



Women's Theatre and Performance in India: Gender, Sexuality, Violence and Resistance

Dinesh Kumar

Research Scholar, Department of English
School of Humanities, IGNOU, New Delhi, India
Email: dinkr489@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted on: 23-03-2025

Published on: 15-04-2025

Keywords:

Women's Theatre and Performance, Gender, Violence, Hysteria, Resistance

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the Women's Theatre in India this study addresses women's arguments for gender equality, bodily autonomy, reproductive choices, and freedom from sexual and gender-based violence through theatrical performance of embodied resistance to socio-cultural norms and practices that condone and justify the sustenance of gendered violence and other patriarchal oppressive social orders. The Women's Theatre, epitomizing intersection of art and activism, puts women speaking out their subjective experiences through bodily presence, actions, movements, postures, gestures, and linguistic and theatrical semiotics as commanding tools with an attempt to consciousness-raising among audience. Women's Theatre presents women with subversive performance with their bodies as sites of protest to challenge the subordination of women, marginalization of their subjective experiences and commodification of their bodies in patriarchal social and cultural contexts. This study purports to examine the theatrical performance-texts where women, through embodied performance of sexist gender roles, different sexual and gender-based violence and their traumas relegating them to hysterical condition, explore resistance to challenge societal structures, gender norms and expectations which put them on the

margins of mainstream social, cultural and economic systems and how dynamics of such subversive performance of women in the Women's Theatre becomes a powerful tool of consciousness-raising for audience to think of causes and consequences of sexual and gender-based violence and to take action to interrupt, disrupt and subvert the male-dominated social norms and cultural stereotypes, with an attempt to bring women's position with gender equality in the center of social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. In this study the select performance-texts—Padmanabhan's **Lights Out**, Mehta's **Getting Away with Murder**, and Sengupta's **Mangalam**—will be analysed through the perspective of psychoanalytic feminism along with semiological and phenomenological interpretations of actions, movements, gestures, theatrical semiotic objects and women's embodied experiences.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15222683>

Women's role in the development of Indian economy, healthcare services, agriculture, science and technology and their valued association with family, society and the state are indubitably acknowledged on the one hand, but on the other they are multifariously discriminated on the ground of gendered notions, and subsequently they face sexual, gendered and domestic violence and their subjective experiences are undermined to the extremity. It is often noted that the prevalent gender inequality, socio-cultural norms and stereotypes, rooted in patriarchal hegemony, are the basic source of all the different forms of violence committed against women. Around the globe women intermittently have protested gendered differences and prejudices through different media like social media and literary writings and advocated for gender equality to access the economic resources, legal and political rights, equal wages for equal work etc. Writings in different genre have always been most powerful media for women intelligentsia to voice women's unvoiced issues and subjective experiences. Women have written numerous novels, dramas, critical essays and composed poetry speaking about 'Woman' question and women's problems caused by an authoritative and male-dominated society.

Theatrical performance of a play-text puts before audience the embodied experiences of the characters through actors performing on the stage to raise awareness of some significant issues of a particular



society. The theatrical performance of dramatic works or performance-texts and plays prove to be the most significant medium for women theatre artists including playwrights, directors, actors and audience to bring oppressed women's private and personal issues to public's attention with an attempt to consciousness-raising among audience to think of the tyrannical and brutal patriarchal stereotypes and socio-cultural norms and venturing to interrupt and disrupt them at every level of society and to install a social system with gender equality. Women-actors, who are presented in the center of the theatrical stage, through embodied performance of gender, violence/trauma and subsequent generated hysteria, the Women's Theatre intends to explore women's resistance to social norms and cultural stereotypes of authoritative and patriarchal society which relegate women's personal issues and subjective experiences to the periphery and limit gender equality. This study endeavours to present 'woman question' through theatrical staging of the performance-texts. Women actors performing gender roles, violence and subsequent hysteria not only intend to highlight the realities of the male-dominated oppressive social orders but simultaneously advocate the idea of equality of male and female with an intervention into the male gaze or perspective and for this they present, on the stage to audience, their lived experiences of gender roles, violence and hysteria originated from the trauma and its experiences.

