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## **Dramatizing Power and Resistance: Images of Women in Pakistani and Indian Alternative Theater**

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Dramatizing Power and Resistance: Images of Women in Pakistani and Indian  
Alternative Theater

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature & Cultural Studies

by

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## Abstract

This dissertation analyzes Pakistani and Indian plays that illustrate the nexus of power relations that operate in Pakistan and India to disempower women and the way women resist by creating dialogic spaces or fissures in the exploitative system. I have selected plays by Ajoka Theater in Pakistan and plays dealing with the similar thematic concerns by notable Indian playwrights to explore common grounds and points of departure. I have chosen four images of women depicting diverse modes of oppression associated with women's bodies that are dealt with in these plays.

Chapter 1 will examine *Barri/The Acquittal* by Ajoka theater, and *Mother of 1084* by Mahaswata Devi, depicting women as victims of state violence during their incarceration. While chapter 2 underscores the issue of women trafficking and commodification of their bodies as a form of modern day slavery. I argue that women's bodies are harnessed and controlled by patriarchal forces that coalesce with capitalist system. When their voices remain unheard, the female protagonists in the plays, *Dukhini* by Ajoka, *Kamla* by Vijay Tendulkar, and *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan, chronicle their resistance through their bodies in distinct ways.

While chapter 3 examines that female agency in Pakistan and India is either negotiated through motherhood or through an absence of motherhood. The figure of the mother without child in these plays ranges from the harrowing circumstances of a woman who loses or relinquishes custody of a biological child (*Bayen*) to the traumatic state of a woman who miscarries/ undergoes an abortion (*Barri/The Acquittal* and *Silence!*) or one who never becomes pregnant (*Kala Meda Bhes/ Black is my Robe*).

Chapter 4 illustrates the perception of performing or dancing women as the cultural or societal Other in Pakistan and India. My major objective is to illustrate changes in ideological discourses concerning this issue as the societies along both sides of the border developed after independence. I have examined Tripurari Sharma's *Azizun Nisa* and Ajoka Theater's Aik *Thee Nani/ A Granny for All Seasons* to elaborate this theme.

While evaluating the dramatic techniques, themes and female protagonists of the plays, I have used feminist critical perspectives, also keeping in view, feminist theater traditions. Thus, the dramatic texts included in this study, explain the power relations and female subjectivity in Pakistani and Indian societies, and reveal the way women employ subtle and overt ways of resistance and attempt to subvert the power structure.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	29
Chapter 2.....	75
Chapter 3 .....	111
Chapter4.....	151
Conclusion.....	193
Works Cited.....	199

## Introduction

It's all right, daughter, after all we are prisoners, even prisoners of laughter and merrymaking, why do you bother with them? I remember my father used to stop us from laughing at home, he said that the angels of goodness turn away from a house where they hear the sound of young girls laughing and satan enters the house instead. (*Barri/The Acquittal*, 70)

I am Fatima. The bastard, Bachoo, the pimp, locked me in and has gone looking for customers. I have come by jumping the wall. (*Dukhini/Woman of Sorrow*, 197)

Look. Ditta needs a woman badly and you need an ox equally badly. If you let go of one wife and give her to Ditta, he will be too happy to exchange her with his ox. (*Kala Meda Bhes/Black is my Robe*, 168)

It is all right by your culture if boys sing and dance. What is wrong with girls doing the same? Why are you people such hypocrites? (*Aik Thi Nani/ A Granny for All Seasons*, 134)

I begin this dissertation with these images that reflect the institutional power relations that characterize and circumscribe the lives of women in Pakistan and India. These dramatic images elucidate with piquancy the edifice of the world which is supported by inegalitarian structures, and in Mohanty's words, "a world transversed with intersecting lines of power and resistance" (*Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* 2).

This dissertation is an attempt at examining plays by Ajoka theater and some Indian playwrights that highlight the 'politics of the female body,' also demonstrating the way disenfranchised women take control of their bodies and resist oppression. Women are incarcerated, sold out as commodities, bartered and displaced for being and not-being mothers, and are calumniated for being performers in Pakistan and India, and the

texts I have chosen to examine, portray these images powerfully. Furthermore my purpose for choosing this geographical terrain, that is, Pakistan and India, is twofold. Firstly, both countries assert a kind of solidarity despite their differences at multiple levels, secondly, Pakistani theater can be considered an offshoot of the kind of theater that had flourished in India before the colonial rule began.

I have multiple aims in this study, given my comparative scope and selection of plays that I deem as cultural products. I regard cultural productions, as active agents of social change. I wish to make a broad-based audience aware of this literature, and to enhance the contribution of Pakistani dramatists in the field of world drama. Overall, this study aims to discover areas of solidarity by analyzing a shared cultural and colonial history, and by probing and sharing resistance strategies employed by women in their ongoing struggle against systems of control and domination.

Additionally, this study is an attempt to locate affinities as well as alterities in the theater practices of the two countries, and my aim is to show how Indian or Pakistani theater depicts the culture or social conditions of the region. I have examined the way female characters are portrayed and projected on stage, and inquired whether they have agency and the will to resist to totalising structures of power or they are just passive and silent sufferers; whether they are delineated in a positive light or portrayed as avenging, monster figures. Are these plays using indigenous theatrical traditions or borrowed Western forms? What local, indigenous techniques are being employed and why, and how far these forms are successful in conveying the message of the playwright/practitioner? In addition to illustrating the social, historical, and cultural



conditions of the subcontinent that have shaped the drama on both sides of the border, my objective has been to trace the way the image of woman on stage has evolved.

Power is as complex a phenomenon as gender is, and the relationship between the two is a contentious one. From Foucault, Lukes, Bourdieu and Giddens to a plethora of feminists, the notion of power has remained a focal point of debates and still no consensus has been formulated. However, many feminist scholars assume that “theories of power tend to be silent when it comes to the subject of gender” (Davis 67). It goes beyond the scope of this study to analyze and critique all the theories of power conceptualized by different scholars but, Giddens’ conception of power, as both “constraining as well as enabling,” is more relevant to my dissertation. According to Giddens, investigating power also involves uncovering “dialectic of control,” which will be the focus of this study (qtd in Davis 73). Thus, I investigate the “dialectic of control” that deprives women of their subjectivity and agency and compels them to lead fragmented lives, but it is enabling in the sense that women choose to resist and this is what the plays in this study illustrate.

In the subcontinent, patriarchal order intersects with religion and politics to maintain the status quo, marginalizing women. Religion is and has remained a major issue, and has played a definitive role in the politics of the sub-continent. Whether it is the Brahmins or the ruling classes in India, or the clerics and the politicians in Pakistan, religion is distorted and appropriated to exercise control over women. To be precise, women have remained crushed under the weight of the dogmatic religious and patriarchal structures in the region, from Devadasis (Women in the Hindu temples to serve gods) and widows in India to the victims of rape and honor killings in Pakistan.

Furthermore, in India, a duality exists regarding the status women are generally accorded. On one hand, they worship female goddesses; some of them being emblems of great strength and are often evoked to inspire courage to fight. On the other hand, a large number of women become the victims of dowry related deaths; thousands get raped every year. However, this dissertation will focus on the issues that have common grounds, and that have been examined by the playwrights in both the countries.

As the playwrights and theater practitioners in both countries have been striving to create consciousness in women and the masses about their rights, my aim is to examine how and to what extent they have proved the efficacy of art being used as a tool to initiate social change. Some issues pertaining to women and the way they are projected on stage correlate in both countries while some situations are distinctly Indian or specifically Pakistani. However, this observation cannot be generalized, as the structures of power are variable, more likely to shift in accordance with a specific culture, society, and the dominant religion observed in the region. Another question that these plays have explored is how religion and class structure sanction controlling and abusive system that debases women, and their nexus influences women in both India and Pakistan.

A brief historical overview of theater in the subcontinent is pertinent here because theater is still evolving in Pakistan, but the fact that it came into existence from the same origin—that is, the Indian drama, explains its affinities with the current trends in the genre as it is being practiced in India. Theater in India is more advanced, diverse and polished as compared to the still developing art in Pakistan. One reason for this disparity is that theater in India is an integral part of their ethos. It has a tradition as old

as Greek drama, and can be traced back to more than two thousand years, with its own dramaturgy and poetics—the *Natyashastra*. It is significant to give a brief introduction to Indian theater because it developed from *Natyashastra*, but it was strongly influenced by European drama during the colonial era when the mainstream theater practitioners started producing plays by Shakespeare and other British playwrights to cater to the taste of British colonial masters and the elite. Indian theater gradually, under the Western influence changed its shape; traditional theater was limited to village theatres and religious festivals alone. Thus it is important to trace how the indigenous theater evolved into Parsi theater and the Theater of Roots and many other offshoots that are being practiced today.

As a compendious treatise on the nature and art of dramatic performance, the *Natyashastra* is usually ascribed to Bharata Muni by some scholars, compiled between 300 B.C.E and 200C.E. The treatise is a longer and more elaborate account of the dramatic art than Aristotle's *Poetics*, including detailed exposition of the structure, stage and theater organization, and aesthetics (*Norton* 16-18). Written in Sanskrit, other texts that exerted a considerable influence on the literature and theater in India, were the epic poems- the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (both written between 500 and 200B.C.E.), classical dance dramas such as Kathakali and Kuttiyatam. Graham Ley, drawing a comparison between Greek, Indian and the Japanese Noh theater, notes the basic structural and thematic similarities which have attracted much critical attention, specially the concept of "imitation," which is *Anukarana* in Sanskrit (Ley 191).

Another notable aspect of the classical Indian theater is its emphasis on the audience- based aesthetic theory which describes "rasa—the sentiment, mood or

aesthetic experience that a play creates in its spectator—and how it is achieved in performance” (*Norton* 18). Thus, the *Natyashastra* is one of the oldest discourses that enumerates spectacle, costume, gesture, music, dance, and language, as elements of a successful theatrical performance that create a mood or ambience to be relished by the audience. Around two dozen Sanskrit plays are extant to this day, major playwrights include Bhasa, the author of thirteen extant plays, Kalidasa whose *Shakuntala* is still performed, and Shudraka.

Episodes from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are also still performed today in different parts of India, evoking conflicting interpretations and reinterpretations of the epics in regards with the portrayal of women. According to Suddhabrata Sen Gupta, these epics manifest a kind of energy in dissenting strains and voices, and also a “libertarian vitality.” These voices “represent a challenge to the hierarchical, oppressive and patriarchal structure of our society” (2558-2560). Also, notes Gupta, there are voices that are definitely subaltern and voices that are elitist. Voices of rebellious, angry women and voices of powerful patriarchs. But, today, the versions of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* produced by B R Chopra on television negate these contradictory strains that were an integral part of the epic tradition. Definitely, these versions renounce everything that subversive or challenged the elitist, patriarchal order, while supporting male chauvinistic ideologies (Sen Gupta 2558).

Sanskrit drama continued to flourish through the seventh century till it started to devolve due to invasions by Muslim armies from the north, and almost vanished from the cultural scene by 1000 C.E. The major cause of its decline was political instability as it was mainly patronized by the court and of course religious pundits as well.

Today, Indian theater enfolds a wide array of folk performance styles, large scale commercial plays and musicals, theatre for educational purposes, and lastly, political street theater. Anuradha Kapur observes two main paradigms of theatrical traditions in India. “One is called the Company Theater or the Parsi Theater that remained tremendously popular all over the country from 1860 to 1930, and the other is the Theater of Roots, an organizing principle through the late 1960s to the 1980s” (43-44). Also as Fawzia Afzal Khan observes, “With the advent of British colonial rule in India, elements of British drama and theatre entered the theatre lexicon of India” (1).

