



Review Paper

Female Playwright's Decry of Protest for Social Injustice in 'Body Blows'

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Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, and Poile Sengupta are the leading contemporary Indian Women Dramatist of 'Theatre of Protest' in English. They deal with violence obligation on women in every sphere of their daily lives. This violence is multifaceted, not merely physical; it is more often mental and emotional. It affected the psyche of the victim that they are hard to comprehend and even more difficult to overcome. It is an analogy of three plays associated with the life of three characters which deal with childhood sexual abuse, rape, molestation in relation, and infidelity. Their plights remain constant even though society moves towards modernity. The female playwrights in this volume have focused on all these various kinds of violence as abuse, ill-treatment, sensitive nuanced texts that women face, etc. Together these plays make up a powerful volume focusing on the most important and problematic issues that turned into cancer to our society. Also, they have explored that women are sexual objects only; in this patriarchal society which inclines them to powerlessness.

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'They may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.' -- Elie Wiesel, winner of the Noble Prize for Peace

Brahma created the Natyaveda or fifth Veda, which world serves not only the function of entertainment but also of instruction. Desire to change social and political systems around us by opposing the wrong happenings and letting the imagination of a better world to live in, come true. Protest art is a powerful means of drawing the public eye to the causes of wrong happenings. Many ways of protest are available around us as music, painting, film, signs, posters, graphics, puppet shows, and socialist

movements but apart from them, theatre is the superior form of protest. When we use protest devise with theatrical art, it becomes a Theatre of protest. Actors enliven dreadful real incidents on stage with genuine expressions, which generate pity and fear in the hearts of the audience, with this process people go through sentimental and psychological treatment changes. They are forced to think deeply about that particular event and analyze the facts and it gives ways to find out the remedies. In its broadest sense, political theatre is the act of conveying this imagined better world to the everyday onlooker. Nowadays theatre is not merely becoming the means that may be used in protests but it is indispensable. Theatre of protest can range from

spontaneous street theatre to entirely serious (even unlawful) acts. Theatre deliberately encapsulates a whole range of psychological devices associated with protest that can be intricately woven into the fabric of the experience.

Manjula Padmabhan (1953) is a renowned contemporary playwright, journalist, comic strip artist, and children's book author of the award-winning play. The first play in this cluster, 'Body Blows' is 'Light Out', first performed in 1986 by Sol Theatre Company, at Prithvi Theatre, Bombay that defines social apathy, the difference between Decent women and Whore, Roll of police, Male domination, Indecision of male. This play is based on an eyewitness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, in 1982. In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighboring compound. Manjula draws the attention of her audiences towards the real hazardous supersession of the growing social apathy in modern man's life. The drama successfully achieves its aim and certainly inspires the audience not to follow the path, adopted by the characters of the drama.

The play is strongly based on the indifference of the social duty of people towards being members of society. People mostly hide themselves to play their role. They are the so-called Civilized; it is ironic on their part that they do not know the real meaning of civilization. The man of a metro city like Bhaskar became insensible; he the husband does not seem to be least bothered about it but Leela the wife 'feels tense' and 'frightened.' Leela even hints at their responsibility as a social being and says, "that we are part of what happens outside. That by watching it we are making ourselves responsible." (6)

'Light Out' presents the tragic spectacle of the daily rape of women; for a week in an under-constructed neighborhood building with a watchman; under the flashlight within sight at a distance by the middle-class characters. The screams threatened Leela, so much that she rejected the idea of listening to music because, "the sound will make me tense, I can't bear any sound anymore." Being a woman, she could feel the pain, the suffering of the victim and identifies herself with it. She says, "Am I going mad" Leela and Naina are anguished by the cries for help, but the man like Bhaskar and Mohan dig deep into their conscience by arguing that the victims are after all only prostitutes, not 'decent women'