The Women's Theatre in India came to prominence during 1970s as an alternative to the feminist theatre in the West. Being swayed by the ambition and resolution of the women's liberation movement and radical feminism in the 1960s, women playwrights and dramatic writers appeared with firm determination to present women's personal and private issues in their plays and performance-texts. Women theatre artists, actors and playwrights began to play the roles of social activists and brought their disapproval to gender roles and gendered violence imposed on women through gender performativity and subversive performance of traumatic experiences and hysteria of women as modes of expressions of resistance. The Women's Theatre mainly intended to present women's subjective and lived experiences on the theatrical stage for raising awareness among the audience. The women's Theatre expects audience to be not only spectators but *specactors* or co-participants in the perfection of production and meaning-making of the performance on the stage. Usha Ganguly, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Tripurari Shrama, Mallika Sarabhai, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, Anuradha kapur, Kirti Jain are among many prominent Indian women playwrights and theatre directors who did not only do playwritings but also attempted to generate feminist vocabulary to present women, through feminist lens, with their voice to articulate their subjective experiences.



Women playwrights present women actors and characters in oppressed and victimized positions where they confront with different forms of violence including physical, psychological, sexual, cultural, social, economic and domestic abuses. The Women's Theatre, therefore, includes women playwrights and theatre artists including directors and actors to venture out into performing and exploring women's issues and 'woman question' as embodied experiences on the theatrical stage with an attempt to interrupt into the hegemonic and oppressive structures generating and sustaining sexual and gender-based violence against women and disrupt the male gaze. Nivedita Menon, in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), very pertinently affirms that it's gaze which shapes specific meanings to violence for a male and a female, "The gaze of the viewer constitutes and reconstitutes the meaning of images" (Menon, 2012, 220). Helene Keyssar poignantly defining feminist theatre maintains that "production and scripts characterised by consciousness of women as women; dramaturgy in which art is inseparable from the condition of women as women; performance (written and acted) that deconstructs sexual differences and thus undermines patriarchal power; scripting and production that present transformation as a structural and ideological replacement for recognition; and the creation of women characters in the 'subject position'.... It was exciting because it dared to venture to the stage with such diverse and sometimes surprising representations and explorations of women, of their relationships to each other and to men, that it created a new audience for theatre" (Keyssar, 1996, 1). "Women's Theatre", Tutun Mukherjee, in the chapter "Prolegomenon To Women's Theatre" of *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*, encapsulates, "which is urged by a general concern for gender relations and draws upon women's perspectives and experiences towards 'consciousness raising' to improve the social conditions for women" (2005, 14). In the 1970s and onwards Indian Women playwrights and theatre artists made a dominant advocacy for an urgent need of deconstructing and subverting the prevalent gender and sexual politics through the performance-texts and their presentation on theatrical stage for consciously receptive audience with an attempt to produce for the state to set up social, cultural, political and economic systems free from multifarious sexual and gender based violence perpetrated against women. The Women's Theatre, from the 1970s onwards, practicing consciousness-raising, attempted to forge a new understanding of traumatic experiences and hysteria of women to articulate and visualize gender and sexual violence perpetrated against women.

