Theatre to Women

Subbiah M

Assistant Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University. Pondicherry – 605 014, tamiladavu@gmail.com, Mobile: 09487279439

Correspondence to: Assistant Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University. Pondicherry – 605 014, India, tamiladavu@gmail.com, Mobile: 09487279439

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1. INTRODUCTION

In India, even after 65 years of Independence, discrimination based on gender was still rampant, irrespective of the social, educational and religious background of women. Every one hour, one woman died because of dowry harassment and sexual Harassment also. Though women held powerful positions in politics, sports, science, and other professions once considered the forte of men, inequalities based on gender still existed. However, India was among the countries that had the highest number of women professionals in the world. They juggled between work and family, striving to strike a balance between the two. In this background, the paper will deal about the women representation in Theatre Activities. However, in Indian Theatre, women representation/participation is as an actor/script writer/director/performer or as a Technical designer is very less and even though they are very much interested in Theatre. Because of the social construction of our society, the discrimination of women in Folk Performing Arts and in Theatre is continued. But some exclusion is there, and this paper exposes the exclusions and the experiences of that exclusion in Theatre. That means the Struggles, Contribution and Empowerment of women in Theatre are to be explained and documented through this paper.

2. THEATRE TO WOMEN

Theatre to women is restricted one not only in past but now itself, the restriction has two phases one is self implemented and other is social implemented one, the factors behind such restriction is many fold. The first and foremost one is the patriarchic social structure, where the key decisions vested to men in accordance with his interest. But the domination is not a regional one it a global phenomena belonged to all societies in east or west. The shell of such restrictions or discriminations has to crack open, the movement to such a change is witnessed even from last century beginning itself but the pace of it is very slow one, than it could be, as the movement is hurdles with many social norms and customs which rooted over the mind of the people over last millenniums. The modern women, who she is least, bothered about her gender and more conscious about her role in both in home and society. But the nature of how they interfere in various social issues introverted one; still at present they are in the feel of a chain which they were locked for millenniums. But their efforts to make a new social saga through various social activities include theatre also.

3. THEATRE A MEDIUM TO EXPRESS HER

The dynamic nature of society now rolled over the social perspectives over women, the change is not a voluntary one but there have a good deal of struggle from the part of women for such a progressive change which one is compelled to ensure and agree to their equality and opportunities alike to other part of the gender. The theatre now for the women a measure or effective tool, to express their freedom, their power, their existence, awareness as well as consciousness. And also a medium to protest, a as medium of protest it has proved very effective and impactful one with in the short while of time from the women engaged to theater. There have many instances on how they used theatre as a powerful mean of protest. For instance the theatre entry of Molyoshee Hashmi. On 1 January 1988, while performing a street play, Halla Bol (Attack!), during Ghaziabad municipal elections, at Sahibabad’s Jhundapur village, near Delhi, the Janamroupe was attacked by political hoodlums of Indian National Congress Party. Saldar succumbed to his injuries the following day. On January 4, 1989, two days after his death, his wife Molyoshee Hashmi, went to the same spot again, with the troupe of ‘Jan Natya Manch’ and defiantly completed the play.

At present if we analyze the feminist productions we can also understand one factor is they are catalyzing social changes, by revealing the unfair practices and beliefs whatever there in society. And they all revolutionize and provoke the thoughts and outlook of the society irrespective of gender. But all productions can not consider as feminist plays for as they are participated by women in whatever level to a particular production. The women theatre personalities are more colored to an activist rather than a theatre persona who takes as it as a medium to express their creativity and imagination. They are new tide to the shore of theatre to clean misfits from social scenario. They much bold and with a readiness to act against the flow. They are with the mission of wipe conventions which are inconvenient to them and also challenge the restriction framed by generations to their family life and social life as Nora (the character of Ibsen, in his play Dolls House) has done. The oppressed and suppressed attitudes darkened with theatre activities of the women, as they used theatre as medium of expression, they are talking about whole society some of them are misinterpreted as feminist movement. There have feminist
theatre but that is not desirable one, to conclude or colour all women theatre participation and initiative as feminist movements in theatre. They are not keeping away from the society as a separate division or section to fight against the male part but seeking their place in society with due respect and participation with all freedom and without any discrimination. For instances, the entry of women to traditional performance those have, which once owed no space for them. In the Folk Dance, Oyyattam - Oyy may be men. Ten years ago women also began to participate. And also the same in Paraiyattam and Devarattam which was traditionally danced only by men. The women participation in mainstream social activities are encouraged by the theatrical activities which are taken with the intention to equal right and move against the exploitation in its all kind and colour. The theatre gives a space and devise to react and protest against such mischief. In short theater able and armed them, to react and defend themselves (Sandra M Bemis, 1987).

4. SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN PERFORMANCE

The participation of the women cultural activities of woman is so restricted one even now it itself more narrow may bordered with films only. The common notion is women not need those things they entitled with some other duties without getting time to such social and entertainment activities especially women from the lower social strata. Their identity is closely related to the family not with the society. But certain pockets of society has given some sort of place to the women but such things are ritualistic color from instances Payattal, samyattam, Arayan nyanbu, these are both ritualistic in color and gives some space and occasion to expression of their feelings and ensure their place in the society. But in modern times such practices related to rituals are less colored one one than it had previous we cannot consider it as place which entitled to women to express their place and entity to the society but a mere a social compromise with the colour or pretension of ritual or belief. When we compared with other societies the pace of progress of women empowerment is very slow in Tamil society. The causes, behind it include the hesitation women folk and the hailed leaders’ insincerity. And also the theater conclude to elite class of the society only not to entire strata of the society that also make such slow pace in women participation in theatre. Society itself has in conflict with women with its notions against women but the same time it demanded the women participation. The demand only fulfilled with the sacrifice of women, by sacrificing her urge for her indiuality, her foredoom, her freedom of expression. The sacrifice to the existence of the Indian family system and social system, when they get out of such restrictions the family system which is identity to the Indian society also seemed the end (Flynn Meredith, 1984).

5. WOMEN IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY THEATRE PRACTICES IN INDIA

Women re-entered the Indian theatre scene in the early 20th century CE in a gradual, and (in the initial years) rather disrespectful, manner. India gained independence in the year 1947. The participation of many woman leaders of great stature in India's struggle for independence gave a new confidence to our women folk who moved forward in the process of nation-building as equal partners of their male colleagues. All these leaders, be it Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu or Vijay Laksmi Pandit, were women of extreme grace and poise who fought a bitter battle against the British rule while retaining all their feminine traits. The picture of Rani Laxmi Bai that is embedded in the Indian psyche is the one in which she is riding a horse with a sword in her hand while her son is strapped onto her back with the help of a cloth band. All this had been reflected in the theatre that evolved in the post-independence India. Examples from three very significant Indian plays will show us to how these plays are different from their western counterparts (where the women are compelled to attain male characteristics in order to exert their influence in the society). While generalizations of any kind can prove to be mere rhetoric and at times meaningless, it is important to emphasize that the centuries-old tradition of equal and participatory role for women in all walks of life is in many ways reflected in the modern Indian theatre. If this tradition is not a reality today, at least our theatre certainly strives for it and is striving to attain this goal (Leavitt Dinah Luisa, 1980). The examples in this analysis include the powerful woman characters from Indian plays like Savitri in Mohan Rakesh's play Aadhade Adhure (Halfway House), Benare in Vijay Tendulkar's play Khamosh! Adalat Jari Hai (Silence, the court is in session) and Padmini in Girish Karnad's play Hayavadana (The Horse faced). These characters, in their battle against the man or in their search to complete themselves by finding an ideal partner, are not characterized as having become manlier. These women characters are in complete contrast to their western counterparts—Bernarda Alba in Federico García Alba, Mother Courage in Brecht's play Mother Courage and her Children, and Shen Te in another Brecht's play Good Woman of Setzuan—who are compelled to acquire male characteristics in order assert their individuality (Shubha Tiwari, 2007).

The character of Savitri in Mohan Rakesh’s play Adhe Adhure is so gripping that one is never sure whether to admire her or to pity her, or to think that she has, in the manner of a Greek heroine, devoted her family, one by one. Is Savitri an early feminist icon or does she belong to the pantheon of women who are feared by the patriarchy as being too strong-willed with a lust for life? Savitri, the theatrical protagonist of Alba, is not a middle-aged and dissatisfied middle-aged mother of three grown-up children break out of the confines of the family home to enter the public space, she also becomes the breadwinner, reducing her unemployed husband to a redundant cipher. And as if this were not enough, she is also shown to have a past of extra-marital relationship. With this one play Mohan Rakesh exploded the myth of the idealized and hallowed institution of the Indian marriage, as well as shattered the image of the ideal Indian woman and mother as pure and self-sacrificing, perpetuated endlessly in earlier novels, paintings and on stage. Savitri is one of the most powerful and emancipated characters ever created for Indian stage. The popularity of the play, which has been in production for the past more than 40 years now, is a clear indicator that she has found a receptive and supportive audience among the people who live in modern urban India.