The Parsi Theater was a montage of diverse elements, borrowing from Persian *Shahnama*, and adapting chimerical stories from *Arabian Nights*, as well as integrating local performative elements with techniques borrowed from European drama. Parsi drama highlighted the social problems of the times, including issues related to women’s rights, alcoholism, and religious sectarianism. By the 1930s, notes Kapur, Parsi drama transformed into modern Indian body type, through cinema, as theater companies converted into cinema companies (87-118).

After independence in 1947, the modern Indian theater, dominated by colonial theatrical practice, felt the need to search for their indigenous tradition which was consigned to oblivion for ages. Pioneers among theater practitioners who sought to resurrect the ancient dramatic tradition were, B.V.Karant, K.N.Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam. Suresh Awasthi writes about the revival of Natyashastra in this context that this kind of theater is both avant- garde in the context of conventional realistic theater, and still belongs to the Natyashastra theatrical tradition which sounds paradoxical (48-69). It was in the 1950s, with Habib Tanvir’s two groundbreaking productions—*Mitti ki Gaadi*,

and *Agra Bazaar*, that music, poetry and festivity, elements of traditional theater, were once again brought back to life. Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* was another innovative venture, directed by B.V.Karant, which appropriated the traditional aspects of mime, music, myth and masks, to the wonder and awe of all who had adhered to the canon of realistic theatrical tradition. "The models and conventions of the borrowed realistic theatre," writes Awasthi, "always remained alien to our theatrical tradition, and the inherent conflict between the two could never be resolved" (298-99).

"Modern Indian drama", observes Erin B. Mee, "is a subset of "theatre" but is nonetheless connected to, and influenced by, many of these other performance forms" (1). Mee credits four male playwrights with creating a modern dramatic literature in India: Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, and Girish Karnad in Kannada. There is Dalit theater movement or the literature of the oppressed, Data Bhagat being an eminent writer in this context. It can be seen that modern Indian theater has remained considerably dominated by male playwrights, directors and actors.

I will here briefly enumerate a few important male writers who have portrayed women in different lights in their plays. Girish Karnad, a forerunner and innovator in the Kannada theater/Theater of Roots, reveals women in a different light: women torn between different conflicting conscious and unconscious desires (*Hayavadana*), and women in incestuous relationships (*Anju Mallige*) or transgressing the norms (*Nagamandala*). Jaidev Taneja discussing the role of women in post-independence Hindi drama notes "fundamental changes in the portrayal of women which he relates to social and political transformations. Taneja traces this transition from 1970 onwards,

from pativrata (self-sacrificing wife) to a newly awakened woman, especially in the works of “Surendra Verma and Ramesh Bakhshi where sex replaces love. Institutions like marriage and family are also being interrogated” (*Muffled Voices* 18).

Vijay Tendulkar is another prominent name in the milieu and whose plays are included in this study, has displayed a remarkable skill in the portrayal of women, though most of them have been illustrated as silent victims, revealing violence concealed under the garb of modern sensitivity. Two of his plays, *Kamla* and *Ghasiram Kotwal* are noteworthy for their excellent dramatization of the exploitation of women in the system where gender politics and male structures of power prevail. Mahesh Dattani, another major figure, writes in English, and his plays expose the urban middle class hypocrisy, questioning the norms and decadent conventions of society. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* underscores the plight of the marginalized sections of society- gays and women, in complex relationships. In Dattani’s view, “Men and women are the biggest stereotypes in the whole world”, and he strives to probe deeper, and writes for no political reasons (*Muffled Voices* 20). In his play *Tara*, he focuses on the supremacy given to the male child as compared to girls- an alarming problem in India where female infanticide is on the rise.

As women playwrights, directors and activists began to emerge in the 1970s, female actresses had already been making their presence felt. The significant question is to observe how the images of women were being portrayed by the male writers and directors till that time and then to notice whether the newly appearing women in the field brought any notable difference.

There are women playwrights who believe that theater is an art form which can provide a platform to women to voice their indignation, and to create consciousness in women about their rights, Usha Ganguli being one of them. Most of these female practitioners avoid being labeled as feminists because they feel it reflects the concerns of white, middle class women in the United States or Europe who are oblivious of the problems women of “third world” have to deal with in their day to day lives. Usha Ganguli, Mahaswata Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan, Tripurari Sharma and many others have been writing and directing plays that illustrate women's issues concerning dowry deaths, female infanticide, and plays and workshops about sex workers. These writers/directors have made use of both indigenous as well as Western dramatic forms, influenced mainly by Augusto Boal's form of the Theater of the Oppressed. However, in spite of all the obstacles, plays are being produced and written/directed by women in the subcontinent, more in number and with a variety of approaches, in India than in Pakistan.

To situate female writers /directors in India, in this context, is rather a hard task, as most of the material is not accessible or is not published or translated into English. The same can be said about Pakistani theatre where most of the plays are not available in printed form, let alone in English translation. However, women and their issues have always been an important subject in the theater, illustrated by both male and female playwrights. Thus, Indian theater depicting the image of women cannot be demarcated into pigeon holes because of its diversity of form and multiplicity of theatrical activity. But there are some prominent playwrights who have tackled the issues concerning women in their works, both male and female. Lakshmi Subramanyam, however,



attempts to classify them into two well defined categories: plays written and directed by male playwrights, and those written or directed by women practitioners (*Muffled Voices* 15-16). H.S.Shiva, as a playwright in his overview about the Kannada theater, observes “the image of women as falling into the categories of maya (temptress), mata (comforter) or just a victim” (*Muffled Voices* 16). Shiva’s observation is appropriate as generally woman is portrayed in roles that convey negative connotations, or as a passive victim or a goddess like, self -effacing figure.

Now I will look at Pakistani theater and its origins and show what is happening currently in this field and how perceptions about drama have changed over the years and what developments we can observe regarding women as actors and directors.

In Pakistan, Urdu drama can be traced back to the period of Wajid Ali Shah, the ruler of Oudh in India (1847-1856) who patronized it and set a new tradition (qtd in Rahman 188). After the independence, several amateur theater groups started performing in the newly emerged country, including Lok or Folk theatre in the Punjab. Tariq Rahman mentions various groups that were prominent and produced Urdu plays of considerable merit in the 1960s. Unfortunately, this era also witnessed a dictatorial regime of General Ayub Khan which led to a new leftist movement including students who were against the dictatorship. Finally, Ayub’s regime came to an end under the then very popular leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. And as Pamment notes, “A concept of new Pakistan emerged, which did not correlate with the dominant English drawing room comedies or other remnants of Parsi theatre” (Pamment 2) .

The changed scenario in the political arena was conducive to newly emerging writers and gave rise to art, music and literature. It was a sort of cultural renaissance in

the 1960s in Pakistan. “English language plays became marginalized,” Pamment notes, “and foreign play adaptations, increasingly localized, took hold of the main stage.

Student theatre activity, in particular, began to flourish, with individuals strongly influenced by the new left anarchists, European absurdist, Afro Asian movements and indigenous tradition”. Notable playwrights during this period were Sarmad Sehbai and Najam Hussain Sayed, and Major Ishaq Mohammad who pioneered the contemporary theatre, infusing it with a new spirit by reviving the Punjabi folk idiom. This was a time when theatre began to flourish with a fresh vigor, and some of the most original plays were written and staged for the first time in the history of Pakistani theatre.

But, observes Anwar Enayatullah, “... this newly infused vigor in the budding writers writing for stage was transferred to the production of plays for the television. ( 54-59). Eminent writers like Ishfaq Ahmed, Bano Qudsia, and Intizar Hussain began to write for television; these writers are considered notable figures in Urdu literature. Other women writers who were extremely popular and were writing drama serials for television were Fatima Surraya Bajia, Haseena Moeen, and Noor-ul-Huda Shah. Their plays were centred around women and their issues, but they were written in the manner of light-hearted romantic comedies. Unfortunately, stage was neglected by these writers who wrote extensively for television.

While the theatre mainly influenced by Western dramaturgy was popular in big cities, another kind, much older in tradition, was the folk theatre known as Swaang in the Western Punjab. These plays were based on folk tales, mostly legendary romances like Heer Ranjha and Sassi Punnu, with folk music and songs as an important source of entertainment for the rural masses. Actresses had to be good singers as well in order to

perform in these plays. A popular actress who also was an owner of a theatre herself was Bali Jatti. This form of theatre entertainment was mobile and moved from village to village; it was more popular in the sixties and seventies as most of the villages did not have electricity, having no access to television or cinema. Fauzia Saeed has studied the rise and decline of the folk theatre in great detail in her book: *Women in Folk Theatre*. Folk theatre in the cities started to wane with the rise of cinema; movie makers lured the theatre stars to act in films, which was a more popular and sophisticated mode of entertainment. It also gave the theatre actors a highly coveted status of stardom with more lucrative offers of money, observes Saeed. As folk theatre virtually dwindled down and gradually disappeared, it was replaced by the film industry.

This flowering of culture and literature could not be sustained, as the country was gripped into the iron hold of another, more oppressive and eleven years long martial law in 1977. During the bleak period of General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in the eighties, people associated with the theatre and arts started to disperse; some even left the country in a state of self-imposed exile. General Zia's imposition of Shariah Laws were directed more particularly against women; Hadood Ordinance (female victims of rape were considered guilty of the crime and were imprisoned) made the position of women extremely vulnerable before the law. More emancipated and educated women felt confined due to extreme measures being taken to enforce the religious obligation of observing purdah (wearing of veil) on television; media was strictly censored.

Parallel to commercial theatre was a gradual rise of alternative theatre in Pakistan, mostly in the provincial capitals of Lahore and Karachi, and more importantly, was being promoted by women writers, directors and actresses. Pakistani alternative

theatre literally emerged in this despotic regime in the eighties; art became political. This drama, mostly being led by women, had to fight the religious, social, and political mores of its time, and had to overcome the structural and technical literary obstacles.

Some educational institutions patronized dramatic societies including Government College Lahore, Kinnaird College and the National College of Arts, Lahore. These institutes staged mostly the translated versions of European and American plays or the original plays written in English, most frequently plays by Shakespeare for the entertainment of the educated, elite class. Madeeha Gohar, a former student of Government College, Lahore, with the collaboration of Shahid Nadeem, who later became her husband, founded Ajoka Theatre in 1980. Shahid Nadeem, who was a television drama producer and writer, started writing exclusively for Ajoka theatre. Madeeha Gohar was a known television actress and had earned a degree in dramatic studies from the UK. Both husband and wife, the former as a writer and the latter as the female director revolutionized the concept of theatre, which was solely being produced for the sheer entertainment of the audiences.

Commercial theatre, with its salacious humor, had a narcotizing effect on the senses of the viewers making them oblivious to the social problems of the day. Opposed to alternative theatre, was the mainstream commercial theatre whose sole objective was to lull the masses to slumber during their highly entertaining comedy shows. These plays incorporated elements of song and lascivious dances which were performed by actresses hailing mainly from red light areas of the big cities. Mostly women were portrayed as whores, avaricious, and lecherous in this kind of theatre to

lure a large number of audiences. The incorporation of dance numbers was banned during the martial law which lasted till 1988.