Study of performance of gender, violence/trauma and subsequent hysteria through the framework of feminist psychoanalytic presides because power dynamics of patriarchy constructs gender identity which is ascribed to men and women through conscious and unconscious processes and perpetration of



different forms of violence as sign of male-domination and oppression making women hysterics are the manifestation of psychic parts of men to impose violence and women verbalize and visualize it through different linguistic phenomena and embodied actions. The Women's Theatre moves around women's experiences which are presented through feminist subversive theatrical performances on the stage where their embodied actions, movements and gestures are at work in the production of meanings to audience and the traumatic experiences and hysteria representing women's psychosis are interpreted and analysed with psychoanalytical perspective. "In making the hidden visible", as Patrick Campbell emphatically maintains "the latent manifests, in laying bare the interior landscape of the mind and its fears and desires through a range of signifying practices, psychoanalytic processes are endemic to the performing arts" (Campbell, 2002, 1). Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis has always been looked for a "theory of femininity, sexuality, and sexual difference" (Showalter, 1993 287). The study of women's hysteria under the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis becomes prominent and relevant because in the recent decades of the past a number of feminist theorists and literary critics agreed, for different reasons, that psychoanalysis, as a theory or method, was developed out of the work with hysterics as Juliet Mitchell, in her essay "The Question of Femininity and the Theory of Psychoanalysis", writes, "psychoanalysis had to start from an understanding of hysteria. It could not have developed...from one of the other neuroses or psychoses. Hysteria led Freud to what is universal in psychic construction and it led him there in a particular way—by the route of a prolonged and central preoccupation with the difference between the sexes...The question of sexual difference—femininity and masculinity—was built in the very structure of the illness" (Mitchell, 1986, 386). Jacques Lacan, Helen Cixous and Julia Kristeva's works presented new and significant insights to understand the dimensions of language and gender of modern female hysteria with semiotic grounds. Talking of Kristeva's developed insights into hysteria and its understanding G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter write that she "has argued with particular force that medical appearances can never be considered entirely apart from their linguistic moorings, any more than from their gender-based dimensions" (1993, viii). Debating on Dora's story in "The Laugh of the Medusa", Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement discuss about force and gravity of hysteria in subverting the patriarchal oppressive notions. Clement on the one side is skeptical of the power of hysteria in the feminine subversion, but on the other hand Cixous asserts that hysteria is the "nuclear example of women's power to protest" (1986, 154).

Medical experts and physicians perceived hysteria in women as a matter of medical diagnosis. Hysteria originating from trauma was previously explained as complex experiences related to stress, flashbacks



and madness which Herman termed to be “dissociation in traumatic stress disorders” which “offers a window into consciousness, memory, and links between body and mind” (1992, 40). Mark Micale, the historian at Yale University, asserted, “For centuries, hysteria has served as a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in the opposite sex” (1989, 319). Freud in his archetypal work *The Etiology of Hysteria* (1896) on hysteria postulated and defended the theory of ‘seduction’ and recognised hysteria as “disguised communications about sexual abuse in childhood” (Herman, 1992, 2). Freud asserted that sexual abuse becomes harmful only when it is consequently resulted in ‘unconsummated excitation’.

The modern feminist understanding reworked in the interpretation and explanation of hysteria, and women activists, feminist theorists and anti-sexual violence champions challenged the medicalised opinions about women’s hysteria. Elaine Showalter in her essay “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender” says that in the recent past decades historians, doctors and psychoanalysts finding the hysteria having its source in the trauma and traumatic experiences which in turn have been caused by imposition of gender and social and cultural norms as compulsory heteronormative orders and patriarchal rules, claimed that “hysteria is caused by women’s oppressive social roles rather than by their bodies or psyches, and they sought its sources in cultural myths of femininity and in male domination” (Showalter, 1993, 287). To counter the medicalised conception about the cause of hysteria feminist theorists and literary writers were assigned with the responsibility of bringing and establishing the idea that gendered sexual violence, which is social reality of Indian patriarchal social order, is social and cultural constructs and can be subverted, with an attempt to change social consciousness, only through dismantling the social and cultural norms of compulsory heterosexuality. Women social activists, feminist theorists and literary writers come together going beyond the medical diagnosis based interpretations and mythical and fantasized explanations of women’s traumatic experiences and hysteria look into trauma and hysteria and gender and sexual violence grounded into the patriarchal social and cultural norms and oppressive heteronormative taboos and stereotypes which are needed to be subverted through their right presentation to audience of a particular community or society. Feminist literary theorists and critics, activists and artists, transcending from medical understanding of hysteria, being influenced by the semiological and phenomenological discourses, brought and developed a new and different understanding of women’s hysteria as a language of expression in the form of gestures. Taking hysteria as medium of expressing feminist ideology to counter the preestablished medicalised and patriarchal notions to diagnose female hysteria and victimize and make women responsible for it and their



