensions, grief, honor death and life ironically play together in this intimate family drama. Well observed dialogues and complex characterization show a deeply perceptive mind at work. The women characters in the play are very moving and engaging because they are genuinely trying hard to confront their own behavior and motivations between a life that is still connected with a past and a present which they aspire to better.

Girsh Kamad’s Hayavadana (1971) and Naga Madala (1990) were two plays that took points of departure in terms of the representation of women in Modern Indian drama. Both Padmini from Hayavadana and Rani from Naga Mandala, recognize their world of desire and celebrate their sexuality even while functioning within a patriarchal structure. This factor becomes even more intriguing when the play has emerged from a male playwright who eschews the realistic mode in the above mentioned plays, and sets the plays in a non-realistic, non-urban space, and within the realm of folk culture. The two women desire more from society then what has come there way. To have women challenge the constraints of their destiny was made possible by the use of folk structures and folk elements, allowing for fictional characters to interact with real characters,
setting into motion a story telling technique that allows magic, myth and metaphors to weave in and out of realistic settings, subverting conventional morality by spinning the narrative, manipulating conventional tools of dramaturgy, providing alternative endings and examining both performance, and performance text in a unique and innovative manner. Because folk theatre was seen as naïve and exotic (by the urban mind), and far removed from the conditions of the every day life, it was presumed that this form was incapable of expressing modern issues and psychological impulses. Girish Karnad has used the folk form and its conventions in a manner, where he has used the folk narratives, not only as products of a folk tradition, but more as a story telling device where the most complex ideas can be made visible in a far more dramatic way than if he had used a realistic or naturalistic style of writing.

*Hayavadana* was the first major post-independence play to derive its narrative from a twelfth century folktale about switched heads, and to use anti-realistic stage conventions and structures to delve deep into myth and music and to connect it with personal memory. To dovetail past history into a modern experience was a revelation for the Indian stage. The above play poses many philosophical and metaphysical questions about identity and reality. *Padmini* is married to *Devadutta*, who is intellectual and sensitive, but she feels a visceral attraction towards his friend *Kapila*. The husband sensing the attraction between the two decides to decapitate himself at the *Kali* temple. *Kapila* on seeing his friend dead also kills himself.

On the intervention of the Goddess *Kali*, a boon is given to the wife, *Padmini* to revive her husband and his friend, by placing their heads back on their bodies. In a devious twist the wife changes the head of her husband with his friend. This narrative offers a symbolic resolution to the issue of body/mind dualism. *Devadutta-Kapila* has now got the perfect mind and the perfect body, while *Kapila* is deficient in both aspects. But when each man’s body reverts to its original qualities, the problem of dualism returns. Women’s desire is explored in a way that poses questions about her morality. Her behaviour does not conform to the views of feminine propriety, as envisaged in the traditional world which she inhabits. In the end when both the men die, each killing his
Four men in a single lifetime, says Padmini.

Similarly in Naga-Mandala (1990) Rani, the main woman protagonist personifies innocent desire, in contrast to Padmini’s overt sexuality. Marriage, for Rani, means the loss of childhood and maternal love, and she has to re-imagine love to secure the foundations of her being. Cut off from family and community, except for a surreptitious visit from the local blind woman, Rani fictionalizes her world to such an extent that there is a blurred line between fantasy and fiction. Where does one end and the other begin? The snake lover’s nocturnal visits in the form of the husband are explained through folk lore and myth thus escaping the moral labelling. For Rani the ‘day’ and the ‘night’ visits are explained by a simple logic- the brutal husband of the day, transforms in the ardent lover of the ‘night’ – as the Naga explain. The husband decides on the day visit, and the wife decides on the night visits. When Rani’s pregnancy is discovered, the play shifts from its illusionary tone and is jolted back into a patriarchal society, where a husband and community are in control and where the identity and desires of a woman have no space or voice. But unlike Padmini, Rani is empowered at the end. The women, in both the plays, desire men who are not their husbands and both manage to achieve the focus of their desire. Yet Padmini loses both the men and ultimately becomes a sati, while Rani finds a way within the conventions of being the conventional wife to nurture and sustain her desire, albeit through myth and fantasy. Girish Karnad, in his writing does address feminine issues, as both Hayavadana and Nagamandala are about the deprivation in a woman’s life and her choices. That proves that both genders can react similarly to certain issues.’

But when Padmini chooses to be a sati after the death of her husband/lover, it leaves the viewer with an uneasy sense of resolution. Even though she saw herself as the wife of both the men, she commits sati in her role as the pativrata. But even here cannons of traditional morality are disrupted as she says “other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come, I have not even been left with that little consolation” (page 63)
Mahesh Dattani does not subscribe to the viewpoint of creation being ‘male’ or ‘female’. “I am not sure about the politics of gender since at times, I do not even think about the gender of my character. Men and women are the two biggest stereotypes of the world. You write about women and men for no political reasons. Plays such as ‘Tara’ and ‘Bravely Fought the Queen’ or ‘30 Days in September’ have women protagonists as the central characters. I am fascinated by women who make their choices given their limited resources and circumstances. But my choice of women as central characters is purely an artistic choice and in no way am I trying to take on a cause. I am free to show men and women with failings and strengths without being overwhelmed by political implications. Gender battles are also interesting subjects. I believe I can forget my own gender.( in fact is only for sexual purpose that I remember my own gender, really). So those scenes between women don’t come from an ‘outside’ view point at all. In fact, I am not even sure about the politics of gender most of the time. It is only when other characters in the play react to their own gender, or the gender of those around, that the issue comes alive. In that sense, contrary to what I said earlier, I am on the outside looking in. And sometimes I am on the inside looking out”.

The Entry of Women Directors in the 50’s and 60’s: Text, Stories, Forms and Concepts.

Women directors have broadened the agenda of Indian drama. Both the form and content of their work has pushed the boundaries of what is possible to show and tell on the stage, and theatre culture has certainly been enriched by their presence. What is the woman craft when she tells a story on the stage? What determines her choice of text? Where does she find her stories from?

In fact there is no ideology, no format and certainly no manifesto that defines women’s theatre. If there is one overriding artistic impulse, it is simply to invent from what is there, what exist or what does not exist. In a certain way a woman can never separate herself from the role of the nurturer, the householder, she needs to improvise, to

---

258 Dattani, Mahesh (1958–): The first Indian dramatist in English to win the prestigious national Sahitya Akademi award.
make things stretch, and to make things possible within limited resources and means. Which is a quality that is also manifest in the way a woman makes theatre, a feeling of things being put together. Women directors, while creating a set or costumes don’t usually go to the shops and buy things, they rummage in their trunks, in their cupboards, in their kitchens to improvise, and push the imagination to create costumes, build a set, to create a world on the stage that has a resonance with their own world and its concerns. Not as a replication, but to stir up a memory, a dream, an alchemy between the mundane and the artistic. In fact, all the material used in a play is gathered from the world a woman inhabits, a world she is surrounded by.

“Feminist theatre is concerned with characterisation, and therewith also concerned with plot, for a character’s attributes and behaviour influence the plot, and conversely characters are at least, in part, determined by what happens in the story. If plot seeks to set up joineries between different situations of the narrative rather than simply reporting a sequence of events, then there is no easy way to separate character and plot. In recent work by women directors some of the characters have been assembled, and I use the word assembled advisedly, become comprehensible as such by their inner lives as by their public aspect. The inner lives may digress, recoil, expand, and contract thereby affecting plot structure. The public aspect too is not firm and completely readable as it is constructed by putting together several points of view that may be similar or even contrary. The plot/character configuration has transited towards a new set of subjectivities where change in the way of drawing characters has resulted in redrawing the parameters of plot. Such work has inaugurated a rethinking on the meaning and performance of character both on stage, and in script”.

Women’s theatre is committed to meaning, to shifting through the referents of material reality and drawing blueprints of their construction that can be historically revised and changed. It does not require a great leap of imagination for a woman to understand that being a woman makes for a grand collection of compromises, large as

---

well as small, in order to lead a successful life in a male-dominated society. It is categorised that the masculine principal and the feminine principal are two ends of a polarity, ying and yang, north and south, Mars and Venus, may have oppositional contractual pulls, but all thesees clichés do not in any way illuminate the problem of being a woman in theatre. As I have mentioned earlier, the word director seems to suggest a sense of maleness, and this profession has always been viewed as a prerogative of the male. Women were perceived more as actresses, singers and dancers rather then directors, for various social and cultural reasons. The entire notion of directing seems to indicate control and authority, attributes usually associated with the male species. This naturally had a bearing on the aesthetics of production that wore the stamp of male sensibility and attitudes. When did women intervene and enter this hallowed profession which had been the natural reserve of men?

It is difficult to hypothesize and say that, if women had been involved with theatre from the beginning, what sort of theatre would have emerged, what sort of text, aesthetics, audience, actors. These conjectures will really lead us nowhere. The moot question is, that now that women have entered this profession as directors, have they managed to create an independent form of aesthetics, a new way of assessing and receiving? A new way of looking at space, text, characters, and audience/actor relationships. Have they managed to move away from a stereotypical interpretation of gender? Is their a feminine way of doing things? Have women managed to create a new way of viewing? A new way of looking at text, creating text? These are questions that are of concern and need to be addressed. Today a woman, with new self-awareness and confidence, tries to use theatre to explore what it means to be a woman. Also it is an endeavour for some of them to try and locate themselves in some sort of woman tradition that will enable them to contextualise their aspirations, position and, as Simone de Beauvoir\(^{260}\) calls it, “we – consciousness”.

---

\(^{260}\) Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) Novelist, essayist and playwright. Born in Paris and the daughter of a lawyer of conservative persuasion. She took a degree in philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1929. She emerged as the leader of the existentialist movement and was one of the most influential thinkers of her generation.
The Entry of Women directors in India was in the 50’s and 60’s, and when they entered this profession the prototypes that existed before them became, inadvertently, their reference points. Women, in the initial stages, used similar story telling techniques and aesthetics codes that had already existed. While reflecting on the work done by women directors during that period, what is most impressive is that even while functioning within the paradigms already established by the male directors, women directors, sought their own aesthetics, worldview and way of working. Sheila Bhatia, in Delhi, pioneered the Punjabi musical theatre movement, with women oriented themes. Vijaya Mehta, in Maharashtra, discovered significant playwrights from the state, and worked in a contemporary idiom that broke fresh ground in theatrical presentation. Shanta Gandhi and Dina Gandhi( Pathak) worked with folk forms, discovering new ways of telling a story261.

Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA)

IPTA262 (The Indian People Theatre association-1943) played a cataclysmic role in the entry of women into the performing arts, as they made culture a vital aspect of nationalistic concern. "...of materializing through western techniques the idea of a golden past and inducting this into a national project. Along with certain pervasive notions about India’s civilization role, national ideology brings to bear a whole range of bold and

261Shanta Gandhi: 20 December 1917 - 6 May 2002. Called to Delhi in the late 1950s to help set up the Asian Theatre Institute and the National School of Drama as its Professor of Ancient Indian Drama, she brought alive Kalidasa and Bhasa, Mudrarakshas and Bhavabhuthi, as if they were among us today. She penned and choreographed the nautanki ‘Amar Singh Rathore’ and subsequently ‘Jasma Odan’ in the Bhavai style and was the first to reinterpret the classical and the folk for a contemporary sensibility. She joined Uday Shankar's Almora School of Dance, staying on till it survived. By then she was a full-time member of the Little Ballet Troupe, the dance wing of the Indian People's Theatre Association, partaking in the joy of creating ‘India, Immortal’, ‘Man and Machine’ and the numerous legendary ballets that traveled India with Ravi Shankar, Shanti Bardhan and so many who became the artists of the modern Indian dance theatre. She was by then a card carrying member of the Communist Party, living at the commune in Bombay on Rs 40 a month. But soon she was uncomfortable with the party seeking to run their lives, and withdrew to the Amreli tribal belt of Gujarat to run a non-formal school for children, in the process discovering ingenious ways of teaching through music, theatre, dance and story telling.

262IPTA: Pre-eminent activist institution formed, as an all-India organization in Bombay in 1943, borrowing its name from Romain Rolland’s book titled People’s theatre, but stressing ‘our people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice’. 

151
tantalizing questions about modernity that are being lived out to this day........ Here the modern serves as an emblematic category on the basis of which a polemical confrontation takes place between the progressive and the revivalist"263

It functioned as a pre-eminent activist institution formed as an all-India organisation in Bombay in 1943, borrowing its name from Romain Rolland’s book *People’s Theatre*, it came as a response to the people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice. At the conference held during the time of its formation, units from different parts of the country, some of which had been functioning earlier (Bangalore 1941; Bombay, 1942), participated and generated substantial enthusiasm among theatre workers, writers, musicians, and the politically alert intelligentsia. It also became one of the most significant platforms for the performing arts. Other bodies like the Progressive Writers Association (1936), Youth Cultural Institute (1940), and Anti-Fascist writers and artistic associations (1942) prepared the groundwork for the emergence of IPTA. They were passionately concerned about the lack of awareness of the social and political realities, and the fear and threat of fascism, and India’s colonisation. Their objective was to make people alert to these dangers through writings and performances. The communist party of India, which supported the allies after Germany’s invasion of the USSR in 1941, extended their base in many ways and helped in building a ‘front’ organisation, through performance, were ideas of freedom could be articulated and communicated to the general public. Unfortunately, it did not become an active artistic force, as it clung to its belief that theatre was a weapon for mass awakening against oppression and subjugation, rather then recognising its identity also as an artistic space for communication.

Shanta and Dina Gandhi (later Pathak) played a major role in energizing the activities of IPTA and giving it its artist edge. Both these sisters came to theatre more out of political ideology, rather then nurturing artistic ambitions. Their talent blossomed

263 Geeta Kapur: an independent art critic and curator. She has written extensively on contemporary Indian art.: When Was Modernism: page 146.
when they teamed up with Jayshankar Sundari,264 (the famous female impersonator from Gujarat 1889-1975) to direct Maena Gurjari, in an attempt to use the folk form of Bhavai265 in the Peking opera mould. This famous legend from Gujarat, deals with the pride of being a Gujjar.266 Through the unfolding of events that span from the Mughal times until colonial history, using the perspective of the Gujjar community, along with notion of identity and regional pride, that expanded to include a ‘sense of nationalism’ and national honour.

They chose stories from the folk narrative tradition, from which they fleshed out a sub-text that dealt with the honour of women and their dignity. Both the plays, Jasma Oden and Maena Gujjar, defied the social order of things by subverting the existing hierarchies and asserting women power. This has to be seen in the political context of the progressive IPTA orientation- the revolt of the masses against feudal subjugation, and the rise of the working classes- all this fitted into the left/ Marxist ideology of the IPTA movement. We must here also keep in mind that notions of feminism had not percolated into the consciousness of women directors, even in progressive organization like IPTA.

It was in 1971, when I was a student at the Panjab University that a festival of plays came to perform in Chandigarh from the National School of Drama. The play that left a lasting impact on me was a Bhavai play, based on a Gujarati folktale Jasma Odan directed by Shanta Gandhi. This play had been first performed in 1967, and had become a milestone in Indian theatre, almost achieving a cult status. It showed that tradition could be used to express complex contemporary ideas without falling into the pit of

264 Legendary actor, director of Gujarati plays who also performed in Hindi and Urdu. From early childhood, Jaishankar was trained in acting and traditional music. His first major role was as the heroine Sundari, loosely adapted from Shakespeare Othello. He became so popular, that after that he was known as Sundari (beauty) and became a famous female impersonator.

265 Gujarati Folk form

266 The Gujjar are an ethnic group in India, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Gujjars follow Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and also Christianity-in minor percentage. The Hindu Gujjar also follow traditional sub-caste or tribal system as adopted by other Gujjars.
mythopoesis. How song, story and body consciousness, used by traditional artist, helps urban actors to discover a new lexicon of signs, gestures and body language. Shanta Gandhi talked about the difficulties of taking a traditional Bhavai text and moulding it into a relevant interpretation. An attempt to significantly alter a traditional text, without losing sight of the basic ethos of the given form does pose some delicate problems. In her version, the female protagonist Jasma replaces the idea of her being a sati, with the idea of a working woman. Her husband Rupa in the original text, is supposed to be ugly and unintelligent, but in Shanta Gandhi version, he is intelligent and hardworking, which makes Jasma fall in love with him, despite his physical deformity.

Packed into the proscenium arch, the audience saw a tableau of Gods and sages, celestial beauties and nymphs who, due to a series of transgressions, evacuate their iconic space in Indralok and are born as ordinary mortals toiling to earn their early bread. Through a series of rearrangements the images of the past are recast in a contemporary framework. The theme of the traditional idea ‘God resides in the soul of the poor’ had a sentimental morality to it, but Gandhi, with her sophistication and knowledge was able to draw on traditional resources within Gujarati culture, to redefine its representation. In a way this secular transformation fitted in with the new subject-matter, of the national agenda of Nehru’s socialism, where the Gods and sages, celestial beauties and nymphs shed their iconicity and took upon themselves another form of idealization; the dignity of the worker. Within the same mise-en-scene certain aspects of realism dovetailed comfortably with the traditional genre of acting. Realism is suspended, but never eschewed. The actors moved easily and without self-consciousness between the world of the Gods to the world of the quotidian, using references from their own life. The two sisters had come a long way from the cannon of acting and communication laid down by IPTA.

Women In Punjabi Theatre.

To map the history of the women movement in theatre in Punjab one can say that, despite the public life of theatre, we know very little about the role women played in the theatre history of Punjab. Any history of woman directors from theatre will
necessarily be sporadic, erratic, unsung and ignored. Theatre and its history in the state of Punjab are not considered worthy of recognition, archiving or patronage. You have to be a trifle mad and obsessive to continue doing theatre in a state that has no cultural policy for the arts and still considers the stage to be a place for the disreputable, the drop-outs and the infamous. Despite this disfranchised scenario, there still existed a few significant figures that altered the history of performance arts in Punjab. Before independence, the presence of women in theatre was completely negligible, because conventions and conservatism made it impossible for women to go to schools and colleges, so being a theatre director was a distant drum that no one had even heard, leave alone dream of such an eventual possibility ever happening. Yet women artists did manage to break through the glass girder and express themselves through theatre.

Modern Punjabi theatre began in 1913, and the pioneer of Punjabi theatre was Norah Richards (1876-1971), an Irish lady who played a pivotal role in bringing Punjabi theatre to the forefront by giving it a fresh impetus, by transcribing Punjabi themes into a theatrical lexicon, and for creating a culture of sensitising an audience into receiving plays with a content that was radical and forward thinking. In 1911 Norah Richards had established the foundation of urban Punjabi theatre in Lahore. Married to an Irish Unitarian minister, Edward Richards, who had came to Lahore to teach English at Dyal Singh College, she started an amateur theatre club in the college that had a far reaching impact on theatre activities in Lahore. As an amateur actress she had been associated with The Irish National Theatre in Dublin, and was saturated with Lady Gregory’s rural comedies, Synge’s sombre plays, and O’Casey’s cultural testaments, not so much with Yeats’ dance-dramas. The success of her directorial debut in Lahore with A Midsummer Night’s Dream, encouraged her to direct many more Shakespearean

---

267 Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory (1852-1932) Irish playwright, who after the death of her husband developed a strong interest in Irish history and literature. She met William Butler Yeats in 1898. And together they founded the Irish national theatre society which became the nucleus of the Abbey theatre company. The distinguishing aspect of her work is the use of the folk dialect of Western Ireland which influenced many playwrights later, as did her innovations in one-act comedies and folk histories.

268 John Millington Synge (1871-1909) Irish playwright. He founded the Irish literary theatre, dedicated to the writing and performing of Irish themes in Dublin.

269 Sean O’Casey, single-handedly revived the faltering hopes of the Abbey group. This playwright, a product of a Dublin slum, used vivid and vital language, which was a blend of comedy and tragedy, and brought to life the inhabitants of the slums.

270 William Butler Yeats’ (1865-1939) Irish playwright and poet.
productions with her students. However, she soon realized that it was important for Punjabis to work in their own language, and wrote a few one-act plays based on stories from the past (Valmiki, Sati, Mother-Earth), which were similar in structure and style to the village comedies and morality plays that were prevalent in Ireland at that time.

