

Different Frames of Marginality: A Study of the Selective Plays of Poile Sengupta

Satyajit Pal
Bankura
West Bengal

ABSTRACT

Marginality is something which suggests a position without identity. It has different face and facets which are framed in a multiple way in their writings by the prolific writers of Indian English literature. Poile Sengupta, an accomplished playwright, actor and a well-known writer for children, is one of them. Along with other contemporary Indian women playwrights, Sengupta has brought a drastic change in the contemporary Indian women dramaturgy. The new Indian women playwrights consider drama as a most powerful and effective medium of protest against the prevailing stereotype social norms and conventions of Indian society and its age-old treatment with the female denizens. They have expressed their concerns towards gendered subalterns and they have also registered resistance against those malpractices and transgressions which have been hitherto either neglected or stupendously misinterpreted by the mainstream Indian playwrights. Being a significant playwright of the school of Indian feminist theatre, Sengupta has challenged the established notions of Indian theatre. She has exposed the hypocrisy and the vicious side of our patriarchal society where women are still neglected and marginalized. She has taken this medium as a tool to deconstruct the patriarchal metaphysics of our society which considers women as weak, seductress, obstacle, and sexual objects.

Key words: Dramaturgy, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Transgression, Marginalization

Writing is basically a social activity. Writers collect experiences from society and thus, they find sustenance for their writings. So, society is the base of knowledge where a writer goes back again and again to recollect his/ her experience in order to enrich his / her writing. In this way a special bondage is built up between a writer and a society. A writer can never ignore the responsibility if the society demands anything from him /her. This responsibility can be observed when a writer reflects the transformation of a society in his / her writing through his /her keen observation. So, he or she can easily detect anything evil or any distinction or discrimination done towards the general ethics of a society. Thus, it is assumed that the literature of a society should reflect its problems. Therefore a writer is bound to interrogate a society, to raise question about a serious topic for perennial debate among statesman, intellectuals, philosophers and scholars of the society. And in this

particular domain of raising question and interrogating the society Indian English literature is far ahead of any other literature in recent times. And under the umbrella of Indian English literature if we speculate precisely we can see that in the matter of asking question and raising voice the genre of Indian English drama occupies a leading position.

Now the question is ‘Is the literature pragmatic in delineating its story?’, or ‘Does the writer have any political stance? Or is he not politically biased at the time of inscribing his ideas?’ According to Terry Eagleton literature “*is non-pragmatic discourse : unlike biology textbooks and notes to the milkman it serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to general state of affairs.*”(3). All writings carry some sorts of ideological implications within it on the issues of exerting the power in the society. Foucault has shown us how power is exercised in our society to dominate or subordinate its members. He has exposed how there is no absolute truth which is only an effect of dominant discourse, how subdued discourses, cultures, values, knowledges and people are suppressed and marginalized yet offer resistance . In this case of resistance again, on the other hand, literature can play a very decisive role to induce political and cultural alternatives by implying the subversive possibilities and imparting them socially critical undertones. So, in demystification of social ideology and taboos and in regenerating the knowledge in a society like India where female denizens of the country are often discriminated, oppressed, threatened of cutting their nose (Recently the Indian actress Deepika Padukone was threatened by Karni Sena for her role in the film *Padmavat*), and finally sexually harassed and raped by the dominant classes of the society, any kind of cultural act or artistic gesture has significance in the empowerment of the women. At recent times in the 20th century in Indian English literature we witness a sudden emergence of a constellation of writers who despite various obstacles write back with the consciousness of women as women to expose the social hegemony of the nation which believed that women are meant to be marginalized in the society and they are born to be molested, to be raped, to be victimized within the four walls of a family as well as in the big arena of the global village. Amitava Ghosh has remarked truly, “*Today a woman writing is a woman fighting. For truth, for honesty, freedom, even if not for equality.*” (4).

The theatre and plays have a significant role in reflecting social evils more vividly and presenting them before a wider audience of our society in a flamboyant way. Stage often becomes a giant mirror to the audience, reflecting their lives and culture. Among all other forms of literature women theatre has drawn academicians’ attention for its immediacy of appeal . Tutun Mukherjee writes in Introduction “*Prolegomenon to Women’s Theatre*” in *Staging Resistance : Plays by Women in Translation* , “ Drama of life and the dramatic are matter close to women’s hearts. One would assume drama as an expressive mode has close affinity with women.” (5). Women theatre at nomenclature level itself is a theatre that is written and performed by women that predominantly focused to the problems and issues of women . It needs to be considered as a different genre that exclusively deals with the problems faced by women in society. The primary aim of this genre that recently came to existence in Indian English literature is to make visible a number of taboos that operate in a woman’s life. Though India have a long established theatre tradition where Bharat Muni’s *Natya Sastra* is considered as an encyclopaedic treatise on arts, the patriarchal influence on the stage did not allow any space for the women in the past. It was exclusively meant for the male practitioners and the female parts were also played by the young boys without beards. Their issues were most of the time remained unspoken. However in the Post-Independence

