

Finding their own voice: Women Writers and Directors of Indian Theatre

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Indian theatre tradition goes back to the 1st century B.C. However there were hardly any women dramatists to speak of before the 19th century. Because of socio-cultural milieu, women did not, or could not contribute much in theatre in ancient India as writer or director or even as actor. The few contributions they have had, has not been properly documented. Almost the same situation existed in other genres of literature.

Things began to change from 19 Century.

During 19th century many female authors carved out an important place for themselves in the genre of fiction and poetry: the stage remained largely closed to them. Women started contributing (or their contribution began to be recorded) in the genre of theatre only from late 19 Century. It gained in significance with time. And, interestingly it was more pronounced in regional theatre.

In early twentieth century Balamani Ammal, a former devadasi led her own troupe consisting only of women who needed shelter, that travelled all over the [Indian state](#) of [Tamil Nadu](#). The director and male impersonator - R. Nagarathnamma followed suit, forming an all-female Kannada company in 1958. (1)

Talking about the writing of plays, the earliest plays by women were composed in [Bengali](#), [Urdu](#) and [Marathi language](#). Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) and Rasheed Jahan (1905-52) highlighted social evils through their Urdu and [Bengali plays](#) respectively. The pioneer lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji (1866- 1954), wrote the first drama in English by an Indian woman, *Gold Mohur Time* (1930), a parable play that she succeeded in publishing from London. Bharati Sarabhai's socialistic *The Well of the People* (in verse, 1943) and *Two Women* (prose, 1952) followed.

The numbers increased appreciatively after Independence. The issues raised amaze by their range with regard to women's experiences. Important women dramatists include [Mahasweta](#)

[Devi](#), [Nabaneeta Dev Sen](#), and Saonli Mitra ([Bengali](#)); Dhiruben Patel and Varsha Adalja ([Gujarati](#)); Mannu Bhandari, Kusum Kumar, Mridula Garg, Shanti Mehrotra, and Mrinal Pande ([Hindi](#)); Malatibai Bedekar, Mukta Dikshit, Tara Vanrase, Jyoti Mhapsekar, Sushma Deshpande, and Prema Kantak (Marathi); Manjit Pal Kaur ([Punjabi](#)); Ambai and Mangai ([Tamil](#)); Volga and Vinodini ([Telugu](#)); Jameela Nishat ([Urdu](#)). Sanghamitra Mishra and Nibedita Jena (Odia). Dina Mehta is among the best known of those writing in English, addressing various themes on *Mythmakers*; *Tiger, Tiger*; *Sister Like You*; *When One plus One Makes Nine*; and the most celebrated, *Brides Are Not for Burning* and *Getting Away with Murder*. In 1989, Bilkiz Alladin dramatized the historical romance of the British Resident in [Hyderabad](#), James Kirkpatrick, with the beautiful Khairunnissa as *For the Love of a Begum*, which revealed the interface of the Raj and harem politics.

The new millennium opened with great promise. Manjula Padmanabhan shot to fame with her award-winning *Harvest*, followed by *Lights Out*, *Hidden Fires*, and *Mating Season*. Poile Sengupta wrote some fascinating plays, like *Mangalam* and *Keats Was a Tuber*. Hardly a domain of life is left untouched by these playwrights, who offer a variety of analyses of the position of women, exploration of female subjectivity, and different strategies that need adoption to negotiate social change. Their work and voice ask for reformulation of conventional paradigms and meaningful social intervention, the reconsideration of historical knowledge and the re-examination of the basic premises of traditionally organized systems of knowledge about social and literary dynamics. In doing so, they shape a new dramaturgy—a feminist theory of theatre that finds unacceptable the notions of Aristotelian catharsis and *Bharata's* rasa as the feelings aroused in viewers. The plays upset the equilibrium, provoke, and demand response from an audience that will not expect entertainment but will participate in the dialectics since the issues concerning women and children are of the kind that have invariably been and continue to be sidestepped and neglected by society.

Happily, the emergence of women directors as individual cultural producers with gendered perception, innovative semiotics, and sensitive treatment of social issues, has opened up the field to accommodate women's experiences and viewpoints as well as re-present, with gender-sensitive treatment, texts by male playwrights. This is of utmost importance as far as the impact and consolidation of women-centred theatre in India is concerned because theatre

as a patriarchal hegemony is quite capable of absorbing female texts, nullifying their cutting edge, and even turning "feminine concerns" into new commodities for male consumption.

Talking about the women theatre directors, Dina Gandhi-Pathak, Shanta Gandhi, Sheila Bhatia, Vijaya Mehta, Rekha Jain, and Joy Michael were the pioneering directors, succeeded by such innovative creators as Kirti Jain, Anuradha Kapur, Amal Allana, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, [Usha Ganguli](#), Sohag Sen, Tripurari Sharma, Anamika Haksar, Anjana Puri, B. Jayashree, Maya Rao, Rati Bartholomew, Nadira Zaheer Babbar, and Vinapani Chawla. Younger talents like Robijita Gogoi, Shailaja J., Jayati Bose, Rourkela based Nibedita Jena, Bhubaneswar based Bhaswati Basu and Balasore based Sasmita Rana to name a few, are forging new idioms.

From the 1980s onwards, we find the emergence of a host of women playwrights and directors populating the list of practitioners in Indian theatre, which has traditionally been a male preserve. Their plays strive to present, amid the varied women experiences which is not devoid of struggles against domination, Indian women's hopes and aspirations, their fulfilments or frustrations, subject to the conditions they live in. These can be further correlated with the lived experiences of the women playwrights and directors themselves. In order to dramatize these issues effectively, they make use of history, mythology or ancient accounts of life and society, by way of reinterpreting them from women's point of view. They have consistently used folk themes to their own advantage, and used drama as an effective medium to analyze socio-cultural differences and issues associated with gender discrimination.

Things somewhat changed with women playwright and director's entry into the field of theatre in India, and then took several turns along the way. The first phase was one of the imitations of male dramaturgy – modes of representation and theatre practice, which earned the women theatre practitioners some recognition from male theatre critics, practitioners and the audience. The second phase can be described as women practitioners' critical sensitivity towards the male theatre traditions and the third phase has begun with the articulation of the women-centric concerns, where the women playwrights and directors are not just exploring the nuances and ramifications of women experiences and desires but also celebrating their differences. The 'womanist' dramaturgy, thus evolved, is neither the outright rejection of traditional theatre forms because they also can be used to present the nuanced locations of women in the complex Indian contexts, nor is it the merely experimental theatre forms and

non-linear plays as exemplary of women's theatre. It is as, Helene Keyssar says, projecting the 'consciousness' of women as women and what it means to be in the position of the 'subject', while being also aware of the otherness. Hence, the 'womanist' dramaturgy emerges as the shift in stance, where it is not dependent on the patriarchal recognition or identity. (2)

I strongly feel women playwrights directors in India have come full circle. Women theatre is not only focusing on traditionally women-centric subjects. This, I believe is good. Women directors and playwrights are transcending their gender-related fixation and looking at issues and events from a more open, and should I say humanistic perspective.

Endnotes

(1) http://www.indianetzone.com/59/role_women_indian_theatre.htm

(2) **A Theatre of their Own: Indian Women Playwrights and Directors in Perspective**

Pinaki Ranjan Das *State/University Junior Research Fellow Department of English, University of North Bengal*, on adaptations of the plays written by the male playwrights. *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 19, Issue 11, Ver. VII (Nov. 2014), PP 57-60 e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845. www.iosrjournals.org*

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