On the contrary, Ajoka theatre was political; it was a theatre with a purpose, a form of protest, and the voice of the oppressed and the downtrodden. It was mainly concerned with the problems being faced by the women of the peasantry and working classes who were unlettered and unaware of their rights. Along with Ajoka Theatre in Lahore, there were Lok Rehas and Saanjh, who were also committed to creating awareness in the rural and lower strata of society about their rights. Tehreek-e-Niswan was another group working for the rights of women in Karachi and being run by Sheema Kirmani, a famous actress and performer. These people sought to use theatre as a weapon against the oppressive regime of General Zia. They had to face difficulties in staging some plays that were highly critical of the then government openly. Some plays were banned; students and lovers of art pursued their artistic but subversive activities at clandestine locations. Ajoka was the leading theatre company, and the pioneer in the almost nonexistent field of alternative drama; other theatre groups followed them.

A strong influence of Indian alternative theatre is visible in the plays presented by these groups. Indian dramatists like Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi were inspiring figures who promoted the concept of Street Theatre in India. The concept of Proscenium stage was abandoned by these playwrights while street theatre was preferred as it could reach more people, especially the working classes for whom it was meant. Theatre was used as a tool for cultural intervention. Of all the contemporary alternative theatre groups in Pakistan, Ajoka is the most sophisticated in the execution of their themes and set designs. They have used theatre as a medium to influence the

basic mindsets of the people at micro level, in specific communities, especially in rural and urban, working class people. They represent a theatre of social engagement, a theatre primarily committed to bringing about actual change in specific communities, with their aim to combine art and politics.

Influence of Brecht's epic theatre and Augusto Boal's Community theatre is prominent on these theatre groups. Safdar Hashmi, the Indian dramatist writes about Pakistani theatre, and especially about Ajoka in these words:

...one is inspired by the energy of the people there. They are very brave. We are also sometimes attacked by the police but it's nothing like they face, you see. They are in moral danger all the time. They can't perform openly.... The work of Ajoka from Lahore and Dastak in Karachi I think is most important. Punjab Lok Rehas from Lahore is full of passion and energy. The people really inspire you. ... The work that Lok Rehas has been doing is still crude, however. The work of Saanjh, the only group that has links with the organized left, is also still very rudimentary. But what else can you expect. They have no tradition of theatre at all (qtd in Van Erven 158)

In spite of all the efforts of these theatre groups, there is still a great vacuum in the field of literary scholarship on Pakistani and Indian drama. There is scarcely any scholarly work available specifically about Pakistani drama; in fact it is invisible in the anthologies like *Postcolonial Plays*, and scores of other books on South Asian or Asian drama. Now I will discuss briefly the limited amount of scholarly works available on the subject.

#### A Survey of Literature:

Fawzia Afzal-Khan's book: *A Critical stage: the role of secular alternative theatre in Pakistan*, is the only book specifically written on the subject. This book is a good

starting point for my dissertation as it deals with contemporary Pakistani drama in detail, covering almost all the important theatre groups in the country who have been working for a cause. Khan begins by briefly narrating the history of Pakistani drama; its evolution from the British and then Indian Parsi drama. Tariq Rehman's *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* is another contribution, in which the author has discussed Pakistani drama in English. But, as Rehman has said, there are only a few works worth mentioning in the genre. Mostly, drama has remained hidden in the background, and could not obtain in literature the status enjoyed by poetry and to a lesser extent by the novel. Thus, Rehman discusses a few writers who wrote a number of plays in English but could not gain nationwide recognition. Rehman discusses Hanif Kureishi's plays at great length who is an internationally acclaimed writer with Pakistani origins.

*The Playful Revolution: theatre and liberation in Asia* by Eugene Van Erven is the only work written by a writer who is not from South Asia, and has dealt with the subject in great detail. Erven has traced the emergence of Pakistani drama from its roots in the European and then Indian folk drama, and later its development after the partition till the beginning of 1990s. *Women in Folk Theatre* is a book written by a Pakistani writer, Fouzia Saeed in collaboration with Adam Nayyar, published in 1991. The book is an interesting study of the origin of folk theatre in the Punjab which continued even after the partition. The authors have not only documented the development of this kind of theatre but have also collected the biographies of all the women involved from performers to theatre owners. The book reveals the struggles of these women who suffered a great deal in order to survive in that male dominated domain. According to Saeed and Nayyar:

In the Western periphery of the Subcontinent, the traditional theatre still lives on, practised by occupational groups known as ras-dharia in Western Punjab and Swang in the Potohar plateau. By the light of oil torches, traditional folk tales and sometimes part of the Hindu Ramayana epic were enacted for a receptive audience by these groups. (1)

This book is important because in contemporary Pakistani drama, the elements of folk theatre are still incorporated by most of the Punjab based groups like Ajoka and Lok Rehas.

*Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre*, edited by Samuel L. Leiter, vol 2: o-z, describes political theatre in Pakistan very briefly, giving just a rudimentary account, and *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, edited by James R. Brandon, also provides a brief synopsis of the embryonic growth of Pakistani theatre and its development as political theatre today.

Claire Pamment, a British scholar, in her research article on Pakistani theatre, entitled, "Mock Courts and the Pakistani Bhand," has explored the very old tradition of 'Bhand' the wandering comics who perform at wedding ceremonies. In another article, "Theatre in Pakistan," Pamment presents a brief outline of the history of Pakistani theatre and then observes the state of the contemporary theatre, both commercial as well as the alternative, political theatre. In Pamment's view, in alternative theatre, politics has replaced art, "The stage has turned into a pulpit, feeding 'slogans' to select invitees. At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, the commercial stage was offering slapstick repartee, nourishing an audience hungry for entertainment."

As discussed earlier, compared to Pakistani drama, Indian drama is much more developed and sophisticated. In spite of that, criticism on Indian theatre is still insufficient. However, there are some scholarly articles and books available on the



subject that have been instrumental in my research. Nandi Bhatia, Neeru Tandon, Erin B. Mee, and Anita Myles have analyzed the dramatic art of esteemed Indian playwrights that has been useful.

Furthermore, studying postcolonial drama has been helpful in understanding the context in which Indo-Pak drama can be placed and situated. *Postcolonial Plays: an anthology*, edited by Helen Gilbert, is another enlightening collection of essays on various postcolonial dramatists. This book has been useful in understanding the aesthetics of postcolonial drama.

Additionally, postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanti's insights are helpful in understanding the plight of the women belonging to the third world countries like Pakistan and India. There are many Pakistani feminist/activists as well who have been writing on the subject, like Amina Jalal and Sarah Suleri.

Elaine Aston and Sue- Ellen case explore the different ways of representing or 'seeing' gender, critiquing feminist critical techniques, theories, political issues and theatre practices. Helene Keyssar as well, presents diverse perspectives on the issues of feminist paradigm of art and politics, feminist theatre strategies, performative language, and the question of women's representation on stage. This collection of essays has been very helpful in my study, as it highlights the way feminist theory can be used in understanding the portrayal of women in the contemporary Pakistani and Indian theatrical practices.

This was an overview of the scholarly material available that I have relied on in this study.

## Basic Methodology and Chapter Outlines

Before setting out to analyze single play-texts, it is necessary to define an outline and determine the tools that I have employed in this study. For this kind of close text analysis, I have drawn on the diagram/structure of dramatic analysis created by Patrice Pavis in his various writings on drama and performance. I have also relied on the models of textual analysis given by Elaine Aston and various others feminist critical writers.

I have examined the dramaturgy, and also keeping in view theatrical practices of British and American feminist dramatists. Subsequently, I have located the dramatic texts in their respective historical frameworks, and have noted whether they belong to classical, realist, absurd or postmodernist tradition. Pavis' suggestion to study a text from the way the reader responds to it according to her own perspective and location is an appropriate method that I have taken into account.

To be precise, I have studied the texts to find the visible meanings manifest on the surface, that is, in the textuality, the literary devices, in theatricality and the situations of enunciation. Then comes the invisible or the domain of ideology and the unconscious, as posited by Pavis, everything which is latent, implicit or parabolic that I have examined.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters that are discussed below:

Chapter 1: The Incarcerated Bodies: Women and State Violence in Pakistan and India

Michel Foucault's elaboration of the carceral nature of society in *Discipline and Punish*, and his observations about "technologies" through which individuals define their objective selves in *The History of Sexuality* aptly explain the workings of power structures in modern and ancient societies. The same applies to patriarchal nature of societies in India and Pakistan where male members/clerics/state exploit women using religion as a shield to impose morality, and women are denied their basic rights, like the right to marry for love.

Hence, chapter 1 analyzes plays that investigate systems of domination that include the state, the family structure, and lastly, religious orthodoxy that work in collaboration to uphold morality. As Kavita Punjabi notes in this regard, "They (state/clerics) juxtapose the physical and psychological torture of the women with the discourse of state "morality," revealing it to be a patriarchal construct designed to control women's lives" (155).

*The Acquittal* by Ajoka, *Mother of 1084* by Mahaswata Devi, and *Bandit Queen*, a 1994 Indian feature film, which sparked a wave of controversy, are works that depict women exploited, victimized, and then forced to commit crimes, and then serving their sentence in prisons. *Bandit Queen* is a true story, based on prison diaries of Phoolan Devi, a poor low caste woman, who turned into a bandit after serving eleven years in prison. These works are examined to probe how the state/juridical system and religion intersect to control women's bodies and lives, and what happens when women are imprisoned. These works are evaluated using feminist critical perspectives to explain the power relations and female subjectivity in Pakistani and Indian societies. The chapter illustrates how women, deprived of their basic rights are driven to crimes, and

show that the problem is actually located in the patriarchal functioning of society, the state, and the judiciary, not in the women's actions which are judged to be "criminal." The texts depict how the "rationality" of the state, in its treatment of the prisoners, focuses on the nature of the crime, not the cause for it. I have also analyzed the plays keeping in view Baz Kershaw and Gary Boire's observations on the dramaturgy of prison theater.

## Chapter 2: The Colonized Bodies: Modern Slavery and Commodification of Women's Bodies in Shahid Nadeem's *Dukhini*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamla* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

Human trafficking and prostitution are major problems in the third world countries including India and Pakistan which is an outcome of economic imbalance and lack of access to education in the lowest socioeconomic classes. Women belonging to the lowest strata, who are already marginalized and dispossessed, resort to becoming sex workers or are forced to join the trade. This chapter focuses on *Dukhini*, a play by Ajoka, *Kamla* Vijay Tendulkar, and *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan from India. All these works underscore one significant issue- women being illegally trafficked through India, Bangladesh and Pakistan for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced/bonded labor. Women reduced to this position are treated as colonized subjects or slaves. Feminist discourse often employs the term "colonized" to examine women's oppression. Both patriarchy and capitalism enforce systems of domination over those they consider as their subjects. Hence the experiences of women in a male dominated society and those of colonized subjects are analogous. In this context, feminist critics usually refer to the metaphor "man as colonizer" and "woman as colonized" (qtd in Argaz 30).

*Dukhini*, *Kamla* and *Harvest* demonstrate the constant oppression and violent humiliation that the women belonging to subaltern classes have to experience. I am using the term subaltern for the women who are trafficked and forced into bonded labor or prostitution. I have analyzed these plays to interrogate the issue and will also find out whether the play in question can be categorized as a feminist play. Furthermore, I also study the aesthetic form of the plays and look at the themes, techniques that are shared by these playwrights in spite of belonging to different cultures and regions. To interrogate the theoretical perspectives including the postcolonial context and the theme of commodification of women's bodies, I have drawn on the works of Marxist/socialist feminists like Mitchell Barrett, and Rosemary Hennessy, and Kathleen Barry.