biological and physical problems or attributes, Elaine Showalter considers “hysteria as a specifically feminine protolanguage, communicating through the body messages that can not be verbalized...a specifically feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy (1993, 286). In her work *Hysteria in Performance*, Jenn Cole, asserting that unconscious emotions are demonstrated through the embodied actions as signs, maintains, “The unconscious force at work in the psychoanalytic subject claims the body to demonstrate a symptom—a sign itself—according to a particular, enigmatic and particular logic”(138-139). Traumatic experiences and subsequent hysteria which is utilized as a mode of expression of their pangs of suffering in the condition when they find themselves confined or blocked from using any other linguistic or verbal means of ventilation or communication, as Elaine Showalter, the American literary critic in her book *Histories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1893) explicitly writes “hysteria has served as a form of expression, a body language for people who otherwise might not be able to speak or even to admit what they feel” (1893, 7).

Women’s hysterical experiences finding a place exist between body and mind of the survivors who challenge the boundaries by expressing them through embodied actions and gestures. Mark Micale in *Approaching Hysteria* (1995) maintains that hysteria is “not a disease; rather, it is an alternative physical, verbal, and gestural language, an iconic social language” (182). The feminist understanding has expanded the purview of thinking and explaining of women’s hysteria. Juliet Mitchell calls it as “daughter’s disease” which Showalter names “a syndrome of physical and linguistic protest against the social and symbolic laws of the Father” (1993, 288). It therefore becomes evident that oppressive social and cultural norms of patriarchy impose gender roles and generate gendered and sexual violence against women in the male dominated and hegemonic social and cultural contexts and women’s trauma and traumatic experiences relegate them to hysterical conditions. Feminist explanation of trauma and “hysteria in women offered a new perspective that decoded physical symptoms, psychotherapeutic exchanges, and the literary texts as the presentations of conflict over the meaning of femininity in a particular historical context” (Showalter, 1993, 288) and the Women’s Theatre in India countering gendered notions and theatrically presenting gender and sexual violence and hysteria as women’s communication and expression of resistance to all the oppressive and heteronormative social and cultural norms through performance of women’s embodied and lived experiences as semiotics and phenomena to audience’s consciousness.

Theatre and theatrical performance, as a whole, can be considered to be completely a system of signs in a variety of forms like visual, acoustic, verbal and non-verbal and semiological understanding and



interpretation of them and application, therefore, becomes prominent. In *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* Elaine Aston, discussing about the significance of semiotics in the understanding of the use of theatrical and other signs on the stage for the audience who are responsible for supplementing meanings to the performance and production, proclaimed, “Semiotics offered an understanding of the theatrical text as a sign-system, and, moreover, provided a ‘language’ for the study of plays in performance” (1995, 4). Umberto Eco in his essay “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance”, talking of its significance in decoding the signs which work in theatre as a meta-language which offers the tools and provides audience with language to describe the theatrical semiotic discourse presented in a pattern of binary, maintains, “Semiotics can be conceived of either as a unified theoretical approach to the great variety of systems of signification and communication, and in this sense it constitutes a metalinguistic discourse... or it can be conceived as a description of those various systems insisting on their mutual differences, their specific structural properties, their idiosyncrasies—from verbal language to gestures, from visual images to body positions, from musical sounds to fashions” (1977, 107-117).