This play raised the question that what is the difference between a 'decent woman' and a 'Whore'. Bhaskar and Mohan argue that she must be a Whore, and that's why she is there with four men at once. And Leela and Naina say that she is whore but apart from that she is a woman. It exhibits, males' indecision, they fear to call the police and their enquiries. Leela says, "If she's a whore, does it mean you won't call the police?" Basker replies if she is a whore then, this isn't rape.... Naina says, why? A whore can't be raped? Is that the law? (40) What about those terrible screams? Naina says, "But listen! The women are not just being raped; she's being brutalized as well." (41) "Frailty, thy name is woman." This quotation of Hamlet justifies Naina's statement, "vulnerability to rape, whores lose their right to be women? Is that what you mean?" (43). Then Naina questions

the role of men and says, "But if men are too indecent to be raped does it mean that men are whore?" (43).

Dina Mehta's 'Getting Away with Murder' was first performed in 1990 by Indus International, a socio-cultural group for women, at the British Council Theatre, Mumbai. It is on the shortlist of 7 specially commended radio plays out of 902 entries submitted for the BBC World Playwriting Competition, 1989. It is the second play of this collection which describes the life of three friends in their private hell. It deals with issues of child abuse, women's mental trauma, women's insecurity, jealousy, male infidelity, and infertility. Sonali secretly went through the sex determination test by Raziya her doctor friend and aborted her first girl fetus a year before unnoticed by other family members and friends. Now again she wants the same test to do because she does not want a girl child at all. She creates suspense on this point. It is just because she does not want her girl child to go through the same physical and mental trauma. Often, she gets a stroke of that nightmare and when she sees the mirror she gets a reflection of her childhood sufferings and pain and regresses into a childish voice. That suffering splits her personality into two and when seen by her mother-in-law, she was unable to understand why her daughter-in-law behaving in this manner. Anil her husband was also unaware of the cause behind her anguish attitude. She tells her husband "My mother never loved me. She had eyes only for Gopal (brother) and for him." Anil (husband) asks who is, she moves to the painting.....here he is, the red monster. Anil recognized the person was her uncle Narotam. Then Gopal tells the truth that "My sister was sexually abused....." by their uncle Narotam; that too in front of her brother Gopal, in the same room. Her suffering starts at eight and ends at 12 when he breaks his head "so you can imagine.....night after night coming to her bed, the pious swine with sandalwood paste on his forehead and holy beads round his neck...the pig" (87-88). Gopal was too small to voice over this wrongdoing with her sister, he also suffers from this agony.

Mallika (Mallu) is strong enough to handle her work efficiently but she also has her drawbacks. She feels insecure when she sees any girl with Gopal her boyfriend. It is clear when she says, "with a strange girl straddling the pillion seat, her breasts flattened against his back." (60) When Sonali asks Mallu, why you don't marry Gopal, she replays negatively due to his flatter attitude with other girls, but it was not reality. Thinking that Gopal is showing more interest in this photo of Minzari, Mallu accused him fascinatingly and feeling jealousy about this rural lady, it explores her insecurity.

Gopal is engaged in his project on the witch belt of Bihar (Authentic photographs of women killed in Bihar as witches appeared in a 1988 issue of The Illustrated Weekly of India). His research draws light on the weaker section of Bihar that in Singbhum district alone 200 women are killed as witches every year and he stated that "it not the result of their ignorance but the persecution is prompted by lust, caste tensions, freed for land, male relatives move in on their land. Lots of such cases...they have the backing of power groups within the community" (80).

Query is made on the administration of that state, “their usual attitude is: this deep-rooted superstition, the police can do nothing. Worse, they are often the perpetrators themselves!” In the case of Indumati, “people accused her witch drawing her to the river, to kill her by throwing her in” (79). One photograph he describes Dulkha Devi of Tharwar, “she was stripped naked within sight of the police station, her face blackened, head shaved, forced to run round the village while the men beat her with burning brands and sticks till, she died.” And the reason behind this was that the village priest denounced her as a witch, she had once repulsed him, it seems, so after her husband died of consumption the pujari took his revenge by accusing her of eating him up” (80).