In terms of form and content Khamosh! Adalat Jari Hai is a complex work of art. Structurally, it is a drama-within-the-drama, which revolves around the agonized world of a young school teacher in a middle-class city who is loved with whom she has had brief but passionate affairs; she is desperate to lead a respectable life. The play indicts a male dominated society, reflecting a feminist viewpoint. Its intricate artistry is reflected in the dialectical unity between its form and content. At another level it deals with the mask and the real face and the relationship of art to life. The play unravels the tortured existence of a woman who is abandoned in love and castigated by the society. Physically exploited and betrayed by her maternal uncle and then by a married colleague, she is driven only by man's insensitivity, society is full of hope that she can live her life on her own terms without compromising on her intrinsic feminine characteristics (George, 1994).

In Hayavadana the sexuality of a woman has been put forth in a very unsensuous way by Girish Karnad, one of the most important playwrights of our country. Padmini, the lead character of the play, though married to Devadatta, is attracted to Kapila, her ascetic husband Devadatta's best friend. The play is a surreal love story underscored by urgent, driving questions of postcolonial politics and identity. Karnad's play concerns Padmini, a young woman who falls in love with the robust Kapila. When Padmini switches her paramours' heads in a tragi comic accident, Karnad confronts the audience with a dilemma: which man is Padmini's husband, the one bearing his head, or the one possessing his body? Both Devadatta and Kapila contend...
with feelings of incompleteness. The switch seems, at first, ideal for Padmini. However, conflicts arise as the two mismatched individuals try to reconcile the disconnect between their minds and their bodies. The play takes a philosophical turn as the audience is asked to consider whether it is the physical or the intellectual components that create identity. However, the very fact that Padmini is shown in the play as married to one person and unapologetically craving for another person takes this play back into the domain of Indian thought that was lost 1,000 years ago due to external intervention.

As regards to the three western plays mentioned above, one does not really need to delve too much into the essential features of these plays as these are quite well known. Bernarda’s name is the Spanish version of the Teutonic name Bernard meaning “having the force of a bear.” Bernarda, an elderly widow who exerts excessive will over her daughters, is the symbol of all that is associated in our society with masculinity. She is preoccupied with ideas of honor and tradition, and her walking stick is a symbol of the power she holds over the household. She is a vicious and manipulative person who keeps a mental record of every scandal that involves her neighbors so that she can use the information as a weapon against them. In the end Bernarda seems unmoved by her daughter Adela’s death, more concerned about the perceptions of her neighbors as she orders her daughters to uphold the lie that her daughter died a virgin.

Similarly, in the play Mother Courage and her Children, the main character is one of the very few unsympathetic major female characters in modern drama. The fact that when the play was produced in India under the title Himmat Mai, the character was played by Manohar Singh, one of the finest male actors of Indian stage, is a clear indicator that most directors have perceived Mother Courage as essentially possessing masculine rather than feminine traits. In one of the scenes, when the wounded body of her son Swiss cheese is shown to her, she denies knowing him, thus negating the notions of motherly instincts associated with females of all species of the animal world. At the end, Mother Courage leaves the body of her daughter Kattrin to be buried and sets off pulling her wagon alone to conduct her business. A woman, and more particularly a mother, would possibly never behave in such a manner.

In the The Good Person of Szechwan the poor young prostitute Shen Teh is compelled to wear male clothing, a mask to take on the role of Shui Ta, and a forceful voice. While Shen Teh was soft, compassionate, and vulnerable, Shui Ta is unemotional and pragmatic, even vicious. The playwright seems to suggest that one has to become a Shui Ta to survive in this world while all the Shen Tes are bound to perish.

Indian society is full of contradictions. One can by no stretch of imagination assume that the position of women in India is exemplary if it is set as against their western counterparts. What is actually sought to be emphasized here is that the modern theatre in India does in some ways crave to restore the ages-old position of women in our society where they could not only enjoy but also celebrate their femininity and not feel compelled to be apologetic about it.

4. CONCLUSION

The ordinary life and theater has need some link, but unfortunately in present social circumstances there is no such link between theatre and society, the link once was there in society but the strength is loosed and trace of the theatre also loosing. But that theatre existed one has no much role to the women. Shortly the link of the theatre and society is very essential to the woman participation in theatre.

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