The phenomenon of perception is obligatory in the process of interpretation of anything perceived in reality. Actors and characters with their embodied experiences are presented on the stage to interact with audience who perceive and create meanings out the performance. This process of perceiving and making meaning out of the theatrical performance falls under the category of phenomenology. Phenomenological approach of interpretation of experiences was developed by Edmund Husserl Maurice in *Logical Investigation* (1900-1901). Merleau-Ponty, having influence of Husserl, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, observes, “We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive” (2005, xv). Maaïke Bleeker et al. focusing on its dimensions and application maintain that phenomenology is mainly related to “the structures of experience and perception, phenomenology speaks to fundamental concerns about how audience members encounter performances” (2015, 4). Phenomenology provides performers with the perceptions in presenting their experiences in the line to socio-cultural and historical contexts, and also it offers a powerful outlook to audience to perceive and conceive the experiences of the performers to interpret and receive them at the level of their consciousness.

Focusing on Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out*, Dina Mehta’s *Getting Away with Murder* and Poile Sengupta’s *Mangalam*, which are constituents of the Women’s Theatre in India, this study addresses the performance and performativity of gender, violence, traumatic experiences and hysteria of women designed to bring on the theatrical stage to consciousness raising or raising awareness among audience



to interrupt, dismantle the male-dominated ideological system and patriarchal attitudes and bring gender equality by changing the status quo. Like the feminist theatre in the west, Indian Women's Theatre presents women characters in the centre as subjects rather than objects putting forth their lived subjective experiences through subversive performance as a strategy to resist the oppressive gender notions and subsequent violence against women. In the Women's Theatre the performance and manifestation of women's hysterical experiences caused by gender-based violence and traumatic experiences become the part and parcel of the designs of resistance to authoritative social orders. Feminist psychoanalytic study along with semiological and phenomenological study of embodied actions, movements and gestures as well as the experiences of women actors are central to this research.

Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, the performance-text, was first performed in 1986 by Sol Theatre Company, at Prithvi Theatre, Bombay. *Lights Out* presents women victims of sexual and gendered violence and its consequence on the other women who come across to witness the victims' physical and psychological anguish. The presentation of the picture of a woman being raped by four men, off stage, in a compound under construction which is just outside Leela and Bhasker's apartment is central to the whole theatrical performance of this text. Leela witnessing the sexual assault perpetrated against the woman being raped gets victimized. Leela's emotional responses to the rape as a sexual violence becomes the secondary trauma or vicarious trauma which is expressed in the forms of her fear, helplessness, anger, anxiety, hysterical symptoms and she experiences psychological distress. Leela's groaning "AAAAAAHHHHH!"(43) depicts her being hysterical to the extreme degree. Women express their psychological distress and emotional turmoil through hysterical symptoms in the condition when they find themselves unable to express through verbal language and due to the inadequacy of verbal language their anguished experiences can't be verbally expressed as Elaine Showalter writes "Women...suffer from hysterical symptoms not because we are essentially irrational or because we're all victims of abuse but because, like men, we are human beings who will convert feelings into symptoms when we are unable to speak—when, for example, we feel overwhelmed by shame, guilt, or helplessness" (Showalter, 1893, 207).

The expression of her emotional turmoil is the gestural utterance of conscious and unconscious resistance on her part. Her embodied suffering and psychologically disturbance may be the cause of her own trauma, which is retrieved by her witnessing the sexual violence in the present, faced by her in the past. Leela herself being in a middle class patriarchal family is not in the power and position to initiate any intervention and her incessant imploration to her husband, Bhasker, to intervene into the happening