Chapter 3: M(O)thers and Non-M(O)thers as Outcasts: Mahaswata Devi's *Bayen/The Witch*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*, and Shahid Nadeem's *Kala Meda Bhes/ Black is my Robe*

The main objective of this chapter is to articulate woman's role as mother/wife in the patriarchal societies in South Asia. I have focused mainly on women belonging to under-privileged classes, especially remote and rural areas in Pakistan and India where women are either regarded as commodities, or in some situations, as mother/other.

To analyze these questions, I have drawn on the works by theorists like Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed, and others. The chapter stresses on the emotional dynamics of woman's self when deprived of the status of motherhood which in most South Asian societies is kind of a mandatory condition for a woman to maintain her status as wife.

The study also interrogates the disadvantages, and lack caused specifically due to repression as a wife or mother, and the denial of subjectivity and motherhood.

To elaborate these concerns, I have examined Ajoka theatre's play *Kala Meda Bhais/ Black is my Robe* from Pakistan, and *Bayen/ Witch* by Mahaswata Devi from India. Mahaswata Devi is one of the most well-known writers in India, also a social activist who has always raised her voice against class and racial segregation and injustices. These plays address both the issues concerning women's subjectivity- being issueless or denial of rights/subjectivity/agency to mothers in certain cultural situations. As Foucault notes about the relations of power and subjectivity, "There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to." As Foucault excludes gender distinction from this argument, I replace "subject" with "woman". Thus, women in South Asia are subjects, controlled and dependent, tied to their identity as wife or mother, struggling against various forms of domination, institutions or groups, and against different forms of exploitation.

Within domestic space, especially in rural areas, women become victims of superstitions and myths and in some situations, and are excluded from the center to be marginalized. Some superstitions and myths are related to motherhood. For instance, in Pakistan, unlettered people in rural areas and cities, believe that peers or spiritual healers can cure women of infertility. Many women become victims of these fake peers who often rape them. This situation has been highlighted in Nadeem's play *Black is my*

*Robe* remarkably. Mahaswata Devi's play *Bayen/ Witch* addresses these superstitious and victimization of women related to motherhood wonderfully.

However, it can be argued that I have examined these plays from the standpoint of Western feminists, not from the perspective of Indian or Pakistani feminist theorists. I have drawn from Kristeva, Creed and Cixous in particular in analyzing *Bayen* because these theorists have theorized about the dilemma of women keeping in view the maternal aspect, and have presented a thoroughly detailed theoretical framework while Indian and Pakistani feminists have not theorized exhaustively about this specific aspect. Chandrapade Mohanty, Lata Mani, and others theorize about the representation of third world women, and denounce the hegemonic and monolithic view that all third world women are oppressed, and whether the subaltern can speak or not. But in my critique of these plays, the theorists I have relied on are more relevant to the issues pertaining to motherhood highlighted in the plays. Though, Spivak has analyzed Devi's *Breast Stories* in detail, and notes that the breast is what is common in these stories, and also the stories, including '*Breast Giver*,' build themselves around "the ironies of caste, class, patriarchy" (*Breast Stories* vii-viii). However, her insightful critique focuses mainly Devi's fiction, not her plays.

#### Chapter 4: Exclusionary Practices and Performing Women: Ajoka Theater's *Aik Thi Nani/A Granny for All Seasons* and Tripurari Sharma's *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa*

My focus in this chapter remains on plays which highlight the binaries of religion and art, mullahs and clerics/ Hindu pandits have split the society into two antagonistic halves of liberals and extremists. Plays by Ajoka theatre, like *Aik Thee Nani* (There was

once a Granny), and *Burqavaganza* reveal these tensions in the society which have turned our youth into schizophrenic personalities. *Aik Thee Nani* depicts two sisters who were separated from each other after the split of India in 1947. Both sisters were actresses, involved in performing arts before the partition, but the sister who chooses to migrate to Pakistan, has to undergo a complete transformation in order to survive in a conservative society. On the contrary, the sister who preferred to remain in India, succeeds as an actress/performer because of a rather conducive ambience for female performers there.

But, this is not the whole picture, women performers in India as well had to face antagonism and hostility from society. In fact, female performers used to hail from red light areas, or in the ancient times, there were Devadasis “which is a shortened form of Tamil *tevaradiyal* which translates “slaves of the god,” (*Bhatia* 233), who used to perform in the temples, dedicated to gods. Thus, in this chapter I have also looked at the image of Indian female performer and the ambiguity of her existence. I have interrogated the complex binary of gender and performance, and the way performing women are perceived in different cultures, in Pakistan and India.

#### Significance of the Study:

One reason for choosing Ajoka Theatre from Pakistan is because they do not use theatre only as a vehicle through which to register their protest, not at the expense of aesthetics. They have used theatre as a medium to influence the basic mindsets of the people at micro level, in specific communities, especially in rural and urban, working class people. In the same vein, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahaswata Devi from India,



represent a theatre of social engagement, a theatre primarily committed to bringing about actual change in specific communities, with their aim to combine art and politics. Their theatre is a theatre of cultural intervention, and a subversive political activity. I have investigated the function of theatre as a medium of social, cultural and ideological change. I have also examined the elements of performance, and the aesthetics that can enable the audiences to question the current structure of socio-political order.

Furthermore, I reiterate the point that there is paucity of scholarship available on Pakistani and Indian drama. In spite of the availability of suitable theoretical frameworks, critics have been somewhat tardy in investigating play-texts being written/produced in the subcontinent. Apart from a few books and articles, the field of drama remains relatively unexplored. There is only one book, specifically written on Pakistani theatre, and that is by Fawzia Afzal-Khan who has been a part of Ajoka theatre for a brief period of time. Another major reason for this lack of scholarship is unavailability of dramatic texts; most of the plays are not either published or not translated into English.

Furthermore, if we compare drama with poetry and fictional prose, it has received very little attention from literary scholars and critics in South Asian countries. Part of the problem may lie in the fact that drama/theatre has been generally seen as a debased form of art, and those associated with this field have been undervalued and looked upon as *bhands* or *merasis*; both derogatory terms are used to describe actors and singers in the sub-continent. A general view is that theatre does not exist in a country where religious extremism is on the rise and which has become a hub of the Islamic militancy. Contrary to this belief, Pakistan is a country where theatre is flourishing and catering to

the taste of the common, moderately educated public. It is indeed the need of the hour that the distinguished writers who have been writing for television, start writing for stage as well. My objective in doing a comparative study of Pakistani and Indian theatre is to examine the continuities and discontinuities in Pakistani theatre after the partition of India in 1947, and to illustrate the impact of the shared cultural and social heritage and patriarchal structure on performing arts and theatre. There are a lot of common threads that Indian and Pakistani people share, on the other hand, there are some issues concerning women that are specifically Indian and are related to Hindu culture that I have examined in this project.

My basic objective remains to add something to the much needed critical scholarship on the subject. Not only will the students of drama and literature benefit from this study, it will also be insightful to students of cultural studies and anthropology. Moreover, my research may be an addition in the much needed area of criticism on Pakistani theatre and also Indian drama. Lastly, I believe that my study will prove to be fruitful in dispelling the perception that in a country like Pakistan, drama/theater is non-existent. And, I hope that this study will go some way towards filling this gap.

## Chapter 1

### The Incarcerated Bodies: Women and State Violence in Pakistan and India

“The greater ignorance towards a country is not ignoring what its politicians have to say, it is ignoring what the inmates in its prisons have to say.”

Criss Jami-- *Killosophy*

This dissertation proposes a politics of the female body with an aim to recognizing different forms of women's oppression, and the way those images have been projected on stage. State violence is one of those forms of power relations that have legitimized unjust and coercive system subjugating women. Women's imprisonment is one form of control over their bodies which has remained a unique and intriguing subject in literature, especially drama and film. This chapter, therefore, examines the images of incarcerated women and their representation on stage in Pakistan and India.

The plays, *Barri/The Acquittal* by Ajoka Theatre in Pakistan, and *Mother of 1084* by Mahaswata Devi in India illustrate the way the state controls the people/subjects, especially the women, and how women become the victims of crimes committed in violent and subtle ways by the prison officials during their incarceration, also dramatizing the way women resist and strive to reclaim their subjectivity by questioning the very forces that silence them. Additionally, I will discuss India's *Bandit Queen*, a film produced and directed by Shekhar Kapoor, based on prison diaries of Phoolan Devi, compiled by Maya Sen.

I will argue that social conditions in both Pakistan and India perpetuate the subordination of women, and the conditions that propel women to committing crimes

result in their incarceration. I will explore if these plays can be categorized as feminist plays and what strategies or aesthetic techniques have been employed and to what extent they are effective in conveying the message of the plays to the audience so they are compelled to question the dominant and oppressive ideology?

Lastly, I want to explore the question Baz Kershaw poses in his study, but I relate it to the South Asian situation: “How do the practices of drama and theater best engage with systems of formalized power to create a space of radical freedom—‘formalized power’ which is much more than the politics of the state” (35)? Baz Kershaw stresses the fact that “in any system designed by some to control others, there will always be a space for resistance, a fissure in which to forge at least a little freedom”(35). Such spaces and fissures, according to Kershaw, can be best described as “dramaturgies of freedom that can also dissect the body of ideology” (35). Thus, there always exists a space or some scope for the oppressed and the dominated where they can exhibit modes of resistance or subversion.

Before I proceed to discuss the plays, it is pertinent to examine the power relations and the way they create gender asymmetries, and unequal social positions that relegate women to inferior social status. Class stratification in both India and Pakistan aggravates the already abject living conditions of the women from working class and peasantry. I will argue that the state and patriarchy work in collaboration to implement the ideology which is not always conducive to the interests of women, and give a brief cultural background of how power relations work in both countries before examining the plays. In this regard, Michel Foucault’s observations regarding power structure and their operation are relevant to the totalising systems of power in Pakistan

and India. Before examining the plays, I will give a brief overview of how power relations work in Pakistan and India by discussing Foucault and other theorists briefly. Next, I will narrate real life circumstances from former Pakistani prime minister, the late Benazir Bhutto's biography, and will also give a brief account of an Indian low caste woman, Phoolan Devi's prison diaries based on her life.

In his groundbreaking study of prisons and the history of punishment, Foucault illustrates the parade of the chain-gangs in the nineteenth century, and the way those convicts flaunted the symbols of their incarceration and punishment as ornaments, intended to make their suffering seem trivial and display their defiance while making a mockery of their punishment in front of the public.

In every town it passed through, the chain-gang brought its festival with it; it was a saturnalia of punishment, a penalty turned into privilege... it aroused in the convicts not so much the compulsory marks of repentance as the explosion of a mad joy that denied that punishment. To the ornaments of the collar and chain, the convicts themselves added ribbons, braided straw, flowers or precious stuffs. The chain was the round and the dance, throughout the evening that followed the riveting, the chain-gang formed a great merry-go-round, which went round and round the courtyard... (*Discipline and Punish* 260-61).

Gary Boire in his article on prison theater writes about this spectacle that Foucault describes: "worst of all, the spectacle rapidly threatened to explode into carnivalesque subversion: this public spectacle triggered a response opposite to that intended" (21).