This play enquires on Muslim community through the conversation of Raziya and Mallu. Instead of being a doctor Raziya also suffers from male infidelity. Raziya tells Mallu that her husband Habib is getting married again to a 19-year-old girl named Zamena, his niece Fatima’s friend, due to her infertility. But Mallu is astonished at how can he do this, she says, “Or is it he who can’t perform? Sorry, Raziya, but I know he’s made you go through all the tests – while his lordship disdained them himself” (77). Despite accepting the truth Raziya blames herself and says, “No, the fault lies with me. The fatal flaw. I’m that joke of nature a barren woman. When Mallu asks her if is this enough to discard you from his life, Raziya replies, “I shall still be his first wife? The Muslim law-”.

Raziya says, “I doubt, Mallu, that what Sonali’s attempting is a jihad against men! We are the victims!” Mallu says, “But at least she’s sounding a battle cry! Making a gesture, however muddled! Using her helpless hands to claw at the blinds, while a brilliant woman like you submits meekly to this humiliation.... What is the matter with you?” (Inferiority complex). ‘In India, a woman is considered to be an: ‘embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith, and knowledge’ (Everett 1981: 76) ¹

The play is also ting with Indianness. Indian women give priority to family and society and become deaf to their inner voice. However modern and educated women become, somewhere unconsciously, chained in the traditional thought, in which she is being brought up. Sonali thinks giving birth to a son will enhance her importance in her in-law's family; Raziya believes that a man’s desire for children must be satisfied and Mallu confronted her and ask that a man has a right to own the body of a woman younger than he. Is it right? Marriage according to Kate Millett is a game of ‘power-politics.’ ‘Men marry, not because they need a companion or a soulmate but because marriage gives them a license to show power. Thus, politics enters into marriages’ (7). Poile (Ambika) Sengupta is a teacher, writer of children's literature, poet, columnist, and playwright. ‘*Managlam*’, her first full-length play, won the award for its socially relevant theme in The Hindu-Madras Players play script competition, in 1993. *Managlam* is based on domestic violence, marital infidelity, and exploitation of women across ages, contrasts between old and modern societies. Act-I – It is about a conservative, middle-class Tamil Brahmin family that is mourning the loss of the mother, Mangalakka, who has been a victim of domestic abuse for 31 years. When Mangalakka’s

sister Thangam arrives, skeletons tumble out of the closet. The other members of the family are Dorai (husband), Mani (son) and his wife Ravethy, Kannan (son), Sriram (son works in State) Usha (married daughter), and Chitra (unmarried daughter). In Act II the modern family continues to discuss the play, it dawns on the mother (Thangam) and her daughter Sumati that their lives are no different to the characters they have been commented on. Disturbing truths about their own family are revealed. They realize that like Mangalakka and Thangam they too are helpless. Sreeni father of Sumati is a controversial character at one end he supports Sumti to do a job because he knows the truth of life it is difficult and women should be familiar with the outer world and learn the tact to handle all types of situations and become self-sufficient so that she can lead the life smoothly. On the other hand, he is in strata marital relation with another woman. Sumati herself realizes the social status of woman and says to her mother ‘A woman who allows herself to be soft, who relinquishes her weapons.... well gets chewed up..... It’s a terrible state to be in’ (148-149).