violence by calling the police is neglected which symbolizes women's subordinate position in the patriarchal family and society of India. Leela's psychological agony is not cared at all by her husband as she says, "You don't care what I feel, what I go through every day!" (Padmanabhan, 4) and she feels frightened and her fear turns into hysterical symptoms in her behaviour, "I carry it around all day. Sometimes it's like a shawl, it wraps itself around my shoulders and I start to shiver" (Padmanabhan, 5). She is forced to ignore the victim's screams and violent sound but she being empathetic to the victim can not help hearing them, "I can't help hearing them! They're so—so *loud*! And *rude*! How can I make myself deaf just for them"(Padmanabhan, 8). Worry, mental strain, depression and prolonged fear causes hysteria getting entrenched to the extension in her innermost self that she suffers from anxiety disorder impacting her ability to perform anything essential which she expresses, "I feel awful, I feel sick, I can barely eat, I feel so sick" (Padmanabhan, 9). Imposition of gender roles and practices dominate women's emotional space more than that of men and Leela's psychological disturbance is identified with her sensitivity which suppresses her voice. Bhasker to her emotional or psychological distress reacts, "My Leela is very sensitive (Padmanabhan, 15). Mohan's reaction by identifying her anxiety to be the cause of sexual differences, "Oh, I understand—after all, it's hardly the thing for a woman!(Padmanabhan, 15) makes it obvious that the cause of gender and sexual violence against women is the sexual difference. She is persuaded to do yoga and meditation, which is no helpful to her situation, to get rid of her anxiety but her husband does nothing to stop the happening crime. It is the gendered masculinist perception which always finds fault in women for their anxiety and hysteria. Bhasker and his friend, Mohan, who are representative of all men of hegemonic and oppressive patriarchal society, do not wish to interrupt into the happening sexual violence, the gang-rape, to get it away right then. The theatrical performance of *Lights Out* presents the middle class people's apathy or dehumanized sense for rape and their unwillingness to intervene into such a brutal incident:

Bhasker: I don't want to stick my neck out, that's all (Padmanabhan, 7).

Mohan: Personally I'm against becoming entangles in other people's private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong (Padmanabhan, 20).

Their reluctance in the intervention into the happening violence and their action of witnessing the sexual violence combined with physical and psychological violence prove that they are just bystanders and watching the violence from the household.



Psycho-semiotics of apathetic male gaze is marked by the spectacle of the brutality of the gang rape and mutilation of the woman victim's body. The perception and interpretation of the brutal sexual violence through the lens of male gaze and masculinist perspective changes the meaning of the female body and female cry as signs. The victim's screaming for help and the mutilated female body work as signs of speaking body to resist to sexual assaults and violence. The spectacle of the rape "Three men holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his—organ—into her!" (Padmanabhan, 39) depicts the highest degree of brutality and sexual victimization of women, but does not make the male characters feel empathized any more instead it becomes a source of voyeuristic pleasure for men characters and their idea to shoot the live picture of the brutal violence like rape symbolizes the psycho-semiotic and tyrannical male nature which relegate women's bodies to be just objects and commodity for consumption and sexual and sensual pleasure. The visualization and description of sexual violence against the woman victim depicts the intuition and malignity of men towards the women's body and sexuality. The spectacle of the sexual violence becomes a form of pornography embedded with physical violence.

Leela and Naina, representing new women of the post modern Indian society, constantly resist to all the baseless and fallacious notions of Bhasker and Mohan who justify the sexual violence on different unwarranted grounds. The duo think that the sexual violence like rape of a woman is matter of social and cultural intervention. The sexual victimization of the woman must be considered a public issue. In the name of religious ceremony or cultural rituals and exorcism no form of gender and sexual violence can be operated against women. Leela's non-compliance with men's fallacious pretexts is communicated as resistance and necessary intervention, "But even if it is something religious, can't it be stopped? If they're doing something really horrible" (26)? Naina expresses her intolerance and resistance, "I can't bear to hear this sound and not look. Even if it's something religious, it sounds as if it should be stopped!(34). They resist gendered and sexual violence by not being silenced nevertheless their voice is suppressed. They call the patriarchal notions and oppressive social orders into question and endeavour to dismantle all the male-dominated social and cultural prejudices and stereotypes by their feminine subversive performance.

Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* presents the uncivilized nature of imposed violence against women causing the issue of female foeticide. Mehta presents the spectacle of Sonali's traumatic experiences of the child sexual violence she faced in her past turns into her present psychosis. Even though Sonali became victim of sexual violence in her childhood, but she faces the traumatic moment



recurring in the present time of her life and it interrupts her in resuming the normal life as the feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman evidently maintains, “The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (Herman, 1992, 37). Sonali does not want to give birth to a girl baby because she in her childhood has been victim of sexual violence. While she was first time pregnant, she went through the amniocentesis test and having known the sex of the embryo to be female, she herself committed a forceful foeticide. There are a variety of reasons of female foeticide in India but in case of Sonali it is different, i.e. the gendered and sexual violence committed against women on the ground of sexual differences and gender expectations. Sonali’s view “To be born a girl is to be subject to violence and servitude (63) signifies that anatomical or biological female body and sexual differences become the root cause of gendered and sexual violence and due to patriarchal societal perception and gender power dynamics that causes objectification of female body and views as an object of control. Mehta brings the issue of female body politics through Sonali’s character. The sexual victimization of Sonali and her mother’s suffering has made her to realize that it’s the female body which becomes a vulnerable site on which violence is imposed. Sonali advocates for freedom of female body, reproductive choice and abortion. Sonali speaks, “It is still my body and my choice. A symbol of my emancipation” (63). Phallocentric ideology embedded in patriarchal history makes female body vulnerable to be perpetrated violence and through Sonali, Mehta presents that the oppressive power dynamics of patriarchy can be subverted only through the freedom of female body and sexuality.

Sonali’s trauma of her child sexual abuse victimizes her to be hysteric. Traumas of her past and stressful experiences of her being pregnant with a female fetus combine together in giving birth to hysterical symptoms in Sonali. Raziya’s description of Sonali’s mental stress, “Perhaps something buried in Sonali’s mind is waiting to be disinherited” (73) produces a clear picture of her present psyche. Sonali suffers from insomnia and anxiety disorder and she, at night, walks before mirror and speaks intermittently slipping into a female child’s voice. Sonali expresses her traumatic experiences, in hysterical mood, “I feel...something in the shadows...waiting to pounce on me...pushing and clawing...my head...my head hurts. It hurts...it hurts...” (87). Hysterical body of Sonali communicates through different semiotics of hysterical symptoms which can not be expressed through words. Mehta presenting performance and performativity of hysteria intends to speak to audience to empathize with Sonali’s hysteria which is caused by gendered and sexual violence and oppressive social orders of



patriarchy. She raises awareness among audience through such feminine subversive performance of women's subjective experiences.

Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam* presents women's personal and private issues in familial and social relationships. The performance and performativity of domesticated sexual and gender-based violence is the central phenomena of this performance-text. Mangalam the eponymous character has been victim of sexual molestation committed by her brother-in-law before marriage. She is married to Dorai who becomes the perpetrator of sexual abuse to Mangalam. Dorai is an epitome of a man who is orthodox in his behaviour and sticks to social and cultural norms of Indian patriarchy. Mangalam's having a child by another man before marriage becomes intolerable and dishonour to Dorai. Mangalam suffered sexual violence by her brother-in-law before her marriage and sexual abuse after her marriage by her husband and dies. The actual cause of her death remains unknown which disturbs her sister, Thangam. Through Mangalam's character Sengupta presents a picture of oppressions and violence imposed upon a woman in a patriarchal family in an Indian society. Dorai harassed Mangalam and she could not express her pain throughout her life. Thangam resists to oppressive gendered notions discussing the miserable fate of Mangalam. Sengupta presents Chorus to visualize oppression and violence against women committed in the name of male-dominated social and cultural norms, taboos, stereotypes and phallocentric prejudices which undermine and marginalize women's subjective experiences and force them to be silence:

Because a woman has patience,
She is not allowed to speak;
others speak for her,
and she never learns the words.
Because a woman is strong,
She is not to be protected;
others violate her,
and she must pay for their trespass.
Because a woman has breasts,
she can not be on her own;
age turns her skin to parchment,
and then she is left alone. (123)



Other female characters Revathy, Usha, Vaithi and Kamala become victims of violence in the hands of oppressive male power and they express their resistance, in their own ways, to patriarchal social orders. Usha, who is Sumati in the Act II, is a modern woman who also expresses her resistance to gender-based oppressive notions. Through characters like Thangam and Usha, Poile Sengupta presents that stereotypical taboos and socio-cultural norms undermine women's exploration and control female bodies to exploit and consume them as objects but they do not accept their subjugation. The final and intended message is conveyed by chorus in the last of the performance when all women performers come together to express women's determination of endurance and resistance to operations of gender and sexual violence against them:

As for women, the gods said
let them be strong rooted, like trees.
For it they who shall hold
the ends of the world together
And there will be storms
and the wind will blow very strong
but the women will stay, like trees,
they will hold the world together. (151)

The performance of *Mangalam* brings various forms of violence based on gender and sexuality along with women actors and characters questioning male dominated socio-cultural norms and power dynamics, prevalent in a patriarchal society, which dominate, control and humiliate female body and undermine their agency and subjective experiences. Sengupta exposes men's desire to gain power to control and victimize women on the ground of gender norms and sexual differences with simultaneous presentation of women's resistance to hegemonic and oppressive gender notions and norms which encourage and sustain multifarious violence against women.

While in the conventional performance-texts and dramatic writings women were presented as characters submissive to compulsory heterosexual power politics and viewed as obedient to laws of Father and loyal to male dominated socio-cultural norms without manifestation of resistance to oppressive notions of gender and sexuality based violence, but the Women's Theatre in India presents new women characters and actors who represent women coming from margins to the center of the stage, and questioning and resisting the male hegemonic oppressive power dynamics rooted within gendered and stereotypical notions of patriarchy through feminine subversive performance of their embodied



subjective and lived experiences. The substantial account of this critical study has been the performance and performativity of intersections of gender and sexual violence or trauma and hysteria of women in male-dominated historical and socio-cultural contexts. The critical analysis and interpretation of gender, violence/trauma and subsequent hysteria of women with lens of psychoanalytic feminism along with understanding theatrical semiotics and phenomenal experiences of the performers assist in making evident the true designs and intentions, i.e. consciousness raising or raising awareness among audience, of the Women's Theatre artists including playwrights, directors, actors, and audience as *specactors*.

Works Cited:

- Aston, Elaine. *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*. Routledge, 1995.
- Bleeker, Maaïke, et al. *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations*. Routledge, 2015.
- *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival: Three Plays*. Seagull, 2000.
- Campbell, Patrick, and Adrian Kear. *Psychoanalysis and Performance*. Routledge, 2002.
- Eco, Umberto. "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance." *The Drama Review: TDR*, Mar., 1977, Vol. 21, No.1, Theatre and Social Action (March., 1977), pp. 107-117, The MIT Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145112>
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recover*. Basic Books, 1992.
- Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. New York, 1996.
- Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. zuban, 2012.
- Micale, S. Mark. *Approaching Hysteria*. Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Mitchell, Juliet. "The Question of Femininity and the Theory of Psychoanalysis.", *The British School of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. George Kohon. Free Association Books, 1986. 381-400
- Mukherjee, Tutun. *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Ponty, M. Merleau. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge, 2005.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender.", *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. University of California Press, 1993, pp. 286-344.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*. Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Newly Born Women*, trans. Betsy Wing, University of Minnesota, 1986.



- Rousseau, G. S., and Roy Porter. “The Destiny of Hysteria.”, *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. University of California Press, 1993, pp. vii-xxiv