Boire in his remarkable study on postcolonial prison theater enumerates significant features that are frequently employed in plays that revolve around "such mechanisms of authority as trial and judgment, discipline and imprisonment" (22). In his study on prison theater, Boire notes that even a rudimentary survey of the literatures of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand would demonstrate this tendency to engage with this "legal

trope" (22). Both Ajoka's *Barri/The Acquittal* and Devi's *Mother of 1084* underscore one major trend in post-colonial writing, that is, the prison theater, which in Boire's view, revolve "parodically around such mechanisms of authority as trial and judgment, discipline and imprisonment" (22). What Boire observes about prison theater from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, is also applicable to Devi and Nadeem's plays, as these two writers also aim to bring to light what is officially and deliberately concealed. I will enumerate the features that Boire mentions, are employed by the postcolonial prison theatre writers and that can also be discerned in the plays in this study.

In order to examine how power relations operate, Giddens' observations are relevant in this context: "All social systems are viewed as 'power systems', and usually this means that they are involved in the institutional mediation of power" (*The Nation State* 9). The State Power functions with the aid of the State Apparatuses, whether they are exercised overtly by the use of force which is a prevalent custom in South Asia or employed in "attenuated and concealed and even symbolic" forms (Althusser 145). When it comes to symbolic forms of the state apparatuses, it would be relevant at this point to discuss Pierre Bourdieu's notion of power and the way it functions. Lois McNay, discussing Bourdieu's concept of habitus argues that bodily identity is not natural but involves the inscription of social norms or the 'cultural arbitrary' upon the body (36). However, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is not limited to bodily identity alone; it also signifies the 'living through' of these norms or imposition of the ideology by the individual in his/her everyday life. McNay explains the concept of habitus further by emphasizing that Bourdieu also like Foucault postulates that social inequalities are not instilled at the level of direct governmental or organizational intervention, but through

the “subtle inculcation of power relations upon the bodies and dispositions of individuals. This process of corporeal inculcation is an instance of what Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence* or a form of domination which is ‘exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’ (qtd in McNay 36).

Bourdieu’s theory leads to one significant factor which impacts the condition of women substantially and that is the “symbiotic relationship between the state and patriarchy”. Traditionally, almost all societies in South Asia are patriarchal, authority rests with male members of the family while the state, by having the power to legislate and implement laws, including religious/ Shariah laws, transfers the power to all male members of society. Indeed, clergy, police and the criminal justice system in Pakistan can exert “direct control over women’s dress and deportment” (Kandiyoti 14). Thus, power is exercised by male members of society, not only within the domestic sphere but also in the whole community. The state plays a pivotal role in formulating laws that are usually detrimental to the concerns of women belonging to the lower classes in particular. Furthermore, as Kandiyoti observes: “Contemporary policies and ideologies relating to women are being formulated in an increasingly complex field of forces where governments respond to the contradictory pressures of different sections of their internal constituencies as well as to their international ties of economic and political dependence” (14).

In all provinces of Pakistan, especially in the rural areas of interior Sindh and Southern Punjab, women are dependent on male members of their family, having no control over their lives. At least 75 per cent of women populate rural areas, where living conditions are deplorable due to low income levels; the majority of them are unlettered,

having no knowledge of Islam or their rights as Muslim women or as Pakistani citizens.

In a report by the government- sponsored commission on the status of women: “the average rural woman of Pakistan is born in near slavery, leads a life of drudgery and dies invariably in oblivion” (Kandiyoti 77). However, it would be erroneous to assume that all Pakistani women are subservient to men and live in abject conditions. Pakistani women cannot be yoked together as one homogenous group, as society is class-based and women hailing from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds face issues that are incomparable in many ways. The influence of feudal lords and customs, for instance, in the interior Sindh and the Southern belt of the Punjab are different, compelling women to comply with inflexible and sometimes inhuman traditions.

Therefore, it is not surprising that these women have no option other than submitting to the local authorities or becoming scapegoats in brutal customs like Karo Kari (a form of honor killing practiced in Sindh), and forced marriages. Ayesha Jalal points out that for women who are “neither poor nor unlettered, submission can be socially rewarding. So long as they do not transgress social norms....” Moreover, women from middle as well as upper classes are accorded respect and also enjoy some autonomy (78). This point is significant, as transgression of any kind, for instance, marrying without acquiescence of the family, can have dire consequences for women; occasionally, it can even lead to incarceration or murders for revenge.

In India as well, living conditions are equally disadvantageous to women, as Shirin Rai notes that the state, especially the post-colonial state is of critical importance in women’s lives both public and private. In India a considerable emphasis is placed upon the power (or lack of power) of the state to formulate, legislate and enforce laws



regarding equality between men and women (11). In 'Sexual Class in India,' Modi and Mathre argue that Indian women are incapable of 'speaking', and that the 'the public voice of Indian woman has long been stifled by a male-dominated society and her present silence on the problems she faces are related to a self –image (which is severely distorted and repressed)'(qtd in Guha 96). Rai also argues with Spivak that a "weak system of internal regulation" is another feature of the third world states with high level of state violence (17). Gayatri Spivak, while discussing Mahaswata Devi's short story, *Draupadi*, writes in detail about police torture on women in custody in rural areas specifically. Draupadi, the central character, is a tribal woman on the wanted list of the police, and "the men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi (Draupadi)—in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law" (184). The story illustrates that police torture is at its highest when the victims are women, as Spivak argues: "It is when she (Dopdi) crosses the sexual differential into field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful "subject," who, becomes "the object" of their search," and "an unarmed target" (184). I will discuss this point later in detail while examining *Mother of 1084* by Mahaswata Devi.

Where Devi's *Draupadi* depicts state violence on women belonging to working classes or the peasantry, *Mother of 1084*, delineates violence on women hailing from middle class, involved in political activism during the Naxalite movement in India. In the same vein, Phoolan Devi's (who later came to be known as the Bandit Queen in India) case reveals how low caste women in rural areas bear the brunt of family feuds and property disputes, and are victimized and shamed publicly. Rape is used as a weapon to teach women a lesson and to silence them, not only by the men who are considered

custodians of village morality, but also by those who are supposed to provide protection, especially, the police.

The key question is as to why women resort to committing crimes and what happens within the iron bars and claustrophobic walls of the prisons. If we take a look at what kind of women are incarcerated and the nature of their crimes, it would not be hard to discern that most women from middle and upper strata are convicted for political activism, or for raising their voice against injustices perpetrated on women. On the other hand, women from working class and peasantry are generally convicted for the crimes they commit either due to injustices, domestic violence, or extreme poverty. Noting this paradoxical nature of the status of women in the Islamic state of Pakistan, Jalal writes about the eleven years of repressive and tyrannical martial law: "After nearly a decade of state-sponsored attempts at stifling women's voices in the public arenas and pushing back the boundaries of social visibility, Pakistan has become the first state in the Islamic world to have a woman Prime minister" (77). Coming to power in an Islamic state which remained in the grip of martial law, was not an easy task for Benazir Bhutto, daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was sacked due to military coup in 1977, and was hanged in 1979 after undergoing severe torture during his imprisonment. All these years, Benazir had to suffer for her political activism and struggle to restore democracy and human rights that had been completely withheld during the decade. Narrating her visits to her father during his imprisonment, Benazir writes:

Iron gates, one after another. Long dirty passageways in between. Police matrons searching me, going through my hair, running their hands over my arms, my chest, my shoulders. Another iron gate. Then three small cells with iron bars in the doors...

I peer into the cell, but I am blinded by its darkness. The jail authorities open the door, and I step inside my father's death cell (143).

Reminiscing about her own dark days and repeated incarcerations at the age of 26, Benazir writes: "I pace the corridors of Al-Murtaza (their residence in Larkana). This is my mother's ninth political detention and my seventh since the coup two years ago, I still can't adjust to the forced isolation. Each incarceration is just adding another layer of anger" (36). Benazir spent the prime time of her life in prisons and remained in exile after she was allowed to leave the country for her medical treatment in London. Later, after Zia-ul-Haq's death in the air crash which occurred in 1988, she returned and started her political career once again becoming the first woman prime minister of Pakistan in 1989. During the years of martial law, along with Benazir, hundreds of women, who had political affiliations with Pakistan People's Party, and were struggling against the dictatorial regime to restore democracy, were arrested, jailed and tortured; at times, female political activists were also imprisoned in the dark and smelly dungeons of the Lahore Fort. The Fort, built during the Mughal era, had housed criminals, traitors, and rebels for centuries, from the reign of Ibrahim Lodhi to Akbar, and from Shah Jahan to the colonial era of the British. Zia-ul-Haq revived the tradition of torturing the political activists in these underground chambers, infested with pests, dusty and claustrophobic, and in complete isolation from the general public.

Feminists, human rights activists, and lawyers present a number of chilling statistics about the criminal justice systems all over the globe including Pakistan and India. Prisoners are chained, shackled; spend hours in dark, smelly cells and unhygienic environment with no access to proper medical care, including pregnant women. Not only women are verbally abused, and sexually harassed, their blood relations are also

threatened, and at times incarcerated to maximize the pressure on the accused, if he/she happens to be a fugitive.

*The Acquittal* by Shahid Nadeem graphically paints the abject conditions of Pakistani jails and their inmates. In spite of being a privileged male Pakistani citizen, Nadeem unveils the inhuman and derogatory treatment inflicted on women in prisons, exposing simultaneously the circumstances and forces that are involved in bringing them to this deplorable state. The play also focuses on the patterns of torture designed specifically for female prisoners, and the way female prisoners interact with each other, and their gradually developing collective feminine consciousness. The play reveals an interplay of power relations between the politician and the policeman, between the clergy and the patriarchs, who all control the system, perpetuating legalised oppressive mechanisms. Simultaneously, the very coercive system also reveals the gaps and fissures that allow for expressions of freedom and transgression. The plays in this chapter are used to dissect and carve out the body of ideology that helps shape systems of control, exhibiting dramaturgies of freedom or rebellion against authority.

*The Acquittal* traces the lives of four incarcerated women in the prison whose stories unfold gradually with appalling details that reveal the stronghold of the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society. The play illustrates what happens when four women of the same society hailing from different economic groups and diverse backgrounds are packed in a claustrophobic space. Most of the events take place outside the confines of the jail cell which are narrated by the inmates in retrospect. However, the way female prisoners are verbally and physically abused is illustrated through dialogue and off stage happenings.

The play corresponds perfectly to Foucault's description of modern architecture which for him symbolizes a psychologically incarcerated society. Pakistani society is a large physical prison where women are forced to be docile, live under constant surveillance, and are forced to abide by the laws legislated by the dominant male members of society. Any violation of these laws means punishment and in the context of Pakistani penal system, it means that the criminals or the accused may have to remain imprisoned for far longer periods of time than the actual sentence they are supposed to serve. Using the prison cell as a metaphor throughout the play, Nadeem questions the definitions of crime and punishment in our gender and class-oriented society. The dictatorial regime of General Zia-ul-Haq with his gender biased laws like Hudood ordinance provoked women throughout the country. As a consequence of Zia's oppressive policies many political movements for women's rights surfaced during the 1980s, leading to arrests and torture of the women on the forefront.

*The Acquittal* begins with the narrator, Zahida, "vice-president of the Women's Association and an active member of the Democratic Party" as she relates her experience during her three-month imprisonment with other female inmates. Zahida reads out the stories of those women from her diary she used to write during her confinement. These stories or, the "microsocial" worlds of women's experiences critique the "macrosocial" patriarchal oppressive states, and elaborate upon the ways in which the women's bodies become one of many sites of state control.