In 1912 she initiated a competition of one-act plays which gave an impetus to local writers to write plays that dealt with issues that were regional and indigenous. Iswar Chander Nanda’s play Suhag (Wedding 1913) was the culmination of her efforts. This play may seem outdated and irrelevant today, but was significant at that time, as it brought out the production of meaning and a compelling conceptualisation of the history of Punjabi theatre, by examining the problems of female identity, and throwing light on unspoken issues of widow remarriage, love marriage, by giving it a ‘voice.’

The foremost challenge for these directors, working in 1950’s and 1960’s as well as in the 1970’s, was to prove that they could be just as imaginative and competent as their male counterparts. Even though the blue print had become deeply entrenched, they took the risk of breaking away and setting their own feminine aesthetics and way of looking at text. Social realism during that period was still the norm or the standard criteria by which plays were judged.

Refusing to submit herself to the confines of conventional theatre, Sheila Bhatia (1916-2008) had a fierce belief in the power of theatre to effect change. She was able to explore and experiment outside the customary boundaries and to combine her talent as a writer, director, actor and producer, to create uncompromising, sharp-sighted and gutsy productions. Bhatia’s work tackles social and women’s issues head-on with a pace and passionate energy, which was truly remarkable.

With her company, between the mid sixties to the mid seventies, she created plays that exploded onto the stage experiencing tremendous commercial success, and with fairly wide and popular appeal. Her production Charm Badla Da (The Moon behind

---

271 Morality plays are a type of allegory in which the protagonist is met by personifications of various moral attributes who try to prompt him to choose a godly life over one of evil. The plays were most popular in Europe during the 15th and 16th century. Having grown out of the religiously based mystery plays of the Middle Ages, they represented a shift towards a more secular base for European theatre.
the Cloud 1966) was a medley of Punjabi folk and wedding songs without any firm
narrative. It was an extremely popular play, more so due to the astoundingly rich voice of
Madanbala Sindhu, an actor/singer. Her production of the famous love legend Hir Ranjha,(1956), done in the operatic style won her accolades, by hauntingly transforming
Waris Shah’s love story (1723) in a robust operatic style. She also directed Federico
Garcia Lorca’s272 Blood Wedding (Tere Mere Lekh 1984) and Bulle Shah’s Sulagde
Darya (Burning Rivers 1985). Even though her central characters were women, the
orientation of her work was more aesthetic than blatantly ideological. In Bhatia’s theatre
the woman’s voice does not assert itself, and does not in any way provide a specific
framework of woman’s aesthetic, or ideology.

Despite the slightly ‘dark’ themes of some of her texts, her interpretation and
representation was lyrical and romantic. Hawa Se Hippy Tak (From Eve to Hippy) and
Qissa Yeh Aurat Ka (The story of the women) were both done in 1972 and were ‘women-
centric’. Although Bhatia was conscious of the woman’s position in a patriarchal
society, yet one could neither identify with nor recognize the women in her plays. Even
while being defiant, they functioned within conventional social spaces. In an attempt to
be part of the times, Bhatia directed plays like ‘Hawa Se Hippy Tak’, (1972) a comment
on the youth, with their anti-establishment stances and a defiance of the twin frame of
patriarchy and feudalism. He plays were deeply rooted in the history, tradition and
politics of Punjab, yet their primary appeal was emotional.

“I have been portraying the tragedy of being a woman in a male-oriented world.
Despite all this glib talk about women’s emancipation, she remains a second class citizen.
The irony is that she is party to the creation of such a situation. She has come to welcome
her shackles as chains of adornment. Very cleverly man has placed her on a high
pedestal. He keeps singing hymns in her praise as an all-sacrificing mother, loving
daughter, devoted sister, loyal wife and so on. But this in fact is a use to prevent her from

272 Garcia, Lorca, Federico (1898-1936) Spanish poet and playwright. One of the best known Spanish poets
of the twentieth century and the most widely translated Spanish dramatist of the age; these facts owe
something to Lorca’s tragic death at the hands of the Falangists; they also derive from the oddly symbolic
way in which Lorca’s intense personal work reflects the death of liberty and the creative imagination in
Spain, coinciding with the death of the Spanish revolution after three years of civil war (1936-1939)
claiming equal parity. I have mirrored this situation in my work and ‘Qis: i Yeh Aurat Ka, Hawa Se Hippy Tak’ is a veritable document of this male game.273

She did receive considerable adulation in Delhi, as her theatre resurrected a new identity politics amongst the Punjabi community fractured by its dislocation due to Partition. She also stood in direct contrast to the lewd but popular ‘Sapru House’ theatre – an unfortunately negative stereotype with which the name of the auditorium came to be linked – which most sophisticated Punjabis abhorred, although it also provided a link to Punjabi heritage and language. Sheila Bhatia offered them, instead, a return to the beauty of Punjabi poetry, music, and the panoramic references to culture through anecdote and story.

In Bengal, Tripti Mitra,274 foremost actress of contemporary Bengali theatre, became a member of the Indian people’s association (IPTA), and acted in most of its productions. Married to the legendary Bengali actor Sombhu Mitra, they both combined to create mesmerising theatre in Bengal. Mitra’s portrayals of the characters that she performed on the stage had the hallmark of artistic virtuosity, with a voice that had a range and resonance that was not only charismatic but also profoundly connected her with the audience. Her daughter Sali Mitra275 raised the bar of theatre acting, and took the legacy inherited from both the father and mother further. Her solo renditions have won her many accolades across India. While in Bombay, Vijaya Mehta, combined folk traditions with a deeply ingrained contemporary mind. In her oeuvre, that spanned from the 1950’s to the 1990’s, she created one production after another that stunned the audience with its sheer innovation and freshness, from Kalidas’s Shakuntala to Rani in Naga Mandala and from the widow in Barrister to the angst-ridden mother of Sandya Chayya, she played the characters with a sweep and depth that tested indigenous Indian techniques on the simultaneous plane of the contemporary. Bringing on the Marathi stage, the works of Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Jaywant Dalvi’s, with their

273 Sheila Bhatia in conversation with Chaman Ahuja in Theatre India: Page-38 March 2001
275 Daughter of the legendary Bengali theatre actor Sombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra.
dense plots and complex relationships – characters were now being infused with psychological nuances and sub-texts starting getting discussed.

The gender relationships situated in a contemporary milieu, delineated their women characters in a manner that challenged stereotypes. Her long-time collaboration with the German director Fritz Bennewitz\(^ {276}\) catapulted her onto the international stage, with a flamboyant rendering of Bertold Brecht’s, *Chalk Circle*, using the tamasha\(^ {277}\) form to give the narrative a folk feel. As a woman director Vijaya Mehta, when she plays a character on stage or directs a female actor, goes into the minutes details of the character without actually taking an obvious political or gender position. But she never forgets for a moment, and neither does she let the audience forget, that she is a woman director who will bring to the characters an interpretation and value that is definitely feminine. A prolific actor and director, she certainly impacted an entire generation of actors, playwrights and directors with her theatre repertory *Rangayan*, that flourished from the early 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, doing experimental plays that cut across the social spectrum, and introduced exciting playwrights and actors to the world of the stage and cinema. In Vijaya Mehta’s work, gender studies may not have influenced her in any sort of direct way and her work may not be directly linked to feminine discourse, but in her work we definitely discern a certain steering away from stereotyping women and holding them up to the light, for fresh and creative interpretations.

**Punjabi Theatre in Chandigarh**

The training in most drama schools in the late sixties and early seventies had been persuasively derivative of western sources, forms and traditions. But the situation changed in the late seventies and eighties. Suddenly folk forms and traditions started being explored and valorized, on the assumption that there existed in these forms a theatrical vocabulary that would enable urban theatre to establish links with their forgotten, invisible past.

---

\(^{276}\) Fritz Bennewitz (1926-1995) German director, whose collaborative productions in India influenced many directors, especially in the Brechtian techniques.

\(^{277}\) Tamasha (literally means entertainment) a theatrical folk form from Rajasthan. Many confuse the origin of tamasha from Maharashtra, but this is a fallacy.
When I moved to Chandigarh in 1984, the political history in the state had been through so many upheavals on the level of language, and life that I could sense diffusion in matters of identity. This created a need within me to place my work in a specific cultural framework. The traditional forms through which I explored myself, belonged to rural Punjab which did not have a well developed theatrical tradition, in terms of aesthetics, technique and style. But working with these forms helped me in exploring a theatrical lexis, where unusual encounters could happen. This was an attempt to reach a space where this distinction between conflicting histories did not matter, and which could be used to express my own creative affinities. What drove my search was the desire to create a theatre genre that would supply contemporary answers to the difficulties traditional acting tools posed in its relation to modernity. I never saw tradition in the ‘past tense’, but something that was living and could reproduce its context organically within a contemporary environment. What concerned me was whether an ostensibly ‘old’ form would constrain and perhaps choke the representations required of a contemporary practice. What these forms did do, however, was free my work from the constraints of ‘realism’, which was the dominant mode of theatrical representation available at the time. The Naqqals would spin any narrative on its head, by breaking all the rules of realism. In the middle of a tragedy a horse can appear on the stage and break into a song. In an episode in the famous love legend Sohini Mahival, the matka or the earthen pot upon which Sohini is crossing the river Chenab, suddenly animates itself and starts to narrate the story to the audience. This is a theatrical device that does not fit in with any known grammar of performance, but is completely acceptable to the audience.

The Work Culture

While directing my first play in the city, I found that actors would come late, sometimes reeking of liquor, and bring with them their private complications and moods. There late coming and endless tea breaks would bring out the shrew in me. I was told by one veteran actor “we do theatre for fun, but you are always shouting about punctuality.” I would be irritated with actors who would come to rehearsal dressed in tight trousers, unable to bend or move during work, or actors who would arrive without their scripts, and spend more time gossiping and smoking then learning their lines.
But I carried this belief within me that theatre has to challenge the status quo, and to be able to collectively engage in an imagined future. The very act of people gathering together is a radical act in itself. I formed my group ‘The Company’ in the year 1984. Today, looking back, I cannot help thinking how chance and fate played a role in making me start my own theatre group.