era a growing interest for the theatre by the women was seen for the influence of various movements and actions of the 20th century like the establishment of the National Council of Women in 1921, Hindu Marriage Act of 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 etc. The most important matter among all these incidents is the western feminist movement of 1960s and 70s which stormed the mindset of the Indian women playwrights to foreground their problems on the stage. In one of his articles Pinaki Ranjan Das rightly mentions, “This association, therefore, as Nandi Bhatia puts in *Performing Women/Performing Womanhood*, ‘took up issues pertaining to caste reform, actresses, courtesans, family and domesticity, and the dalit cause, and connected these to decolonization, anti-colonial nationalism, and Post-Independence nationhood’.” (7). As a result we saw the emergence of a galaxy of newly talented women playwrights like Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mallika Sarabhai, Dina Mehta, Tripurari Sharma, Varsha Adalja, Dr. Kusum Kumar and Shanoli Mitra who got an opportunity to show their ingenuity and intelligence in the arena of theatre and art of play-writing.

These new Indian women playwrights consider drama as a most powerful and effective medium of protest against the prevailing stereotype social norms and conventions of Indian society and its age-old treatment with the female denizens. They always endeavour to deconstruct the patriarchal metaphysics by interrogating as well as challenging both the phallogocentrism and phallogocentrism of contemporary Indian English writing. Realising the empowering nature of theatre, they have used this medium as a tool to express their concerns towards gendered subalterns and also to register resistance against those malpractices and transgressions which have been hitherto either neglected or stupendously misinterpreted by the mainstream Indian playwrights. However, this paper engages with the two texts written by one of these contemporary Indian women playwrights, namely, Poile Sengupta.

Ambika Gopalakrishnan alias Poile Sengupta is a Proficient playwright, actor and a well-known writer for children. She is popular for her Bangalore based amateur theatre group, namely, Theatre Club. Her six well known plays are published in the book *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play* (2010) which includes the plays like *Mangalam*; *Inner Laws*; *Keats Was a Tuber*; *Alipha*; *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni*; and *Samara’s Song*. These plays are distinct from each other in structure, theme and style. As a playwright Sengupta has reflected her own consciousness and sensibility as a woman in her writing. She has expressed her deep concern about the familial, social and political status of the Indian women and children through her plays. In this article I would like to focus her two very popular plays *Mangalam* and *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni*.

Sengupta’s first play for the adults *Mangalam* has made an effort to subvert the traditional ideas and notions of our society which emphasize the stereotyped representation of women as weak, seductress, obstacle, sexual object or a procreating device. The play upholds on the stage the traditional treatment of the patriarchal society with the female members and exposes how they are treated as an object by their fathers or husbands or their molesters. Dividing into two acts the play employs play-within-play method which renders the play a critical undertone. The most interesting matter about the play is that the protagonist of the play i.e. Mangalam, in whose name the play is entitled is absent throughout the story for her death which provides the basis for much of the action of the drama. The playwright does not comment much about the reason of Mangalam’s death but gives us insights through the narrator’s choric commentary: “*Women die many kinds of*

death; men do not know this.”(1). Actually, Mangalam represents those Indian household women who being victim of male chauvinism of this patriarchal society die many times before their biological death. The play reflects women’s perceptions and feelings collectively as they suffer in a man made claustrophobic situations being compelled to live a life of without freedom and identity after their marriage. From this perspective the play is a good critique on our social marriage system which very consciously projects the bondage and servitude of women in our society. In the first part of the play, Mangalam is the victim of male aggression while in the second part Sumati becomes the victim of molestation by her uncle.

The play makes us remembered the oft-quoted phrase of Simon de Beauvoir “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. Our patriarchal society constructs and formulates the identity of a woman. She is attributed by different roles like mother, sister, wife and daughter in relation to man as if she has no identity of her own. The female body is the place to be vanquished by men. And this tradition is continuing from our ages after ages. In the second act, Sumati attacks Suresh, a modern guy with conservative ideas, by retorting that “... *the moment a woman doesn’t fit into the category of being a mother or a sister, she is baggage...sexual baggage.*” (1). Again, this male dominated society establishes discriminations and sets different rules for different genders. While any immoral sexual activity can dishonour the reputation of a woman, a similar act on man’s part, is forgivable and can be easily ignored. This is evident when Thangam in the first act of the play hinted at the character of Dorai who tried to disgrace her sister’s reputation: “*What about that married woman who used to come to the temple everyday and take prasaadam from your father? She took prasaadam from you also, didn’t she?*”(1).