The play comprises 14 individual scenes. The first scene reveals Zahida who is also the narrator, reading her diary. She introduces herself to the audience as vice-president of the Women's Association and also an active member of the Democratic

Party. She addresses the audience directly, and begins to narrate how she was arrested and spent three months in the prison, “on charges of going on a hunger strike in connection with changes in the family laws” (Nadeem 54). The scene serves the purpose of exposition while Zahida as the narrator also fulfils the role of the chorus. The next scene is used as a flashback and shifts to the prison cell, revealing incidents that occurred in the past during her incarceration.

This scene commences with Zahida's entry into the prison cell; she is actually pushed into the dreary and dismal cell by the crude prison officials; in the background, loud and gruff male voices and laughter can be heard, mocking at the “Begum Sahib (madam).” Here Zahida, in a state of shock and bewilderment, encounters other inmates for the first time, who watch her with awe, apprehensive to see a new arrival. Zahida is also flustered at first to see the strange women, and declares that she is a “political prisoner”, not “a criminal,” creating a gulf between herself and the “criminals” who are now intimidated by the presence of this upper class, educated lady.

Nadeem here creates a class barrier by directing the audience's attention to small and intricate details of the contents of Zahida's handbag, and the way she examines the cell with an air of haughtiness, complaining constantly about the dinginess, and the pervasive unpleasant odor of her new abode. The other three inmates are not introduced here, but it is made clear later that all of them hail from low income groups and are uneducated. One of the three ‘strange’ women, elderly and religious, constantly prays, continually turning her beads; the second one just stares at her or the wall silently; the third one is still not clearly defined in this scene. The scene exposes the myths about prisoners that they are *different*, and that they are lowly, despicable

*creatures*, dangerous to the civilized world, need to be debunked simultaneously. In *Barri* too, Zahida realizes that she also, like others, held that prejudice that those women were criminals, thus different from her, but soon enough, this myth is dispelled. This moment comes as a revelation that she had deemed herself superior to those poor women, and that in the beginning, she felt “unsafe” in their presence. The understandings that unite these women in prison come from their shared experiences of separation, of disempowerment, of the continual physical abuse they face in the prison environment (102).

Before her encounter with her female inmates in the prison, Zahida had only a superficial knowledge of the problems faced by working class women. However, after serving her sentence in the jail, she faces the real horror of the circumstances poor women have to face in the everyday world. Nadeem shows how incarceration stigmatizes women and, therefore, once sentenced to imprisonment, women are perceived as outcasts. Zahida undergoes a humiliating experience before she enters the jail cell: “They thought they could make me submit to a search. I openly refused to be searched by men. They had to bring in a female attendant. Searched by men. In a Muslim country. I said frankly. Is this your Islam (56)?” She refuses to submit to their brute force; her body becomes a site of resistance. It is hard for her to get used to a restricted and controlled life in the beginning: “... here there was rationing of fresh air and light. Twice during the day we were allowed to go out for a stroll. The rest of the time we were closed up in the cell” (57). She reveals that their restrictions multiplied since one female prisoner tried to set fire to the ward and was burnt to death.

Nadeem reveals this through the attitude of these inmates, the “strange women” looking at Zahida in awe in the dark and smelly cell. Jannat Bibi is a middle-aged woman imprisoned because her son, accused of stealing a tape recorder, is a fugitive, and in his place, she has been taken into custody. Jamila, a young and beautiful woman in her early twenties, is awaiting death sentence for murdering her old and cruel husband. She is depicted as a strong young woman who is constantly in a state of uncontrolled anger. Jamila’s association with the mirror is significant, as she loves to view her image often in the fragmented piece that reflects her shattered dreams, and a life cut short and thwarted.

Maryam, a young woman, was arrested on charges of dancing in a shrine, and thus violating the sanctity of the place and the law. During her imprisonment, Maryam gets raped by the jail authorities and as a consequence, gets pregnant. Zahida, after listening to their stories, comes to realize the vulnerable situation Pakistani women are in, without any agency or control over their own lives or bodies. The play is a true dramatization of Foucault’s analysis of power relations and the body: “... the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (173. Bunster-Burotto, exploring the nature of torture against women, reveals that “such torture takes various forms: violating the “chastity” of a woman through rape...; and forcing the pregnant women into sexual slavery by taking control of their offspring, torturing them into aborting, or appropriating their new-born children” (qtd in Kavita Punjabi 157).



When Zahida questions Marium about the baby's father, Jamila replies: All the officers of the jail are its fathers... people can't find one father and this fortunate one has no dearth of them. Do you understand Zahida Begum (madam)? (64) Later in the scene, Marium is taken by force to have a medical examination: "*The knock continues. Suddenly Marium screams as if she is being raped by several men. Jannat: May be the labor pains have started.. Outside, the voices of the warders and their swearing are heard*" (75). The prison wardens force Mariam to undergo abortion against her will to conceal their crime. She had refused to terminate the pregnancy because of the motherly love she had developed for the unborn child. Marium's heart-rending screams during the painful procedure which is happening off-stage, can be heard on stage. Marium is not just a passive victim, she registers her protest in subtle and sometimes in overt ways; her screams, her dance, her refusal to yield to the prison wardens are disparate way of her rebellion. Ultimately, she is unable to thwart her abortion because of her imprisonment, her body is in the grip of forces beyond her control. Her transgression is only symbolic, when she sings the sufi poet Bulleh Shah's verses, who was against the religious orthodox state, and the clerics of the era.

Pakistani society aptly depicts Foucault's notion that in every society, the body is in the grip of very strict powers, and the state exercises a "subtle coercion, ... an infinitesimal power" over the active (*female*) body" (181). Foucault does not specifically make it gender specific when he theorizes about power, but he does indicate that power relations between man and woman reflect and reinforce state power. As Foucault stresses here:

The family, even now, is not a simple reflection or the extension of the power of the State; it does not act as the representative of the State in relation to children, just as the male does not act as its representative with reflection to the female. For the state to function in the way it does, there must be between male and female or adult and child, quite specific relations of domination, which have their own configuration and relative autonomy. (*Power/ Knowledge* 187)

How the male family members control women's bodies using religion and juridical system as "disciplinary power mechanisms" by keeping women unaware of their legal rights is dramatized by Jamila's story. It highlights another poignant issue in Pakistani society, that is, when girls of tender age are forced to marry against their will owing to extreme poverty or other reasons. Jamila was forced to marry the man who was old enough to be her grandfather, at a very tender age. Severely tortured and controlled by her husband she despised, Jamila finally eloped with her lover, only to be discovered and imprisoned by the old man, later. She took the opportunity to get an axe from the inner chamber, when released from ropes, and murdered her husband to his utter surprise and horror. After listening to her story, Zahida informs Jamila that she could have pursued a divorce through court instead of committing the crime which was her legal right. This scene also validates the traditional feminist conception that power within gender relations is basically 'top-down and repressive' (Davis 79). Kathy Davis argues against this concept of asymmetrical power relations where women transform into 'cultural dope,' powerless to change their circumstances, and are 'misguided victims of what used to be dubbed 'false consciousness' (81). But, I argue and the play also depicts that these women are indeed victims of 'false consciousness,' because of their ignorance, which is the consequence of economic imbalance in society. However, the play illustrates that in spite of belonging to the lowest rung of society, they do struggle to exercise control, often in microscopic or sometimes even in trivial ways to undermine

asymmetrical power relations. Often, ignorance and extreme frustration caused by repressive circumstances force these women to committing heinous crimes with tragic consequences.

Here the play reveals fissures or gaps where these women, by transgressing the societal norms, strive to take control of their lives. I will now examine how the playwright dramatizes strategies of resistance in the play or creates dramaturgies of freedom using Kershaw's phrase.

Jamila's murder of her husband can be seen as a subversive act but this is how she becomes an autonomous subject, acquiring a self-conscious identity. As Foucault argues about power relations and subject formation, "the subject does not precede power relations, in the form of an individual consciousness, but is produced through relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility" (qtd in Mahmood 17). According to this notion of subject formation, Jamila's act is a consequence of the societal forces and pressures that have worked on her and shaped her subjectivity. Jamila's uncontrolled anger and her rebellious nature, according to Saba Mahmood's observations on Foucault, are "the abilities that define her mode of agency," which are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the products of those operations" (18). Thus, Jamila's agency is not simply a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable. As Jamila expresses her extreme anger and disgust while narrating her story:

If I had an axe, I would slaughter them one by one. (*her action indicate murderous intent*) I would first strike at the father who never thought I was as good as

his sons and forced me to marry the old man; then I would strike at my brother who cared only for his honor and never for my happiness, then at the shopkeeper who always looked at me lecherously and made fun of my misfortune, then at the mullah who performed my marriage forcibly in the name of Islam, and the policeman... and the judge who will decide my fate tomorrow... and these warders who won't allow us a moment of peace. (75)

Jamila's tirade against the men who ruined her life, reveals the whole structure of patriarchy which keeps women oppressed and deprived of their rights, and drives them to crime. This illustrates how the disease is actually located in the patriarchal functioning of society, the state, and the judiciary, not in the women's actions which are judged to be "criminal." The text reveals how the "rationality" of the state, in its treatment of the prisoners, focuses on the nature of the crime, not the cause for it.

The play uses these stories as springboard for probing the system of domination which includes the state, the family structure, and lastly, religious orthodoxy to uphold morality. As Kavita Punjabi notes, "They juxtapose the physical and psychological torture of the women with the discourse of state "morality," revealing it to be a patriarchal construct designed to control women's lives" (155). Marium was arrested and then imprisoned because she had dared to dance in a shrine which is an offence, an act against the norms of morality in an Islamic country. Dancing is considered an immoral activity which is specifically performed by prostitutes confined in the red light area. Although according to Sufi tradition, dancing is a way to arrive at a spiritual state; transporting the dancer to a spiritual realm, making her/him oblivious of his/her corporeal existence and uniting him/her with God. Dancers at most shrines whirl their way to a state of spirituality, making them oblivious of their material existence. Marium in the play is described by her inmates as a "Dervish-like" being, a saint-like woman.

Zahida, as well, after her release, declares openly that she is not intimidated by the law enforcing agencies: “Yes, I was saying that people are claiming that Zahida Zaman is scared. It is true that since my release I haven’t participated in the meetings of the Association or the party. But that doesn’t mean I’m scared. However, I am no longer the Zahida Zaman of old whom all of you knew... . I was infuriated the way police behaved and then that police search in jail” (Nadeem 54). Zahida as the narrator, registers her resistance and protests against the system through her writing, and in Helene Cixous’ words, becomes a Woman who “must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (*Medusa* 334). As Zahida writes: “I was not able to write in my diary for many days. I didn’t know what to write, words failed me. Perhaps the right words have not been invented to describe what was unfolding before us. After all, men have invented both language and the dictionary” (75). Cixous argues: “It is men who have “driven away” women from writing and it is men who have confiscated their bodies, their voices, and thus their writing in order to defend patriarchal order, which they fail to realize crushes them equally” (*Medusa* 339). Here in the play, by deciding to write, Zahida challenges “the historical and political constructions, of subverting the dominant linguistic order, and of representing themselves (women)” (*Medusa* 339).

Many plays depicting prison in the dramatic space explore “the perverse disciplinarity of the idioms of incarceration” at the same time exploring some sources of radical freedom” (Kershaw 46) One form of resistant and transcendent act is the use of folk songs and dance in *The Acquittal*. At one point in the play, the inmates sing a folk

song which mocks and defies all the instruments of authority while performing a traditional dance:

The Mullah's (religious cleric) belly is big

Hit the mullah's head with a stick.

The mullah's beard is long

The mufti's pajama is wide.