When I first moved to Chandigarh from Bhopal, I was teased by all my friends in Bhopal that the next time we meet Neelam, she will be an impresario of a Giddha and Bhangra team. All this was said in jest, but somewhere it set me thinking. I wondered at this distorted impression that most people have about the state. ‘Punjab has agriculture, but no culture, sort of cliché. But the advice BV Karanth gave me before leaving for Chandigarh continuously echoed in my head- ‘whatever work you do in Chandigarh must be done in the language of the state, with local actors, as theatre must be local, regional and vernacular- you must nationalize the regional and regionalize the national’.

At that time in Chandigarh the stalwarts of theatre were Gursharan Singh, Mohan Maharishi and Rani Balbir Kaur, whose work I was exposed to and who, to some extent, represented the theatre scenario in Chandigarh and also became the benchmark for references. Punjabi theater despite the dogged commitment and motivation of many regional theatre groups has still not found a voice that is loud and clear. Even though there are many groups that are working in different parts of Punjab, they are still struggling with questions of identity, both in terms of subject matter and form. Some of them are so localized, that the only have relevance in the context of their regional aspiration and milieu. In a way they have their strengths and rapport with the audience that they are engaged with, but cannot connect with a wider audience. This statement should in no way undermine their work, as they serve a certain social, psychological and creative thought-line for the audiences that they address.

One of the most significant forces in Punjabi street theatre is, indisputably, Gursharan Singh (1929-) the iconic father-figure of revolutionary/political theatre in Punjab. His theatre is a theatre on carts, on trucks, in village squares, under a tree, on a street corner. It is a theatre of sweat and salt, a theatre of applause, a theatre viewed by...
thousands of people sitting under a blazing sun or watching under the night-light with the sort of passion reserved for religious functions or village fairs. In 1964, he founded the Natak Kala Kendra in Amritsar, which has been the nursery to many Punjabi theatre actors and directors. His street theatre activities impacted Punjabi rural communities and inspired a generation of activist theatre workers who spread the message of social change and civil rights to workers, laborers and students. During the height of terrorism in Punjab in the 1980's he continued to perform, regardless of safety and with constant threats to his life. His most notable play was Tohya (ditch) an interesting diatribe on man’s capacity to keep on digging his own ditch, told in a satirical vein. In Kurshiwala and Manjiwala (The chair-man and the cot-man) was a direct assault on the apathy of officialdom in tackling the terrorist designs of Jarnail Singh Bindranwala, the Machiavellian terrorist who held an entire state to ransom by his brutal designs. His agitprop theatre exercised a strong influence on the general public, who thronged to see his plays with a fervour and passion, reminiscent of political meeting that held promises of hope and affirmation. Why was Gursharan Singh or Bhaji as he is affectionately known become so influential and revered? Why did a man whose allegiance was to the Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was involved in anti-India tirades and was hiding inside the holy Golden Temple. The army had to move in and Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his group of armed extremists who had set up their base in the temple were flushed out, leading to many innocent pilgrims dying. He spearheaded Sikh separatist movement, and was one of the main architects of militancy in Punjab, which saw nearly 278 Agitprop is a portmanteau of agitation and propaganda. The term originated in Bolshevist Russia (the future Soviet Union). The term propaganda in the Russian language didn't bear any negative connotation at that time. It simply meant "dissemination of ideas". In the case of agitprop, the ideas to be disseminated were those of communism, including explanations of the policy of the Communist Party and the Soviet state. In other contexts, propaganda could mean dissemination of any kind of beneficial knowledge, e.g., of new methods in agriculture. "Agitation" meant urging people to do what Soviet leaders expected them to do; again, at various levels. In other words, propaganda was supposed to act on the mind, while agitation acted on emotions, although both usually went together, thus giving rise to the cliché "propaganda and agitation". The term "agitprop" gave rise to agitprop theatre, a highly-politicized leftist theatre originated in Europe of 1920s-1930s and spread to America as well, with plays of Bertolt Brecht being a notable example. Gradually the term "agitprop" came to describe any kind of leftist politicized art, after the Bolshevik Revolution, an agitprop train toured the country, with artists and actors performing simple plays and broadcasting propaganda. It had a printing press onboard the train to allow posters to be reproduced and thrown out of the windows if it passed through villages.
theatre of the people, create a company of actors and theatre workers, who worked in trying conditions without any comfort or financial remunerations for a cause? Why did his work have an impact on so many of us? What indeed was his theatre? Its origins intertwined agitprop theatre, as an openly revolutionary and agitational form of theatre concerned with day to day issues of the ‘class struggle,’ with all that was visionary and rigorous. Gursharan Singh agitprop Theatre Movement, was composed of theatre activist who had rejected the illusory naturalism of bourgeois theatre, which to him seemed like polite versions of an upper middle class stalking the boards. Instead, with music, songs, short scenes and sketches, using cartoons and caricature techniques, they performed political plays in the streets or halls for a rural and working class audience.

The young people, who worked with him were excited and inspired by current political events, and also increasingly passionate about theatre itself, and for these young students, these rough, simple, propagandistic plays were the answer. According to Hari a student who works with Gursharan Singh “We had no knowledge of the skills that were needed to work in the theatre, just a desire to speak for the people we believed we were representing. So we decided that all we needed was the vitality of the street theatre and some of the acting technique of the legitimate theatre that we developed and made more flexible. As an actor working in street theatre I must be able to dance, sing, play musical instruments and act.”

On the other hand was the theatre of Mohan Maharishi,(1940-) who retired as the Chairperson of The Department of Indian Theatre Panjab University, Chandigarh,(1979) and was a product of the National School of Drama(1962)- was a complete contrast to Gursharan Singh’s earthy charm. One of the earliest, bright products of the National School of Drama with an unerring Ebrahim Alkazi stamp visible in every department of his work, almost as if he could just not shake of the powerful impact his teacher had on his mind, heart and personality. Maharishi, in his own specific way, has done much to elevate theatre in India. In an over three-decade span as a director, teacher, actor, designer, he did several important productions, pioneering amongst them being Dharamvir Bharti’s much-acclaimed Hindi play "Andha Yug" with a foreign cast, a feat that was emulated with a Punjabi play, "Rani Jindan" in the U.S. and Canada.
After a short stint as Director with his alma mater in 1984 - from where he resigned because of differences with the management - he went back to the Department of Indian Theatre, Panjab University, Chandigarh, where he had been teaching since 1979. He retired in 2004, leaving a trail resplendent with controversies, brickbats, and accolades. The highpoint of which was certainly the writing of "Einstein".

Maharishi’s work has been fairly wide-ranging, from Einstein (1997) which was a landmark play and widely celebrated. The play was first staged in Delhi, under the aegis of the National School of Drama Repertory Company, on 25 November 1994 with a string of 25 performances. And has since then generated considerable debate in both literary and theatrical circles. "It shows the wonder scientist in three polarized images," explains the seasoned playwright-director. "But it also, simultaneously, seeks to destroy that very linearity through mutual tension and interaction between the three split images. Three triangularly arranged mirrors that relentlessly reflect and re-reflect the varied dimensions, in effect, add both contradictory and complementary images of the persona in the mind of the audience. It first seeks to establish the broad cosmological framework, and sort of enlist radical changes of far reaching import brought about by Newton and Einstein. The second part largely focuses on the man and his work. It also tries to chart out the complex and often painful, yet emotional and passionate search for an order in chaos, and vice-versa." His play Raja Ki Rasoi (The King’s Kitchen, 1998) received a mixed response, both in terms of its staging and content. His oeuvre of work did not have any definitive signature, conceptual or aesthetic, and his plays swung between realism and stylization.

Rani Balbir Kaur (1945-) on the other hand, worked as an actress in the productions of Balwant Gargi, and showed a vivacity and flair that won her immediate recognition. Her work at the Department of Indian Theatre was marked by tempestuous theatricality, and her impatience with nuanced detailing made most of her productions look half-baked. A vivid imagination, a flair for composing music and her striking colour palettes helped in lifting the productions from sinking into mediocrity. Despite having a very distinct talent and a deep rooted understanding of the Punjabi ethos, she could not really find her space, in the pantheon of Punjabi theatre.
I would like to refer, to my own work as a woman director working in Chandigarh. When I began my work, most plays that I was exposed to as a student in the National School of Drama were epic, larger than life, high drama—Tughlak, Othello, King Lear—with their dramatic speeches, grand gestures, florid flourishes, exposed me to a theatre that had spectacle, and was indeed spectacular.

When I formed my own theatre group The COMPANY280 in 1984 in Chandigarh, I was searching for a form through which I could locate my work. Born and brought up in a semi urban world, I wanted to participate in specific experiences, that were part of my region, but to which I did not have a direct access, at a concrete level. But in a diffused kind of way, there was a sense of a memory, a rhythm, a form, a humor that was part of my inherited legacy. How could I claim it, without indulging in any slavish imitation? It had to be a transmutation or transformation, in the sense, I knew where it came from, but I also knew that I wanted to take it in a very different direction. Tradition was more in terms of tradition—of what I was seeking to recover, not unchanging and age-old, but its very opposite, transformed and used. Tradition for me was a history of change, something which was in constant flux, and therefore needed not to be set against modernity, but capable of revealing, coalescing, confronting and with an inherent potential for change.

My eureka moment came when I saw the Naqqals perform Sohini Mahiwal in a village near Ropar, in 1985, two actors carrying lanterns appear in a hallow of a village square, along with two narrators, who addressed the entire audience describing the play, commenting on its moral and romantic issues in gestures and tones reminiscent of traveling shows and street performers. In the background is a minstrel strumming some indecipherable sound on a simple wooden drum. In Sohini Mahiwal several stories were being told at the same time in the language of ordinary people, in a tone that I had not heard before. The play captured the spirit of freedom with an unruly aesthetics that was far removed from the realistic theatre I had been exposed. I could see how song, story and

---

280 A detailed account of my work would follow in the chapter ‘The quotidian philosophy of creation: an ethnographic account of The Company’.
body consciousness used by traditional artists could help urban actors to discover a new lexicon of signs, gestures and body. When the 'clay pot' in which Sohini has to cross the river began to dance, it became a spontaneous intervention which seemed neither imposed nor premeditated, but broke all the rules and grammar of theatre-suggesting a huge field of possibilities. 281

Women Directors - 1990 to 2007

Text, Performance, Plots Narratives

The foundations had already been laid for the emergence of women directors in the 1990’s, by the work done by women directors in the 50’s, 60’s 70’s and 80’s allowing for the emergence of new directors, who sliced through social stratification and

281 Let me share a story. When I first moved to Chandigarh in 1984, having spent many years in Mumbai and Bhopal, I was mocked by my theatre friends who said, “The next time we meet Neelam, she will be the impresario of a giddha and bhangra team.” All this was said in jest, but somewhere it set me thinking. I wondered at the distorted impression most people have about the sensibility of Punjabis. The cliché that reiterates, ‘Punjab has agriculture, but no culture’. It has always struck me that those who rely on this silly line must be far more ignorant than those they deride, knowing as they do so little about Punjab and Punjabi’s.

