

# Plight of Contemporary Indian Female Playwrights

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## Abstract

Culture and society play a vital role in the recognition and the identity of every individual either a man or a woman. Though the Indian women playwrights do not give much importance to preserve the culture they belong to, yet their artistic expression marks their identity - that they belong to particular culture. There are innumerable Indian Woman English Dramatists working in experimenting with different themes, but their work is dispersed and cannot contain a body of work. The post-independence Indian drama has through the five eras grown more diverse, rich and varied in content and semiotics and lures upon myths, history, folklore, politics and society for material. To begin with, the plays written by some of these playwrights do not always provide a feminine aesthetic and sensibility. They are some who do take women issues and their concerns in a relevant manner but they are few.

Playwriting is a mixture of site, history, representation and audiences within the context of ideology. It tries to establish relationship between the reader and the text. "Playwriting, which is an intricate and complex interweave with site, history, representation and audience as well as conventions of realism, narrative and stage practice, emerges as a crucial arena of exploration for contemporary feminism, providing insights into the politics of writing and the possible basis for a feminist theory of reception"(Forte, 1996, p. 19).

Over a period of time India has experienced a humongous change and as we move towards a greater globalization, global media and western influences are rapidly changing the face of Indian culture on all fronts be it social, political and on economic aspects. In this scenario change has been seen in the form of art, music, literature etc.

Although Indian women have been an important subject for discussion, a search for the local voice has always been in the forefront. The socio-political need of the country emphasizes the need of a local voice to construct a stage for the new wave of feminism in the Indian context as well. It is important for us to realize how crucial it is to have a local voice for issues that affect women today. It is indeed important to have an adequate representation on the world stage.

**Keywords:** Humongous Change, Globalization, Marginalised Castes ,Feminity

## Introduction

Indian theatre has a long history of resistance and activism. From anti-British narratives during the freedom struggle to voicing the issues of marginalised castes and communities, theatre has provided a platform for people to interact with each other at the community level.

Feminism is one such movement that has found a voice through theatre in the last few decades. While other mediums of popular culture have been criticised for their regressive themes and stereotypical

representations, Indian theatre has often been praised for its focus on women's issues, with bold narratives and progressive representations.

Although India's theatrical history can be traced back to 1st century BCE, it lacks substantial female representation till the 19th century. A reason for this could be the systemic erasure of female voices from India's cultural history. This has been perfectly captured by Tuntun Mukherjee, who writes: "*The denial of education to women, the male exclusivity in the print culture, the tendency to 'vulgarise' and 'devalue' oral culture (generally the female domain), the separation of the private and public space have all served to confine women to certain genres and restrict or erase their presences in others*".

According to G.P. Deshpande, (2002:5) "Drama became, in a manner of speaking, the first art-form in modern India which was secular, it moved from divine imagination of the rishi---And the first democratic art-form in modern urban India."

Women forayed into the male domain of theatre with the emergence of feminist movement in the Indian theatre. One of the reasons held responsible for the absence of women in theatre is that theatre is a public space and women's exclusion from that space is deliberately done by society. Women is regarded as object/objective/obstacle and necessarily positions in the oppressed subjectivity (which is not subject but object of femininity). They were considered as objects and categorized as the 'other'. The emergence of women's theatre helped women to speak for them and thus become 'speaking subjects'. The public/private divide was broken by these speaking subjects as they became conscious and free to make their own choices and decisions. The Conscious women focused on themselves and stopped depending on the opposite sex.