And in his hands a water-pot.

The officer's face is unsightly

The judge's court is a sham.

Their coin is not authentic.

The policeman's uniform is unbecoming

The whole world is afraid of him, I will break his stick.

The friends dance in a circle,

Heer's bed is large

Ranjha's pillow too small.

Despite their differences in class, occupation, and age, the dancers enact a vision of unity, however transient. The inmates are admonished and warned by the male warders to keep quiet and stop the merry making but the women ignore their warnings and

continue dancing, laughing out loudly. As Helen Gilbert notes: "Dance is a theatricalized activity that also acts as an alienating device in Brechtian sense,... it not only acts as an expression of individuality but also as an equalizer, a physical and social force which erodes hierarchies..." (239). But this song mocks the nexus of the patriarchs in Pakistani society which includes mullahs, judges and the law enforcing agencies, also including Heer and Ranjha, the protagonists in a traditional folk/love story who defy the norms and elope, only to be killed in the end. The song also creates the transcendent moment of radical freedom, satirically lambasting the male-dominated systems of oppressive control. As Boire notes, "This is a sort of folk humor and witty repartee that most post-colonial prison theatre consistently employs. The play aptly projects Foucault's illustration of the basic methodology of the body as text, the reversal of the fool's festival, the scapegoat ritual, a mocking mime, folk humor which mimics official ceremonies, etc" (28). It also appropriately fits into the category of the carnivalesque described by Bakhtin, a form which directly disrupts all forms of official authority and systems of hegemony and totalitarian control:

One might say that carnival celebrated liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all the hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (9)

Thus, this feature is employed to oppose the existing social order and hierarchy, and as a transcendent strategy to explore some form of liberation and self-affirmation in post-colonial as well as in feminist theatre practice.

Another form of resistance is writing and documenting the lives of the inmates, by exposing what goes on behind the bars. Zahida as the narrator, in Helene Cixous'

words, becomes a Woman who “must write herself” (*Medusa* 334). She is not able to write in her diary for many days, words fail her. As Zahida writes: “Perhaps the right words have not been invented to describe what was unfolding before us. After all, men have invented both language and the dictionary” (75). Cixous argues: “It is men who have “driven away” women from writing and it is men who have confiscated their bodies, their voices...”(*Medusa* 339). Here in the play, by deciding to write, Zahida challenges “the historical and political constructions” by subverting the “dominant linguistic order”, and gives voice to all the imprisoned women (*Medusa* 339). But Zahida can only give voice to these silenced women; she is unable to change their status; Jamila is awarded a death sentence, Jannat Bibi is acquitted too after her son is arrested; Zahida is released as well but Marium is shown sitting as a solitary figure shrouded in darkness, singing a folk song. Marium’s fate is left dubious; and the play is left open-ended.

*The Acquittal* revealed how the state, religion, and family structure create power relations that dominate women and perpetuate systems of control, and how women are incarcerated due to crimes committed for being unaware of their rights. Women are controlled by “disciplinary power mechanisms”, as Davis argues and I agree that “gender ideology is the disciplinary discourse running parallel to and reinforcing state power” (135).

In the same vein, power mechanisms and gender relations do function along similar lines in India. Living conditions for women in India do not deviate, rather, they are coeval . Before I analyze Devi’s play, *Mother of 1084*, I will briefly discuss India’s *Bandit Queen* (1994), a Bollywood film which also depicts the culture of violence on women, especially perpetrated by the state in India. I will not examine the film in detail



because it has already been critiqued by scholars like Arundhati Roy, Leela Fernandes, Meera Kosmabi, and many others. *India's Bandit Queen* delineates in a nutshell, diverse forms of oppression women are subjected to in India, as *The Acquittal* portrays corresponding social conditions in Pakistan.

India's *Bandit Queen*, a highly controversial film, is based on prison diaries of Phoolan Devi, compiled and written by Maya Sen. Sen claims that she received all the material "in instalments, handwritten in Hindi by a variety of scribes" (29). Phoolan Devi's story is not only intriguing but also quite dramatic; a poor low caste woman, rises in fame worldwide, journeying through the rough and rugged mountains with a gang of dacoits to the corridors of power, from a Bandit Queen, she transforms into a parliamentarian, only to be assassinated later.

"Animals, drums, illiterates, low castes and women are worthy of being beaten.", *Bandit Queen*, directed by Shekhar Kapoor, and produced by Bobby Bedi, commences with this quote from a book of Hindu religious scriptures. Phoolan's father, Devideen, an old and impoverished man, (belonging to a landless class, Mallahs by caste) marries her off to an older man, when she is just a child. Later, Phoolan has to abandon her husband's home due to his extremely oppressive and sexually abusive behavior, and returns to her parents who accept her but half-heartedly. The film also depicts inequalities emerging through class and caste lines where being a woman, and also, belonging to lower, Mallah caste makes Phoolan doubly marginalised. Caste/class hierarchy divides women in society just as it divides women from men and which also determines whether women have agency or voice.

Another factor that makes Phoolan's life a series of never ending suffering and abuse is a property feud with her cousin, which sends her behind bars for the first time. The fact that Phoolan's first encounter with men was due to a territory dispute, remains untouched in the film. Maya Sen describes Phoolan's first arrest:

Phoolan Devi remembers crying tears of humiliation. For a village woman to be dragged to a police station in captivity is a terrible disgrace. ... Asked to talk about this, her first experience in custody, she can only recall feeling vulnerable, terrified, unable to sleep properly or eat. A hole in an open drain constituted the toilet and she says she spent many hours watching flies buzzing round it....I asked her if the police had raped her, because I had read other reports that alleged this. All she would say at times was, ("They had plenty of fun at my expense and beat the hell out of me too.") It is not unusual for women all over the world, and particularly in India, to resist discussing the sexual abuse the

y have been subjected to, surrounded as they are by a society that holds them responsible for the acts of violence against them and taints them with self-images of weakness and impurity" (61).

Phoolan's story, as narrated and compiled in the prison diaries, exposes the inhuman and brutal system where women, instead of being protected, are exposed to extreme kind of humiliating treatment by the state:

Every time she tried to say anything he told her to keep her mouth shut. He also molested her, publicly not surreptitiously, using the end of his cane to lift her sari, examining her all over, while his subordinates watched her "interrogation", adding their own crude and obscene remarks. (64)

Phoolan's life-long suffering can be attributed to the callous and brutal treatment she receives from the police, their failure in providing her protection, and at the same time, the stronghold of the upper caste patriarchs of her village or the village elders/Thakurs, who deliberately delegitimize her testimony in every case, and silence her. In the very first scene, she is depicted in rage, using foul language which sends a message that she will resist in spite of all odds. Language is a tool that she employs to register her protest, if unable to resist in any other form. Later, after getting abducted and joining the

dacoits, she takes up arms and retaliates, allegedly murdering all the upper caste men who had once gangraped her. However, this issue remained controversial, as Phoolan never admitted committing this crime.

However, many critics, including feminists, and the general public in India, find the film too disturbing, as it depicted Phoolan's rape in graphic details which further objectified her. An important aspect of the film is that whenever Phoolan is being humiliated, or assaulted in public, villagers remain silent, playing the role of silent spectators which highlights the fact that humiliation and abuse of women is deemed a commonplace and trivial activity. In such cases only women are blamed or shamed if they endeavor to protest or show any streak of rebellion against the existing stronghold of the patriarchy, as is the case with Phoolan.

Another factor which Arundhati Roy indicates in her scathing critique on Shekhar Kapoor's film version is the exploitation of Phoolan's identity, the use of her name as a commodity, and violation of her rights as a living person who is the subject of the film. Roy also questions some parts of her biography that were completely obliterated from the film narrative:

One last terrifying thing. While she was still in jail, Phoolan was rushed to hospital bleeding heavily because of an ovarian cyst. Her womb was removed. When Mala Sen asked why this had been necessary, the prison doctor laughed and said " We don't want her breeding any more Phoolan Devi's."

The State removed a woman's uterus! Without asking her. Without her knowing.

It just reached into her and plucked out a part of her! (The Great Indian Rape Trick, 1)

The violation of a woman's body by the state, and the power to control who is allowed to breed and who is not, is what happens across both sides of the border in Pakistan and

India. Nadeem touches the issue in Marium's case in *The Acquittal* which has already been discussed.

Critics have been engaged in the issues of representation of the third world women, and the first and the third world dialectics regarding the film and Phoolan's representation. Phoolan Devi is considered 'recolonized' because of the way she has been depicted in this film, which Arundhati Roy rightly points out. While Fernandes rightly observes that the film portrays Phoolan as a "heroic" woman struggling against the hegemonic culture, but "the audience is not provided with any context in which to place Phoolan Devi's actions; her rebelliousness is depicted as an aberration within a society that otherwise consists of active oppressors and passive victims" (137). This observation bears legitimacy as low caste or subaltern women, learn to submit to social control, as they are socially conditioned to internalize the oppressive system. Also, Fernandes argues that the film has illustrated a set of conflicting images that have "disrupted hegemonic social codes regarding sexuality and rape within the bourgeois public sphere" and in fact recreated power relations that "re/colonized Phoolan Devi, through the appropriation of her life story" (138).

Lastly, it can be reiterated that both Phoolan Devi's testimonio and the film unravel the failure of the social and criminal justice system in India in providing protection and justice to the masses, especially women.

I have discussed *India's Bandit Queen* to illuminate the patriarchal structure that works in India in rural areas where most of the women live in extremely oppressive conditions, and how that was relevant to *The Acquittal* in many ways culturally. *Mother*

of *1084* by Mahaswata Devi, on the other hand, demonstrates mainly the way the state operates its power structure in urban areas, and how the representatives of the state exercise their power upon educated women who are incarcerated. Zahida, in *The Acquittal*, and Nandini in Devi's play correlate in this regard, as both battle against the existing hegemonic system.

Devi is a middle-class Bengali leftist intellectual, human rights activist, and an eminent novelist and playwright. She was already a known and established writer when her novel *Mother of 1084* was published in the late 1970s. As Samik Bandyopadhyay notes: "As a novelist Devi is at her most characteristic when she re-creates a span of history, allowing individuals to evolve through their interactions with a historical process ..." ( *Five Plays* vii). In an interview, Devi revealed her passion for documenting her own time and history, also, her fascination for socio-economic history of human development including the Naxalite movement between the late sixties and early seventies which climaxed in 1970-71. This uprising, says Devi, created in her an urge to document the event (*Five Plays* viii).

*Mother of 1084* portrays the repressive policies of the state in India that were formulated and carried out in the wake of the Naxalite movement in the 1970s in Bengal. In 1967, a massive revolt was ignited in the Naxalbari area in the Northern strip of India, "bordering Nepal on the west, Sikkim and Bhutan on the north, and east Pakistan on the south". The uprising was initiated by armed Communist revolutionaries, members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), —the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML) (Banerjee i).