Recently, while I was in London, I was told that the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) was, for its next festival, exploring as a theme the relationship between agriculture and culture. Formatting an entire festival around this theme set me thinking. What was once a dismissive judgment about Punjab has today become the benchmark for an International event in London. I had never actually given any thought to this dry evaluation, but I did begin thinking about the deep connection that we have with the earth, land, country, and home. Vegetables that grow in the earth and end up on our dining tables, remind us everyday of the connection between farming, harvest, food and celebration.

I have never been able to separate culture from the earth. To till the land and see the tree you planted grow is akin to the joy that an artist feels when he/she has painted a painting or created a play. Culture is inextricably linked with agriculture. Our language, dance, music is replete with images from the earth and the joys of procreation, growth and renewal; the earth being furrowed, the seed being sown, the spraying of the plant, the plucking of the fruit. Symbols and signs of any ancient culture are taken from myths about nature and fertility. Earth is synonymous with fertility. Art is feminine, it creates like the earth.

I must admit, in all honesty, and even with a sense of pride, that I have always enjoyed the mesmerizing beat of the dhol and the vigorous movements of the giddha and bhangra. The lyrics, replete with innuendos-earthly and risque—appeal to me. used to wonder why Punjabi was considered an unsophisticated language and why the Sikh were always being seen as the bumbling taxi driver in Bollywood films or were the butt of jokes. I questioned why he was never shown as the lover or as a hero in Hindi films. My mind resonated with verses from the Guru Granth Sahib and songs from Heer Ranja, and Sassi Punnu.
chartered fresh terrains for themselves. Woman theatre groups in the 90’s were trying to evolve new forms for theatrical practice, forms that are different from a male oriented or male dominated theatre that existed. A form that would accommodate the changing content, while simultaneously searching for a form which could contain the new content.

Despite their unity of concern many diverse points of view emerged. The array of viewpoints is what gave it continuity, a continuum of concerns, which fragmented into varied fractions informed as much by cultures as by preference. Many diverse, separate and complex influences had evolved through the post-independence period, from folk, to the classical, television, internet, globalization, a kaleidoscope of diverse strands that created a modernistic tapestry into which the creative women artist dipped into for inspiration.

Women theatre groups exist in many cities across the country. From New-Delhi and the North, and from Calcutta to Mumbai and Pondicherry to Chennai. These women directors whose work I will be examining have an intellectual rigour, that is matched by the ease with which they give voice to their world through the vocabularies that they have been handed from the last decade to the closing of the twentieth century. To have the imagination to integrate and assimilate the latest in electronic media, along with the traditions of the folk and classical energies to television. They took the challenge of questioning the categories that had become stereotypical and prised open those subjects that had been locked and wished away. They talked about issues that had never been spoken about earlier even in the work of women directors.

“Our stress is on what forms the grain of these women struggle. How were their worlds shaped? We ask. How have they turned figures, plots, narratives, lyrical and fictional projects set up for different purposes to their use? With what cunning did they press into service objects coded into cultural significations indifferent or hostile to them? How did they tread their oblique paths across competing ideological grid, or obdurately
hang on to illegitimate pleasures? What forms did their dreams of integrity or selfhood take?\textsuperscript{282}

In the eighties gender studies directly or indirectly influenced everything from politics to history, and from social science to media studies. This sort of consciousness percolated in the work of women directors in terms of content, ways of working and aesthetics. The critical questions concerned how to present women on the stage, how to make visible both ‘public’ and ‘private’ space- to show women not as passive receivers but as active participants in their own destiny. How to construct a women socially, biologically and sexually on the stage. As most of the work by women directors is local, working within their own ethnicity and regional influences, yet somewhere most women directors work within a network of thoughts and points of view that interweave and complement each other. This is not in any way to suggest a similarity of content, or aesthetics, but more in the nature of freedom from structures, and a movement away from naturalism.

As a direct contrast to male-authored text a fresh way of working with text emerged from this group of independent directors, working within their own milieu, within their own sensibilities and aesthetics, evolving their own text, structures and points-of-view. Placing the woman experiences as central to their work, they reworked their sense of plot, time, space, pace and narrative – seeing their work more as a process rather than a finished or packaged product. Even while using existing text, they reversed the order of things, by developing an individual authorship through a reworking of the given text -through workshops, improvisation and establishing a collaborative relationships between the actor, text and body.

The question of differences in the working style between men and women should be raised tentatively, and approached without being either strident, or romantic. In my own experience as a theatre director, I have seen a difference in functioning between women and men. Women prefer to take a decision as a collective, while men tend to make it more one-on-one. But the real change is noticed in the choice of subjects, when

\textsuperscript{282} Geeta Kapur: When Was Modernism- page3
suddenly large events and the spectacular were replaced by the quotidian. This shift in emphasis from an issue based theatre to the mystery of the everyday – to see the extraordinary in the everyday became the leitmotif for women directors. The narrative was more in terms of a director wishing to explore the interior spaces of the character. - to use everyday life as a valid theatrical subject and give it voice and space - was what defined the work of women in theatre. They tried to represent ordinary life as poetic and relevant, and saw this as meaningful material for dramatic narratives. Women received their inspiration from, daily life, from the sound of bubbling oil, to clothes being washed. Everyday, mundane images became transformed and made ‘anew’ to be scrutinized, examined and interrogated. They saw in these little parts of life an importance, equaling those climatic events that are usually associated with high drama. Then, anything named feminist theatre refers to the sort of experience that may not have found visibility until now. Because of this, the specifics of that experience – whatever its contours might be - are in the process of being mapped.

“.... In some feminist work, plot is frequently circular, and refuses any resolution, characters can change status, personalities and even gender, crossing society’s often artificially maintained boundaries of gender roles; and objects can bring about social relationships, realities and imaginary landscapes (as in Neelam Mansingh and Anamika Haksar’s work). Thus coherent structures, traditional plots devices, and a dependence on dialogic communication are derailed and called into question in order to unsettle expectations of portrayals”.  

Woman’s theatre have widened the definition of what was considered conventionally realistic. The investigation of fantasy, the plumbing of the sub-conscious, the recognition of dreams, is the sort of space that women directors were interested in examining in a non-sequential, non-linear way.

While viewing the work of women artists I have seen a boldness, innovation and mystery in the way the deal with text, characters and acting vocabulary. It is often

---

said about women’s theatre that - they do not understand structure, but actually what women directors are doing is to reinvent a structure. Actually they are not concerned with structures at all, structure as a monolith – they allow the action/plot/ narrative/time/space to flow all over the stage, overlap at times, or separate, loop, swirl- no rules are maintained, except to get to the heart of the meaning. They see structure as something fluid, uncontained. This sudden whirlwind at the heart of the realist, modernist theatre that had been established by men is as much an expression of individual creativity as it is an inadvertent political response to their rules.

Collaborative theatre

The most significant aspect of the women theatre was that it was a collaborative theatre. A theatre created by director, actors, designers and writer together. This need arose as there was an urge to see a theatre different from the one that was being shown. The need to move away from a hierarchical theatre, where one person's opinion is imposed on a group- it was as if only one person wanted to do the thinking and the rest were to follow. There seemed to be something disrespectful in this sort of approach. In most work of women directors, the performances are layered and the play is seen from multiple viewpoints. That multiple viewpoint also comes from the fact that women did not like theatre to be seen from one fixed point of view, but saw theatre narrative as something fluid enough to contain many voices and opinions. Its almost as if women theatre was saying, that do not see a play by sitting in one position- keep on changing your seat, and fresh aspects of the production will be revealed.

The performances is not constituted by words alone, but gesture, sound, music all coalesce together to create an image. It is in the image that the play is contained and the narrative expanded. As most women directors prefer their work to be collaborative, the authorial voice shifts from the individual to the collective, allowing for each performer to bring something from his/her own life into the performance.

The task of the director involves authority, at least that is the traditional notion. The authority lies in one person (The director) taking total control not only of all aspects
of production but also of what each actor has to do, how he has to move, when and how he has to render the text etc. The director, according to this approach is the master puppeteer who controls all the strings. There is little scope here for the experience of the other members of the group to layer and enrich the performance. This, in my view negates the concept of collectivity on which the art of theatre is based. The possibility of the director encountering new meanings and dimensions of the text that he/she has taken up for staging is also reduced.

“There is said that in day to day life, while women negotiate complex networks of relationships to minimize differences, reach a consensus, men live in a world of status where independence is the key. Women, less preoccupied with status is willing to share, accept and explore, which allows for a more multi layered narrative to emerge”

Text:

It was sometimes in the late eighties and early nineties that women directors started asking themselves some very hard questions- they wanted their stories to be told, their way. Until now all the characters portrayed on stage was the creation of men as they saw women, how they conceived a heroine should behave and look. When women saw the plays, they knew that even though the play talked about their lives, there was absolutely no identification with the women portrayed on stage. It was as if in a flash, women realised, that men cannot understand a women experience, he can only write about it as he imagines it and in that there is a falsification. Women suddenly woke up and said, hey we are more complex then that and certainly more layered.