In spite of some conspicuous shortcomings some women playwrights have contributed to the field of theatre. Mention can be made of Mrinalini Sarabhai, Bharati Sarabhai, K. B Thakur etc. Bharati Sarabhai's 'The Well of The People' and 'Two Women' gives a new outlook to –ancient dogmas and customs. Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal's 'Princess Kalyani' has a prologue and epilogue. In this play the playwright uses allegory to bring forth conflict between the virtuous and the wicked forces. Another celebrated dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai's 'Captive Soil' is a verse play presenting actions and reactions during the freedom movement. Indira Devi in collaboration with Dilip Kumar Roy has written The Beggar Princess a play fully devoted to Lord Krishna. Drawing Inspiration from history came the play 'The Siege of Chitor'. It is a play which narrates Akbar's attempt to capture the fort of Chitor. The tyranny of the British on the Indians has been well crafted in Shanta Rama Rau play 'Passage to India' a dramatized version E.M Forster's novel 'Passage to India'. The list could go down a bit further with more cited examples-in 1963 Ms J. M Billimoria play 'My Sons' presented an image of five students from University of Mumbai, who, in spite of sharp variances in their religion and language lived like real brothers. Dina Mehta (1969) play 'The Myth Makers' won an award from Sultan Padamashee playwright competition. In 1970 Shree Devi Singh experimented with the poetic drama in her play 'The Purple'. Another well-known English playwright from Bangalore Polie Sengupta stands out with the usage of strong, flawless, recognizable characters and circumstances. Her play 'Mangalam' was an award winning play and well received by the audience. A story which centres on the joint family set-up in a Tamil Brahmin middle-class home. The English script is occasionally splurged with Tamil words and phrases. She is also kown for 'Inner Laws' (1994), 'A Pretty Business' (1995), 'so said Shakuni' (2001). These women playwrights have dealt with grave issues pertaining to women and their social surroundings- it could be in rural or urban India. In spite of barriers set in their path be it gender difference, family responsibilities or no economic support yet these women have made a positive

opening in the English Drama scene in India in spite of the dominating male supremacy. Tutun Mukerjee (2005-11) comments “Playwriting as a more public art demands more from the writer; for women the demands maybe doubled because they have also to deal with the assumption that they’re less capable of public artistic responsibility” This assumption can take a back step especially with all the new women playwrights coming up in English. These women have been looking at new issues with a different perception. The old cloak of mother-daughter- wife role has been abandoned and the new progressive, independent role has emerged. This is a positive break through. Yet- these women do foresee glitches. Though she may venture out of the box the woman playwright is in continuous attack and are helpless to criticism and male opinions.

Men’s traditional disregard for women’s writing and women’s mode of existence is caused due to the reality of male power. As Brecht noted, “the theatre as we know it (he calls it illusionism) shows the structure of society (represented on stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium)” (1996, p. 22).

A powerful Indian woman English Dramatist, who came into the fame, was Manjula Padmanabhan. Her much applauded play ‘Harvest’ won the Onassis International Cultural competition prize for theatrical plays in 1997 in Greece. Manjula was the first Indian English playwright to earn International recognition. Harvest deals with the exploitation of human body in the 21st century. She is one of those playwrights who does not indulge in traditional subjects. She concentrates on the subjects of alienation and marginalisation. What makes her a different playwright is her projection of the solemn, forbidding and revolting world. Critics have said that her plays are intelligent but not suitable for the stage. ‘Lights Out’ another powerful play is based on an incident of gang-rape that occurred in the compound within a middle-class community in Santa Cruz, Mumbai 1982. The play unveils the presence of crime in the society where acts of sexual violence occur regularly and no one comes to the assistance of the victim. It showcases the mentality of a scared society who switch-off their lights on hearing the screams of the victim, frightened that their window panes would be shattered if watching.

The feminist theatre movement wasn’t just about discussing women’s issues, but also about encouraging more women to enter the world of theatre as creators, writers and artists. In the next two decades, women’s voices became an integral part of mainstream Indian theatre. Several theatre groups organised festivals and workshops to train and celebrate the entry of women into theatre.

Pole Sengupta (English), Gitanjali Shree (Hindi), Iripinder Bhatia (Hindi), Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury (Punjabi), Binodini (Telegu), B. Jyashree (Kannada), Shanoli Mitra (Bengali), Usha Ganguli (Hindi), Sushma Deshpande (Marathi), and Qudisia Zaidie (Urdu) are only some of the female playwrights that began writing during this period. While all women playwrights were not necessarily feminist authors, they began writing women-centric plays, which encouraged more female performers into the field. For example, Rangkarmee’s *Beti Aayee* (A Girl is Born) on discrimination against the girl child, had an all women cast.