The another play *Thus spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*, a Lyotardian micronarrative, not only hints at the formation of a woman in stereotypical role of the patriarchal society but it also points out the construction of the history of a race subjugating the aborigines as ‘other’. Our epics unfold the glorious history of Aryans who conquered the land vanquishing the black skinned ugly looking native peoples who were represented as evil of the society. As they were evil they were often called as demons and they were treated badly and meant to be suppressed and curbed down by the Aryans and this story was presented gloriously in two great Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Woman: Shoorpanakha merely wanted love.

Man: The Aryan greed.

Woman: She wasn’t beautiful in the ideal way. So?

Man: Their stinking race superiority.

Woman: she did not behave like a well-bred woman. So?

Man: they came all the way south carrying their arrogance like a blood thirsty sword.(2).

The playwright speaks at large the misrepresentation of the black aborigines in our mythical history and discovers the disparity and contrast that are made during their delineation in the epic.

Woman: look at the Ramayana . The hero is tallstraight-nosed...handsome . The villain is grotesque with ten heads. The heroine is slender-waisted, dazzlingly fair. The vamp is dark,

swarthy, big. Outspoken. Coarse. Therefore the vamp is a demoness. Because she speaks her mind. Because she takes up space.(2).

The play unfolds the experiences of a woman belonging to different race and class of a society. The question of gender and female sexuality constantly reciprocates throughout the play. It reveals how women are oppressed and discriminated with the help of several social practices and how they are treated differently for becoming 'other'. It also highlights how the constructed discursive practices make the lives of the 'other' very complicated and challenging. As the mythological figure of Shoorpanakha did not suit in the ideological definition of a woman, her love proposal had been rejected by the Aryan brothers and she was humiliated and tortured by chopping off her nose, ears and breasts.

Woman: You know what they did to me ...the two brothers ...they laughed . Laughed at me. They teased me. Mocked me . the older one said , ask my brother ..he might want you ..the younger one said ...I can't marry without my brother's consent..ask him ..they tossed me this way and that, as if ..as if I did not deserve any more respect. As if I were a broken play thing.(2).

Being a female member of a demonical race the mythical character of Shoorpanakha is doubly marginalized – firstly, she was thwarted as a member of demonical clan who were seen as obscene and evil and secondly, as a woman. And when one is born as woman she should not express her desire, specially desire to have sex with her beloved man and it is expressed she must be called as demon or 'other':

Man: Why don't you tell the truth? You lusted for him.

You wanted sex with him.

Woman: Yes. I did. Is that wrong?(2).

Sengupta's plays depict the interior landscape of the marginalized woman. In our society a woman is only defined by her roles of mother, daughter, wife and sister which are her prescribed designations in relation to men. The identity of her 'self' as a woman is always neglected and just meaningless in a patriarchal society. Therefore, the soul of Shoorpanakha in the disguise of a modern woman shouts at these discrimination and double standard role of our society: "... Do you have to classify me?... I am a woman, don't you understand? A woman. Not a saint. Not a whore. Not just a mother, a sister, a daughter. I am a woman." (2). Thus, Sengupta's plays explore the invisible, internalized, micro-level capillaries of patriarchal power that has been suppressing the women in the domain of our culture since its prehistoric age.

Select Bibliography

1. Sengupta, Poile. *Mangalam. Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000.
2. Sengupta, Poile. *Thus spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni, Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. New Delhi: Routledge. 2010.
3. Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London and New York, Verso, 1991.

4. Amitav Ghosh, “Amitav Ghosh & the 2001 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize: Tracking the Controversy.” 18 March 2001. AmitavGhosh.com Online. 20 march 2001
5. Mukherjee, Tutun. *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (Ed.). New Delhi, Oxford Press: 2005.
6. Subramanyam, Lakshmi. Ed. *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Shakti Books, 2002.
7. Das, Pinaki Ranjan. *Surviving Marginalization: Regional Language Indian Women Theatre Practitioners in Perspective*. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (Online). Vol 3, Issue 11. November 2014.
8. Saikia, Gitali and Neog, Subrat Jyoti. (Ed.). *Indian Drama: Tradition and Transition*. Kolkata: Books Way, 2014.

Note: This paper was presented by the writer in an international conference on “Frames of Marginality: Interpreting and Interrogating Theories and Praxis” which was being organised during 21-22 February, 2018 at P.R.M.S. College in Bankura, West Bengal.