The main difference that did emerge when women came to the forefront of the profession was that women are more interested in the private zones of the characters rather then the public zones. Women directors especially working from the 90’s onward, developed a range of theoretical concepts that emphasized the psychological difference between male and female theatre. Women directors showed inclinations in their work that swerved more towards performance then the word. What marked the women director’s

284 Kirti Jain: Muffled Voices- page 162-163
of the 90’s and the 20’s is that even though each director was working within the concerns of their local situations, yet a invisible thread bound them, not directly but through the subtle workings of what constitutes’ women theatre. In the work of most women directors, a lack of dependency on the written word, an exploration of the body as an adjunct to the text is noticed. Working more to create a distinct visual language for the stage, rather than a dependency on words. To make a different kind of text, which is localized in a imagist space, where the text is reconstructed and reassembled in a way that even while working with a ‘given text’ it is the performance and the visual vocabulary that is the centre of the structure, rather then the text. This search amongst the women director’s for a visual language, was not new, and many stalwarts of theatre, from Grotowoski, Mnouchkine and Peter Brook had in their theatre productions moved away from the written word to create a text based on sound, image, light and the actors body.

This is evident in the works of Amal Allana,(1947-) Veenapani Chawla,(1946) Anuradha Kapur,(1951-) and Maya Krishna Rao(1952-). Anuradha Kapur and Veenapani Chawla are both Punjabi directors, with one working in Delhi and the other lives and works in Pondicherry. They are not working on the same lines or taking the same political positions yet somewhere they belong to a similar struggle. Their work and text is non linear and not clear-cut. It is also non sequential. They brought in contradictory art forms, films slides, music, video clips, like a collage of images that create a parallel text. In there work, they draw upon many post-modern techniques; a pastiche of multi- voices, gender transformation, a lack of closure, a collage of images, yet their work is not ambiguous, but demonstrated the crisis of social change and the complex forces that are working behind this change. What is interesting is that most of these women directors, devise their own script, even when they are working with classical material. Anuradha Kapur’s ‘Umaro Jan’, Amal Allana’s ‘Nati Binodini’, Maya

286 Ariane Mnouchkine- whose theatre company Theatre du Soleil is one of the most celebrated companies in Europe, and she is one of the best-known director’s.
287 Peter Brook (1925-) One of the most influential director of the time, whose productions are a byword for imagination, energy and innovation.
Krishna Rao’s ‘The Job’ work their way towards the text through improvisation and transformation.

Where the text is not the premise through which the performance is constructed, but seen more as a starting point to germinate and devise a performance by allowing an idea to develop through the body. Even while dealing with a given text, the relationship between the performance and the text was disassembled and deconstructed to free the production from a dependency on the text and its construction and linearity. By transforming the text completely through improvisations and dramatic devices, this change is managed, by allowing the actors to take the ‘seed’ of an idea and let it incubate in the impulses of experiences. Most women theatre directors use the text as a note on which the production is built. The main thrust is on the performance, and the text is perceived as an aspect of the performance, not the performance per se, neither is it considered the core of the performance. It is more like a stitch in the fabric of movement. It is the imagery and body space relationship that is minutely explored.

“Like feminism, feminist theatre is also criticised for being ‘essentialist’, that is, for abbreviating women to bodies, and for assuming that all women are the same (bound to be caring and nurturing while men are bound to be aggressive), but notwithstanding this criticism feminist theatre has unquestionably added to the dramatic canon a set of important topics including the sexual division of labour, especially in domestic work and childcare, mothering, prescriptive roles and gender stereotypes, female friendship, female sexuality, and the political importance of identity.

But most importantly, it has proposed the idea of a ‘woman’s language’ in theatre. New dramatic structures which stress collective and cooperative working process by giving precedence to performance rather than to the playscript have come into circulation. These are experiments with the process and form of dramatic writing and put in place a different set of authorial and professional relationships. I am concerned about thinking through these. Does a women language produce different narratives, stories,
plots and characters? Another perception of time and temporality? An otherwise nuanced experience? Another sort of work process?  

Not withstanding the sociological or human importance of women’s theatre directors who are beginning to explore theatrically- and to use as raw material for their plays- an area of experience that is virtually unrecorded in theatre history: the consciousness of woman as seen through woman consciousness. This became the impulse behind their work, a belief in themselves and in their theatre.

In Kirti Jain’s play “Aur Kitne Tukde” - based on Urvashi Butalia’s book The Other Side Of Silence, which has documented stories of the partition. In the production that evolved through improvisations and workshops, Jain uses swings, slides, the innocent objects of joy and excitement that are found in a playground, and then transforms them into fields of blood. With an unexpected suddenness she makes the familiar, unfamiliar to reveal the underbelly; the gore and slime of hate politics. In the scene of the women jumping into a well to save their honour- Kirti Jain uses a slide from the playground to show the actors, slide to their death. While political activism through theatre has been used by many theatre artists (Utpal Dutt, Badal Sarkar, Gursharan Singh), the grammar of the activism, and the visual language changes in the hands of a woman director.

Maya Krishna Rao (1952-) uses personal imagery from memory and observation and casts it in the form of testimonies, images, songs and objects. A way of working that is both erotic and bizarre, her work is an intelligent hybrid of diverse cultural images, at once familiar and alien. Maya Krishna Rao in her play “The Four-Wheel Drive come to Mr. Sharma Body-Fat Murdered-Slow” leans forward and engages the audience with a gregarious familiarity, as if she were in a confessional or in her own sitting room. There is always a sense of intimacy that surrounds her play, talking as it

---

288 Anuradha Kapur: Theatre India page 6 Women Directors directions. A Wandering Word, An Unstable subject

289 Kirti Jain is a professor at the National School of Drama, New Delhi. She was its director from 1988-1995.
were to each member of the audience on a one to one connection. She steps out of a rubber tub with hedonistic ersatz, winks at the audience referring both to her flabby arms and to the politics of anorexia. She is both showgirl and stand-up comic. One moment it is Kathakali, transforming into a cabaret dancer, then swiftly metamorphosing into a political commentator.

To quote Maya “Very early on, thanks to having been trained in male roles in Kathakali and often been made to play Krishna in school ballets, I did not view the world of theatre as being specifically populated with male or female characters, they were just characters from another world.. It was very late in my Kathakali training that I learnt the female role; she seemed strangely new and exciting after all those years of being male! For the first time I learnt to enact the downcast eyes of the female lover, and enjoyed the fact that it was impelled not by coyness but by overwhelming, overflowing, love. I also enjoyed in retrospect the exciting schizophrenia that resulted from the Uday Shankar-type of dance-ballets and theatre productions in school, and the classical Kathakali training at home. I delighted at being able to move from one to the other with ease, with no, “burning contradictions”!! The Krishna I played could be either in Vrindavan or the deep south of Kerala’s Kathakali or in Kurukshetra! All of this was included in both my worlds, not either one of the other; as a consequence I have really never known how to take positions in the modern versus the traditional debate. Also, for me, the experience of someone like Krishna came from the person I danced rather than the god of mythological stories or the picture in the pooja room290.

“I was drawn to a kind of theatre- making where you have to get away from the real to bring out what is real. I think that need, in one way or the other, has remained with me all these years and has continuously shaped the way I think and communicate………..My choice of themes\stories\ideas has never been made for primarily political reason, but certainly a political sense has shaped the form and content of each piece. Differently in each case, but always present. There is politics in each gesture without the gesture being political, if you like. After every new creation, the political sense gets sharpened as well”

"For me the questions were not just to do with what profession to take up but also, what kind of theatre to do, once I had chosen to do it. Having gained a political sense, a whole range of possibilities within theatre open up—or rather, I wanted to discover the different ways in which theatre could be practiced, the way theatre stood in relation to the rest of society. Again, some of this happened by design and some by accident. Today I am a one-person, one-woman performer, partly by accident and partly as punishment."

It is evident from Maya Krishna Rao work—that only a woman could have created the kind of theatre she does. From a blustering Punjabi shrew to a cold matriarch—from a refugee searching for an imaginary homeland to an aging actress. By getting into different skins, she hopes to break the carapace of deception and set up a series of identifications that defy the prototype roles assigned and designed for women artist. In Khol Do based on Sadat Hasan Manto is a story of a father searching for his lost daughter in the pre-partition communal riots. A fifty five minute piece about a search that is so intense that the father begins to find the daughter in his own body, his fingers, the tilt of his head the smile. It was as if the actor was neither telling a story, nor simply getting the body to express his anguish. The interpretation lay somewhere in-between, criss-crossing between dance and theatre. Rao is both the father and the daughter, using the movement from kathakali, but reworked for storytelling, by deferring the meaning, only to claim it later. The bare stage with a circle of light showed Rao attired in a short tunic over a flared Salwar. The one image that stands out in all its poignancy is of the father recognising the abandoned blue veil of his daughter, which he scooped up with his bare foot to gather the ragged blue veil of his missing daughter. (a recognisable object of the lost daughter, giving hope, and providing the comfort of the familiar) This visual image in a flash of a moment conjoins the image of the father with the daughter, dovetailing their pain of separation, which can be enlarged to suggest the separation of a nation that was once one. Suddenly in one actor you glimpse two images, two genders two presences, both absent as well as present- both brutalized- both victims of political

holocaust, yet showing an inalienable empathy with the body, that could be only performed by a female artist.

Trained as a Kathakali performer, Maya Krishnan Rao is at a distinct advantage, of having a highly trained body, which becomes the site that examines issues, of politics, nostalgia and memory. She could have easily taken the safe route of her training as the starting and ending point of her creativity, but instead she transformed and metamorphosed her classical training into developing a distinct physical vocabulary. Using the monologue form she develops most of her work in an improvised way, adding and subtracting as she goes along. Being both the director and the actor can sometimes pose a disadvantage. Not having the outside eye that can edit, there is sometimes a hint of self-indulgence and narcissism in her work.

“Always slightly quoting herself as Kathakali performer/contemporary actor/dancer/political satirist, Maya Krishna Rao scrambles codes through performance and pursues reinvention of (‘civilization’) cultural materials. A crossbreed language-Hindi, English, Malayalam, Punjabi, English-Malayalam, Hindi-Punjabi- spun around quickly by changing accents and linguistic quirks comes volleying out of her mouth in a nonstop barrage. This while she fashions a loquacious cunning wacky storytelling cabaret artist, outrageously dressed in kitsch clothing, her make-up just a little over-applied, just a little reckless. Maya Krishna Rao makes herself as she goes along, collapsing the borders between happening, performance, improvisation and classical dance; by contaminating grammars she produces a style that emphatically deals with urban India, admitting the several layers of subterranean city life into performance.”