Manjula’s five monologues were inspired by the Bombay and Gujarat riots. She throws light on the common man due to no fault of his suffers at the hands of its oppressors, be it in the form of rape, arson etc. These monologues showcase a world which has been torn by unwanted hate and violence be it on the Jews, castes, class etc. She writes on strong provoking subjects which leave the audience foxed, shaken, insecure, nostalgic and resentful. Annie Zaidie is a young contemporary Indian- English playwright, who is known for her ‘So many socks’ was nominated for the best script for META awards. The play is about the sense of rejection where you can reject others but not your own identity. The story

revolves around three generations of a Tibetan family living in exile in India. It speaks about three unique individual who are tied together by birth having the urge to go back home and at the same time they cannot connect with the family in front of them.

Women are never allowed to raise their voice against the evil practices against them and are forced to remain silent throughout their lives. In return, this silence kills them from inside from which they seek escape. Women writers or Women artists felt empowered after entering the field of theatre. Male face dominated theatre for a long time. Women's participation began with the devadasi tradition. Even the female characters were played by male actors. Eventually, women got their voices and started representing themselves. Women playwrights and directors started writing for increasing female performers in theatre. This created a women centric approach. In theatre, women's experiences and thoughts became the subject of the plays. A series of theatre festivals and workshops were organized by various theatre groups to celebrate the cause of women. To cite a few examples – Akka, the National Women's Theatre Festival held in Mysore, 2001, National Women's Theatre Festival organised by Yavanika, a Hyderabad based Theatre group, Prithvi Theatre from Mumbai, National Workshop on Women, Poorva, Rangkarmee from Kolkata etc. Owing to its prejudices The Indian People Theatre Association (IPTA) failed to recognize achievement of women artists in a proper perspective and “Most of the Indian theatre women personalities were neglected because all of them belonged to the community of prostitutes, singers and harlots” (R.G.Mahapati, 2008, p. 109).

Many men who run theatre do not take women playwrights seriously because they find it hard to connect to the stories written from a female perspective. This adversely effected women who wanted to pursue their career in the field of Playwriting. The women playwrights who are remembered for their remarkable contribution are Deena Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan and Polie Sengupta. They have introduced new subjects affecting the feminine psyche in their works. Deena Mehta is a playwright and an editor from Mumbai. Her first full length play was *The Myth Makers* (1969). Her play *Brides are not For Burning* (1993) won the first prize in worldwide competition sponsored by BBC in 1979.

## Conclusion

Though many male playwrights talked about women's issues, their presentation lacked the authentic ring of women's emotions and feelings. The contrary is true of the women writers. In her interview with Mahesh Dattani published under title “Dialogue with Dattani” in her book *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, Laxmi Subarmanyam asks Dattani about the reason behind dearth of women playwrights in the modern Indian theatre. Dattani cautiously shares his observation thus: “women playwrights write about strong feminine concerns or simply write about women for no political reasons (same as male playwrights write about men without really thinking about it)”. However, “theatre companies prefer to do plays with a male protagonist” and this may be reason for “less female representation among visible playwrights” (2002, p. 20).

If woman as a playwright entered the domain of theatre, she was considered a woman first and a writer next. Now that women have entered the theatre as playwrights, they have shaped theatrical techniques which have no author defined consciousness, no resolutions, even tried to build a new class of audiences who would not expect to be entertained. After successfully establishing themselves as accomplished artists, women playwrights have now created plays which are critical the institution of marriage and family hierarchy. They have written plays with strong, complex female characters that demolish the

cultural barriers which are discriminatory in character. Theatre can take measures like sponsoring workshops for play readings to develop playwriting skills and encourage female playwrights.

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