When Thangama got a letter, she came to know that her husband Sreeni had an affair with someone, this event is justified by Engels’ statement in his ‘*Origin of Species*’, which points out that the very concept of family is based on the presumption that wife belongs to the husband. He says that the Latin word ‘*family*’ means the total number of slaves belonging is not mutual – husbands do not belong to their wives (6). Thangama unconsciously tells Sumati that, “Millions of couples get married on that promise andthen do all they can to get away from each other.”(147)

Because a woman has patience,
she is not allowed to speak.
Others speak for her, and
she never learns the words. (123)

Sengupta in ‘*Mangalam*’ sufficiently demonstrates a fine method of representation of women’s issues on the stage with superb theatrical experimentation technique. The play juxtaposed with another play. A brilliant technique of juxtaposing a conservative rural play with a modern one. The use of “*the play within a play*” technique enhances the ironic effect. It highlights that however society has modernized in terms of education and living standards, but the mindset has yet to change. ‘If Mahesh dattani is well known for his maximum utilization of space on the stage, Sengupta for lies in the economy of on-stage setting’ (2). Dorai is the very epitome of male chauvinism. Feminists all over condemn this attitude which holds men as ‘absolute’ and women as ‘subjects.’ This is what Kate Millett calls ‘Sexual Politics’ ‘whereby one group of persons is controlled by another’ (Millett 1969: 23)³ In a male-dominated society women must always be prepared to allow their husbands to use their bodies for whatever purpose they desire.

The inclusion of poetry in short play like *Mangalam* really adds a feature to it since very few plays create space for poems in postmodern theatre. These poems are suggestive and sensitive, penetrates deep in the heart of listeners. Like, Woman lives for

others and becomes dead for herself; When a man knows the secret of her wife, it becomes his weapon to conquer the battle of superiority; When women conceive, it is the most secret, safe, and quiet place for a child; but it is world known truth that no secret is digestible in women's womb. The technique of curtain call is different because the cast exits when the last line of the poem is heard but they reassemble on the stage. The recitation of poems through the voice-over technique effectively emphasizes the concern of the play. The evening concludes with Poile Sengupta's poem.

As for women, the god said
Let them be strong-rooted, like trees.
For it is they who shall hold
The ends of the world together

Anita Singh rightly avers, 'In the twentieth century, Indian English drama intersected with the feminist thought which brought in the question of power imbalance that prevails in our society. Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Tripurari Sharma among others are writing plays in English and their productions are characterized by the projection of the consciousness and condition of women as woman' (4). Feminist believes that women are not mentally different from birth. The female-child is only biologically different but the patriarchal society conditions it into being a woman (De Beauvoir: 445, (5). All three playwrights are excellent who deal with the woman exploitation within the family. They all together tactfully focused on the woman mentality, their sufferings, and their position in a male-dominated world. Their effort to represent the day-to-day experiences tinged with violence against women on the stage is worth appreciation. Characterization plays a significant role as a strategy to enhance the intensity of protest in the play. Women's plight could be realized by women only, like Sonali, Raziya, Mallika, Leela, Naina, Thangam, and Sumati; they unconsciously linked with the mainstream of contemporary Indian Society. And men like Bhasker, Mohan, Suresh, Dorai have lost their senses. Sometimes unconsciously woman ignores other women's welfare, it could be seen in the relationship between Sonali and her mother, Sumati and her mother Thangama. The representation of such issues on the stage has gained a substantial impetus with the emergence of contemporary playwrights such as Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, and Poile Sengupta. All the playwrights have dealt with the themes of man's infidelity, the trauma of childhood abuse, gang rape, molestation, deviance, sectioned society, girl child upbringing, working women, polygamy, woman's insecurity, women's status in family and society, the concept of decent woman and whore, male chauvinism, male indecisiveness, woman's empathy for another woman, man and woman's relation, causes of woman's death in marriage as such remarkably in their plays. In all three plays women characters gradually realize the patriarchal mindset and become mature; letting their emotions and feelings of empathy

towards another woman assertively in front of other characters. Sonali's brother Gopal shares her pain and trauma and Sumati's father Sreeni showing his concern for his daughter; these two characters have been designed by the playwrights keeping in mind the gender sensitization prospect and have tried to highlight how gender sensitization is a must for the healthy society. It helps males to share their emotion and feeling or to show their empathy towards other human being.

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