Most of these artist also collaborated with visual artists to create a performance style that was both an installation as well as a theatrical experience. These directors confronted the new and saw tradition, not in any esoteric terms, but as part of their heritage, which had to be not only taken for granted, but radicalized, without apology or ideological posturing.

293 Actor Prepares: Anuradha Kapur Theatre India :p 26)
In Pondicherry, Veenapani Chawla’s group ‘Adishakti’, straddled tradition, modernity and transition with a dexterity and imagination, where the traditional forms, *Kalaripayattu* and *Kathakali* were confronted and made anew. Her approach is metaphysical, a search for the spirit of the form, through which ancient signs and symbols could be explored in a way to create an alternative experiment.

“Veenapani Chawla lays out several pre-contemporary and contemporary traditions for ‘adulteration’; thus Vinay Kumar, a long term collaborator, brings to bear his understanding of stance and breath, learnt from *kutiattam, kathakali*, and the martial arts, into his body work. This ruptures, expands and saturates, something elasticates the performance into several different worlds at any one time. Vinay Kumar launches into a perfect *kalarii* leap and lands as it were in pidgin- where Malayalam leaks into English and English into Malayalam – and the mix so produced composes a new corporeality and nearly a new language.”

In her production *Ganapati* Veenapani Chawla fuses traditional performance material and systems with a contemporary understanding of the relation between myth, meaning, sound and image. The main percussionist instruments used in the *Kutiattam* performance becomes the content of the play. The four percussionist playing a variety of instruments, including an African horn intersperses with the sound plan creating explanation marks and commas along with a light and causal banter between the musicians, pushing the ostensibly mythic narrative forward in a completely unconventional way. Unusual was the inclusion of a saxophone, creating a sound that dislocated the other instruments, yet underscored a subterranean plot and reversed the order of experiencing. In a certain way this production breaks boundaries of what constitutes theatre. Why not this? Why not that? Pushes the frontier and creates a fresh way of viewing a performance.

294 *Kalari* or *Kalaripayattu* (generally a place for learning): in popular Malayalam usage, a centre that imparts martial training.
295 *body.city: Siting contemporary culture in India* Tulika books: Anuradha Kapur page 141
296 *Kutiattam ancient form of Sanskrit theatre*
Anuradha Kapur, the director of The National School of Drama and is also the director of a theatre company, Vivadi, which is situated in Delhi. She combines in her work a finely critical and analytical mind along with having a gutsy, humorous perceptive characterisation in all her works. Anuradha Kapur develops the *mise en scene* from improvisations and questions the hegemony of the text by allowing it to open up in unexpected ways.

“In *Umrao*, I foregrounded some of the issues that I have been consistently interested in- the speaking voice and the inner lives of women. This also entailed the larger frame of how to fabricate a women on stage in terms of her body language, age and sexuality. I am interested in retrieving a text, and finding the modern women. The play *Sundari* is written in the 20th century, but bridges the gap between the 19th and 20th centuries. *Sundari* dramatic style was influenced by modern Hindi theatre’s connection with the Parsi theatre”.

Anuradha Kapur’s work has been a search to find the relationship between the body and text, between the actor and the character. The struggle has been to explore the space between the life of the character and the life of the actor. How the character gets inscribed on the body of the actor and articulates experiences through the text - When does the actor enter into the skin and bones of the character, how do emotions filter through the memory of the actor with the body being the primary tool were the questions asked. Her work shows an exaggeration of detail, costumes, gender, that is visually sumptuous and creates counter-narrative and an alternative viewpoint to the events that are happening on the stage.

“In the work of Neelam man Singh Chowdhry and Amal Allana and in my work as well, melodramatic excess is used, I would suggest, with an intent to set up a process of decoding given pictures ad to allow for their meaning to travel outside the directionality of plot. Unpacking the plenitude of a highly articulated *mise-en-scene* may actually discharge a series of memories, fantasies, utopia and longings laid out in the richness of the visuals, painted backdrops, props, layers upon layers of costumes and make-up that

---

297 Anuradha Kapur: Muffled voices, edited by Lakshmi Subramanyam: page245)
makes the actor even doll-like, with the face not necessarily in consonance with the rest of the body, produce some of this ‘abundance’.298

The *Job* (1997), was a deeply effective dramatization of Bertold Brecht short story about the implication in an economy that was industrializing at a fast pace. A man unemployed finds a job as a watchman in a factory; his sudden death drives his family to the brink of starvation. ‘Frau Hausmann (his wife) took the news with the terrible blank placidity that you sometimes find in people who have long forgotten what a peaceful, normal existence is like.’299 The thought of losing the job along with her husband constantly trailed her. The only thing that mattered was to salvage the job at all cost: fate could not be expected to make such an offer a second time. She adopted a plan that was as desperate as the situation in which she and her three children were placed. She slips into a male identity and takes over her husband’s job disguised as a man/her husband. Wearing her husband’s suit and clumsily putting it on, she practices his walk, his way of sitting, eating and took the promised job. “The nightly round of the yards, workshops and stores call for reliability and courage, qualities that have from time immemorial been called manly. The fact that Hausmann’s widow was equal to these demands - she even received a public commendation from the management(...) proves that courage, physical strength and presence of mind can be shown by anyone man or woman, who really needs a job. In a few days the woman becomes a man, in the same way as men have become men over the millennia: through the production process.300” An accident in the factory puts an end to the whole thing and brought the catastrophic affair to a tragic conclusion. When one of the boilers blew up at night, the night watchman/watchwoman is injured and taken to hospital. when Frau Hausmann wakes up in hospital, she found herself in the women ward. Despite the pain and the bandages, she is gripped by a larger fear, the fear of her gender being revealed.

A feminist tale written by Brecht has androgynous undertones, and both in the writing and the production one could pick up the feminine impulse and personality. Such energy

---

298 Anuradha Kapur; body, city sitting contemporary culture in India . Actors Prepare page 143
299 Berlin Stories: page 112 The Job or By the Sweat of the Brow Shalt Thou fail to Earn Thy Bread.
300 Berlin Stories: page 112 The Job or By the Sweat of the Brow Shalt Thou fail to Earn Thy Bread.
incarnated in Hausmann widow is shown in Kapur’s production with ‘heroic’ possibilities. Pitted against the hideous strictures of a conventional and poverty stricken society this magnificent woman confronts a life which ultimately defeats her and her courage. The set was designed by Nalini Malani and the performance space was extended to embrace both public and private spaces – these two spaces overlapped and mingled dissolving divisions of ‘public’ and the ‘private’. This was not only a physical statement, but also a statement regarding the ambiguity of what constitutes as a woman’s space.

Images, slides, objects and artefacts were meant to be touched, experienced and celebrated. Text/performance/imagery/objects were put together as a montage and the speech broken up into varying registers to suggest the struggle of the woman, the dichotomy between the outer and inner, the ruptures of life that had forced a woman to pose as a male to get a job that had become vacant after the death of her husband.

The set designed by Nalini Malani had plastic surgical gloves hanging menacingly on a cloth line, along with stacks of empty cupboard boxes fetuses, grain, bread and foodstuff, lead to what Malani calls ‘memory membranes’ –set against a hanging piston, on which Malani had painted images from the story that layered the content with a dense ambiguity. Nalini Malani had felt that it was the performance which brought her installations to life. But given the dynamics of collaboration, it could be said that it was both the installation and the performance that gave life to a theatrical experience.

**Sundari: An Actor Prepares (1998)**

The actor Jaishankar Sundari (1889-1975) who got the name *Sundari* after he played *Sundari* (Desdemona) in an adaptation of *Othello*. Anuradha Kapur’s production

---

301 Nalini Malani (1946-) a leading visual artist

302 Sundari: An Actor Prepares is a film based on the autobiography of Jayshankar Sundari, the legendary female impersonator of Gujarati stage in early 20th century Bombay. Sundari literary means beautiful in feminine gender. He earned that title for his rendition of Desdemona in Othello, at the age of 12. Centered around the works of eminent painters Bhupen Khakkar and Nilima Sheikh and theatre director Anuradha
was an adaptation from his autobiography, dramatized by Geetanjali Shree. The play is written in the 20th century and in someway acts like a bridge between the two eras. The influence of Parsi theatre is in evidence in the production by the use of the rich visual imagery of the painted curtains, backdrops, elaborate props, floats and tableau. The female impersonator was able to glimpse the world through both masculine and feminine perspectives.

In the play Sundari crossing sexual boundaries, particularly when these boundaries seem difficult to define, calls into question rigid constructions of sex and gender. In her production of Sundari, actor Jeetu as Sundari, lies on the floor and places a burning diya on his navel. This brief and fleeting moment evokes images of ‘fire in the belly’ a ‘burning gath’ gave the production an edgy sexuality, a vertiginous thrill of danger. “One of my abiding concerns has been the relation between body and text, how to find a contemporary body and a contemporary text. By body I mean the presence of the actor, as physically and materially present as a body on stage. On the stage a text is meaningless unless I relate to the body. The body of the actor is a primary sign in the theatre. More than speech, the body is an instrument of the actor and the director”.

Her play Umrao, gives a first-person-account of a famous courtesan from Lucknow. Casting the middle aged Uttara Baokar, in the role of the courtesan was crucial to the understanding of the character. Devoid of coquetry, the spectator had to pass through the middle aged body to connect with her memories of being a famous singer and dancer of her times. As the external bibelots required to establish a courtesan are dispensed with, (the gajira, the anklets, the coquetry, the ittar etc) this allows for a fresh way of looking at a subject that had until now been encased in external clutter. In the end, haunted by her loneliness and fear of old-age, Umrao reclines on her bed, while the images of her past swirl past her- through mobile screen- that act like flash-backs, serializing her life while she leans towards the audience and whispers conspiratorially “I

Kapur, the film documents the process of his journey from a boy to a man and simultaneously from a male to a female, in the context of contemporary gender discourses and politics of acting.

Geetanjali Shree (1957-) is a Hindi novelist and short story writer based in New Delhi, India. She is the author of several short stories and three novels. She has also written a critical work on Premchand.

Anuradha Kapur: Muffled Voices Women in Modern Indian theatre edited by Lakshmi Subramanyam; Page 245.
will now turn over”. These lines are loaded with ambiguity- turn over to another life, a new beginning! Or is she suggesting death?

Collaborating with artist Nilima Sheikh[^305], who conceived the set as a series of painted screens that were wheeled in and out of the stage. The painted images on the screen were used as a device to convey the inner text of the scene. The visual image, of a swirling cloud, a golden tree in a certain way reflected the mood and interiority of the courtesan, creating a parallel resonance. Moving screens, mobile installations, painted backdrops, create an unusual interaction and integration with the actors on the stage.

Her production *Antigone* was in partnership with filmmaker Ein Lall, where personal testimonies of the Gujarat victims were projected on to a screen as a montage to the text and action on the stage. In the "Antigone Project", Lall and Kapur reclaim a text that has been used over thousands of years “to talk about ethics, law, and citizenship in these troubled times.”[^306] An old text, an old story, an ancient setting that resonates with new meanings and new interpretation to frighteningly underscores the recurring theme of brutality.

The backdrop of two huge video screens scorch us with images from the Gujarat carnage. Lall focuses — not on blood and gore — but on a hand, or a shoe an unclaimed corpse, a bewildered child. Against this image, *Antigone* (Seema Biswas)^[^307] vows to bury her brother Polyneices, who is denied a burial by his uncle King Creon, who issues an edict that his body will be fed to the vultures for his perceived betrayal. We are then no longer viewers to an ancient myth in far away Greece, but participants and voyeurs to the violence around us ‘now’. Time shift, overlaps, ‘moves’ coalesces into this one moment of history and we step into it.

The audience become witnesses, and see themselves as both the perpetuators and victims of crime. On a bare stage with a mound of earth, Seema Biswas laments about death, life, loss of love, betrayal and mortality. Multiple viewing, multiple images get

[^305]: Nilima Sheikh- eminent painter. 
[^307]: Seema Biswas (1965) is an Indian film and theatre actress from Assam who shot into prominence with the role of Phoolan Devi in Shekhar Kapur's film *Bandit Queen* (1994).
released, reinforced and abstracted by the grim reminder of our own bestiality, our own inertia. Antigone’s planting of a sapling on a mound of earth is the one note of affirmation in a desolate landscape of pain and helplessness. ‘when all is lost, let there be a tree’.

Shifting Identities

The collaboration between Director Amal Allana and actor Manohar Singh has given the Indian stage some very exciting theatre. ‘Mother Courage’ had Manohar Singh playing the title role in a rare display of androgynous acting. “is Mother Courage a masculinization of mothering or a ‘feminization of courage? (Anuradha Kapur: Theatre India Page 11).

“Our agenda was very clear from the start- Manohar was not to totally transform himself into a woman, rather Manohar should ‘play’ a woman, i.e.’ demonstrate, not become one. In the sense, he should keep his maleness in evidence. We began to research older performance traditions where men did women’s roles and tried to analyze to what degree the feminine persona was absorbed and represented”.

Rather than become the woman, with the representation of breast and hair, it was more to document the idea of a women. In Amal’s production, Mother Courage is both male and female, the male\ female duality congealed into one. A mother who fiercely defends her children, but can also share a raucous joke with the soldiers.

In the production of Begum Barve written by Satish Alekar, she focuses on the shifting gender identity of the protagonist. The bleak and dank world of the female impersonator which he inhabits is a world devoid of sensitivity, colour and romance. It is from this world that the female impersonator wants to flee and enter into an illusionary world of colour and music. In this imagined world Begum Barve can play the woman. The separation of the real world from the illusionary world can also be seen as the male\female split. In Barve world the male world is effete, while the female world is

308 Sibo In supermarket’ a line from the play.
309 Amal Allana: Women Who Dared : Shifting Identities page 187
fecund. The production done under a gauzy light with painted curtains reminiscent of the Parsi tradition, the characters seem to float in and out of this magical space. Manohar Singh played the role with a whimsical vulnerability. Clad in a wispy white dhoti, with pinkish make-up and antimony lined eyes, he looked a cross between a painted doll and a grotesque mask. One of the highlights of the play was when Manohar Singh playing the role of an over-the-hill female impersonator slowly and deliberately hooks a blouse around his non-existent breasts with the calculated precision of a woman. After that he wraps a shimmering red sari around his aging body and waits for his lover. Sitting on a swing in an attitude of yearning he looks futilely at the audience – and an unexpected hush descends on the audience. For a split second, the entire audience is drawn towards his yearning. It is as if the invisible became visible and the audience and actors are bound together in a collective moment of anticipation. It is this sort of moment that makes people come to the theatre. Suddenly like a clear pool of water the actor’s life becomes an open book and the cumulative tragedies of his existence stare out, starkly, irrevocably.

Conclusion

We’ll have difficulty for a long time to come. She said that we’ll be angry, too busy imitating, busy answering, and finally held down by the shackles of poverty and several other things, if we are trying not to conform, to be able to create very much. But finally we have to create. And I do think that male art is more or less finished, that the patriarchy has come to a dead end that I don’t find exciting and, looking back, I find less and less of what I loved to be exciting. And it was always a kind of qualified love, in that I wasn’t included. My whole life was ignored, misunderstood, condemned. Looked down upon- women were. And even when being cherished or scorned, laughed at, or praised, they had nothing to do with me- the attitude of men towards women, so even in the greatest writers and artist. I felt a kind of qualified response.  

---

310 Virginia Woolf, quoted in A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre page 38. Adeline Virginia Woolf (née Stephen; 25 January 1882 – 28 March 1941) was an English novelist and essayist, regarded as one of the foremost modernist literary figures of the twentieth century. During the interwar period, Woolf was a significant figure in London literary society and a member of the Bloomsbury Group. Her most famous works include the novels Mrs Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927) and Orlando (1928), and the
Mahesh Dattani writes, “Strangely there aren’t very many female playwrights in languages apart from English. Mahasweta Devi\textsuperscript{311} is the only one I can think of. But there are many brilliant directors like Neelam Mansingh, Usha Ganguly, B.Jayshree, Lillete Dubey, Amal Allana, Vijay Mehta and others who have saved theatre from insipid and unbending male viewpoints which sadly reflect in most male centred modern theatre. Of course there is artistic liberty to have male protagonists, but to have shallow cardboard interpretations of women as victims, as self-sacrificial models of virtue, or as promiscuous and hence unhappy people only reflects a lack of insight into the truth about half the human race. One mention has to be made when we talk about a feminine/feminist voice in Indian theatre. Binodini Dasi\textsuperscript{312} was a path breaker in Bengali theatre. Against all odds she made a name for herself in Calcutta at a time when women were not allowed to act on stage.”\textsuperscript{313} In the early 1980’s and 1990’s a shifting from the ‘male gaze’ suddenly started making its presence felt. Even though thematic shift manifested itself much earlier, yet there was hardly any subversion in terms of questioning the terms of approach and modes of production. It was only in the 1990’s that something known as women

book-length essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), with its famous dictum, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

\textsuperscript{311} Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Dhaka, to literary parents. Her father Manish Ghatak was a poet, novelist, a social activist and deeply involved with IPTA, and elder brother of noted filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak, and her mother Dharitri Devi was also a writer and a social worker. Her first schooling was in Dhaka, but after the partition of India she moved to West Bengal in India. She joined the Rabindranath Tagore founded Vishvabharati University in Santiniketan and completed a B.A. (Hons) in English, and then finished an M.A. in English at Calcutta University as well. She later married renowned playwright and actor Bijon Bhattacharya.

\textsuperscript{312} Binodini dasi- (1862 -1941) Born in Calcutta to a family of actors and prostitutes, a nineteenth century actress and theatre personality. Born to an impoverished family in Calcutta. Popularly known as *Natee* Binodini, she started taking singing lessons from a courtesan (*baiji*) at the age of seven and entered the stage at the age of 12 in a role in the play *Shatru sanghar* at the Great National Theatre in 1874. This was the time when the proscenium inspired form of European theatre was gaining popularity among the Bengali audience. Under the guidance of playwright, director and manager GIRISH CHANDRA GHOSH, and by dint of sheer talent and hard work, Binodini soon became the passion among the well-to-do theatre loving *babus* of Calcutta. During the twelve years of her acting life, she acted in lead roles in 80 plays that included Pramila, Sita, Draupadi, Radhika, Ayesha, Kaikays, Motibibi, Kapalkundala, etc.

\textsuperscript{313} The notion of the professional female performer has been synonymous with that of the prostitute. Known as dancing girls, a designation evocative of their characteristically dual role of both entertainer and courtesan; prostitutes held contradictory positions of privilege and condemnation in Indian society.
theatre, with a distinct identity, way of working, along with renewed acting protocols, structures, characterisation, imagery – in fact a new vocabulary for telling stories came into existence.

Besides outlining a history of the craft, the critical point of the chapter has been this: the historical development and forms of women’s theatre in India have one critical political lesson for us – the response to stasis, rigidity, formalization is sometimes ordinary, fluid and quiet. The essence of earlier representations of women in the theatre – moving from props, to simulacra, to clichés, to absences – is now taken up as a mantle from where to begin. The simulacra becomes the real, the absent becomes the visible, and the prop becomes the character – but not through a switch, as much as a switch in perspective. Let women be absent, you hear them say, because in absence, when represented properly, there is great power. After all, Modernism is as comfortable with mutation as it is with stillness. This is the point where the discursive fights have left us.

So, to conclude, the journey of the dominant institutionalization of theatrical forms created rapid transformations in a series of social beliefs and theatrical ideologies. However, if for men it was about activating performance towards truth based on a global and regional community of seekers, the ideological spin on Modernism was different for women. Working from a space where the cultural barriers and textual insight was far more limited, and having our identity as seekers always measured against our sex, we had to transform how this expression of truth was to manifest differently. The woman as creator became the woman as transformer of the fabric of performance, as someone who had to creatively mutate every element of her process – relationships to actors, cultures, audiences and texts could not follow the patterns without constant transformation. After all, if culture wants us to nurture and grow, we will transform, mutate and shake. That is how, beyond the manifestations of our methods, genders and ideologies, women directors are united through Modernism. It is the womb that does not gestate as much as it accelerates.
The next section will show how acceleration is not driven by a desire for radicalism, but as a desire to create the unheimlich. (a word that Freud used- Uncanny or unhomily).