The play, though set in the Urban Bengal of the 1970s, realistically documents the aftermath of the Naxalite movement, a sort of peasants revolt triggered due to economic and social exploitation of the landless peasants. The reverberations of discontent started to rise during 1966 and 1967 throughout the Indian rural areas. Reports of deaths from starvation and malnutrition, and suicides by famished and desperate peasants were everyday occurrences. Moreover, occasionally, food godowns were also plundered by poverty-stricken men who had no alternative other than trespassing and using force (Banerjee1). The revolutionary movement was supported by intellectuals and students alike, inspired by socialist ideals, but soon it turned into a violent and aggressive revolt against the landowners and those who supported them. The guerrilla-style war was cracked down upon by the state with “exceptional severity, by destroying the rebellious sections of the rural populations, most significantly, the tribals as well” (Spivak 182). The state took a firm position which forced the revolutionaries to hibernate and develop an underground network, using swamps and wooded areas in the northern Bengal as their retreats (Franda 161). This movement struck sympathetic chords to other segments of Bengali society as well. This is how Devi looked at the movement, with considerable sympathy toward the landless and the destitute peasants. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978), a collection of stories related to the Naxalite movement, Devi wrote:

All the factors that led to the eruption of the movement remain unchanged... The exploitation of the starving peasants continues unabated... Rural India has the appearance of an enormous graveyard... This movement has been the most significant and inspiring event for a number of decades in this country. (qtd in *Five Plays* viii)

*Mother of 1084* unravels the repercussions of the movement that led to imprisonment and killings of thousands of activists including young men and women, in police encounters. The story encompasses twenty four hours of the life of a middle aged woman, Sujata, who has lost her son Brati, corpse number 1084, a Naxalite activist who was killed by the violent mob supported by the establishment. Devi herself denies being a feminist, but her plays as well as stories are concerned with women's issues, especially with those who are marginalized including the text in question. One of the questions is to probe how she has delineated power relations and the resultant strategies of resistance chalked out by her female characters.

The opening scene reveals a bewildered Sujata, who has just received a phone call from the police to head to the morgue and identify the corpse number 1084, who is most probably her son, Brati. Devi has described Sujata as the 'bereaved and apolitical' mother but as the play proceeds, she transforms into a politically and socially aware individual, ready to question the existing power structure and the status quo. Although critics have focused on Sujata's interaction with another working class mother who has also lost her son, Somu, my focus will remain on Sujata's interaction with Nandini, Brati's comrade and lover. However, the focus of this discussion will remain on Nandini's incarceration for her connections with the Naxalites, and its impact on Sujata.

Sujata hails from an affluent, middle class background; her husband Dibyanath is a successful business man but his success owes much to his unscrupulous dealings and underhand ways. All her life, Sujata has tolerated an extremely controlling husband who not only lacks moral integrity, but is a womanizer as well. Dibyanath neither approved of his son Brati's political activities nor his idealistic stance rather he tries to

hush up the matter when they receive the phone call from the police announcing their son's death in a violent encounter. Dibyanath, like most people disapproved of the revolutionary movement which explains his son's secret activities, a life which Brati concealed from the whole family. But after the phone call, Sujata encounters the police and their insensitive and indifferent attitude toward the citizens for the first time. Saroj Pal, representing the whole police department and the state, refuses to allow Sujata to take the dead body of her son and perform his last rites. This incident in the play reveals how the repressive state apparatuses operate within the system, and control the potential subversive activities or resistance from the crushed and rebellious sections of society that includes women as well, in this play. However, Sujata remains silent during this episode over the unexpected behavior of her husband, but her silence is also a sort of protest, which has been harboring a revolt.

It is only after her encounter with Nandini, two years after her son's death, that Sujata receives a terrible jolt and awakes from her state of complacency. Nandini provides her with minute but significant details of the other facet of Brati's life that Sujata remained unaware of, that is, his activities as a Naxalite. Sujata is able to comprehend the social reality from a new angle hitherto unknown to her, and for the first time she is able to see life through the lens of the subalterns who suffer because of the unjust and class-based society. Nandini censures Sujata on her political naivete: "How can you be so smug and complacent? With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency" (29)?

When Sujata meets her for the first time, Nandini is wearing dark glasses, her "eyes blind from the gleam of thousand watt lamps" (Devi 31). Nandini's blindness is



suggestive and serves as a signifier of Sujata's ignorance as well as short-sightedness of society at large toward social injustices, and atrocities being committed by the state to curb the militancy. Moreover, it also suggests Sujata's failure as a mother, her blindness to what her son was undergoing without her knowledge. In the same vein, Nandini's blindness critiques the power structures and the way they operate as a sign of brutality of the state. This is also an example of the strategies used by postcolonial playwrights as Helen Gilbert notes that "disfigured bodies physicalize the metaphor of imperial violation and so appeal to the audience on a visceral level... and in some plays the derogative body has not only an illustrative function but also a subversive one" (224). Nandini has been subject to the worst torture in the prison in a solitary and dark cell during her interrogation by the brutal, Saroj Pal, who is an embodiment of the whole corrupt system, and "an archetype of bureaucracy." Solitary confinement is a recurring punishment for those who dare to stand against the authority, or violate prison rules. It is also a recurrent trope used frequently in prison theatre, implying that the inmate will be subjected to more severe methods of torture, even sexual assault. Nandini's skin is scarred, and burnt by lighted cigarette butts, but still, she reveals her willingness to continue her mission, knowing that she will not be able to lead a normal life again. "I know," she says to Sujata, "but I'll never come to the so-called tidy life again. Some day you will learn that I've been arrested again" (30). Nandini is depicted as a resisting individual who is ready to act, not caring about the grave consequences of the path she has chosen to tread on. Sujata is aware of the tragic fact that Nandini will never be able to become a mother, as the result of police torture. The fact that Nandini cannot become a mother is only implied in the text, something is left to the imagination

of the viewers or readers here, to visualize what might have caused that infertility. Severe torture or rape, anything could have been the cause but this can only be discerned as the subtext in the play.

Finally in the last scene, on the occasion of her daughter's engagement ceremony, Sujata encounters Saroj Pal again among the guests, now more painfully aware that Dibyanath is also a part of the whole corrupt and hypocrite system. As Radha Chakravarty notes, "If Dibyanath, the father figure, represents the entire power structure based on wilful denial of moral responsibility, Sujata's maternal loss generates the strength to question and challenge the system from a new-found sense of her own role in history" (112). Seeing all the guests indulging and merry-making mindlessly on the second death anniversary of her son, she collapses, and bursts with rage:

Still in uniform? Still on duty? Mass action in Baranagar? (Turns to the dancers, all absorbed in their whirling movements.) Still the Black Maria, the revolver in the holster, the helmeted policemen within the van? Where's the job this time? (35)

Guests keep staring at her in awe, and Sujata continues: "... Why don't you speak? Speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak! ...Where is the place where there is no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans" (35)? Lastly, Sujata points to the dancers as well as the audience and expresses her extreme anguish at the meaningless existence of them all: "Corpses, stiffened corpses, all of you! (pointing to herself) And I myself? Did Brati die to let you carry on in your cadaverous existence, enjoying and indulging in all the images of the world..." (36)

The play ends with Sujata's fall, and Nandini's determination to continue her mission, but at the same time, showing the indifferent attitude of the moneyed class

towards the ongoing struggle and suffering of the underprivileged. The reentry of Saroj Pal, still in his uniform, suggest that the state policies of using force and repressive measures to curb the movement will never cease, and the struggle to bring social change will also persevere.

The play and novel *Mother of 1084* were adapted into an Indian feature film in 1998, directed by Govind Nihalani who also wrote the screenplay. The film also won National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi. The first scene in the film unfolds in a maternity hospital in the year 1949 which suggests Brati's birth and Sujata's role as a mother. While the play reveals Sujata responding to the ominous phone call and then rushing to the morgue to identify the corpse, this is the next scene in the film version, a harsh, male indifferent voice commanding Sujata to reach Kanta Kupur, the police morgue. There are some modifications apparent in the film version.

Moreover, one aspect which has been highlighted in the film, and not dwelled upon in the novel, though it has been depicted in one scene in the play, is Nandini's torture by the police. The scene where Nandini is undergoing severe torture in the cell is used as a backdrop to predicate the violent tactics of the state to suppress the movement. It is in the fourth scene when Nandini is introduced for the first time, being dragged from her cell by the prison guards in a state of agony. Then the scene shifts to Sujata meeting Somu's mother for the first time, also a bereaved woman from working class, who presents graphic details of how Brati and her own son, Somu were killed violently by the goons sent by the police. Both women are presented as foils to each other, whereas Sujata is educated, and a working woman from affluent class, Somu's mother is extremely poor and unlettered. These interactions create that bonding

between the women that Sujata could not have with Brati when he was alive. By reaching out to the women who were a major part of Brati's life, Sujata strives to recreate the past in order to reconnect with her son.

However, the scene moves again to Nandini which is the main focus of the film, where she is revealed in a torture cell, lying on a straw mat on the floor, writhing in pain and agony. The last scene which is lengthier than the first two torture scenes, depicts Nandini being interrogated by Saroj pal; this section is also included in the play, where Nandini is being blinded by strong lights while resisting strongly, withholding the information that the police want to extract from her. On her refusal to submit, Nandini is ordered to be transferred to solitary confinement where the guards are directed to teach her a lesson. Nandini reveals in her conversation with Sujata that she remained incarcerated for two years and was released, on January 17<sup>th</sup> which is, coincidentally, Brati's birthday as well as his death anniversary, and ironically, the engagement ceremony of his sister Tulli also takes place on the same day.

Nevertheless, what makes the play substantially different from the film is the way the latter comes to a conclusion that is totally unexpected. Both the novel and the play end with Sujata's tirade against the complacently indifferent attitude of her children and guests to Brati's death (during the engagement ceremony which is also Brati's death anniversary) and the movement, and then Sujata's fatal collapse. On the contrary, the film resurrects Sujata, and she is revealed as another devoted advocate of human rights and also a comrade, working with Brati's former colleague, a professor. Nandini is single and meets Sujata after a lapse of twenty years, working for the rights of the tribals. The professor is killed in front of Sujata and she struggles to stop the killer who

was also aiming at Nandini. This last episode in the film suggests that their struggle is not over; peace is not established; the Naxalite movement is still not crushed and the state is using underhanded means to thwart the movement under a false cover of reconciliation. In the end Nandini declares that she will continue to fight, on the other hand, Sujata as well, announces that she now shares Brati's dreams and aspirations, and will continue his aborted mission.

The date, January the 17<sup>th</sup> in the play is used as an emblem, indicative of Brati's rebirth, as all the events, his birth, death, then Nandini's acquittal from the Jail, and Sujata's encounter with her for the first time, take place on the same day. It also insinuates that the cycle of death and rebirth will continue and the state will not be able to crush the uprising of the populace once they realize that they have been wronged.

The play is episodic, comprising twelve individual scenes, alternating between the present and the past where Sujata's relationship with Brati is underscored. Most of the events are recalled in retrospect; the flashback feature employed in this play is usually adopted in memory plays. Furthermore, the police as the representatives of the state appear in the first scene as a harsh male voice on phone, and then again, in the last scene. Saroj Pal's reentry and the focus on his Boots indicate the pervasive influence of the state on an individual's life. This also manifests a kind of circularity in the structure of the text, with the reappearance of the police to round off the play, which is more evident in the film version.

Devi seldom appropriates innovative or experimental techniques in her works; most of her plays are written in a naturalistic mode. Furthermore, Devi has refrained

from taking advantage of the element of song and dance as a gloss over in most of her plays, which is a prominent characteristic of postcolonial theatre, especially of the Indian theatre of the Roots. The dialogues are written purely in prose; no element of the folk is employed. As regards the structures of time and space, the text moves back and forth in time, and each jump of time shifts the locale as well, from Sujata's bedroom to the Police morgue and to the slums where Brati along with other Naxalites is brutally killed. The succession of different spaces not only adds to the epic like structure of the play, but also demonstrates the constellations of power distributed between different players including the police and the angry mob hired by the state.

The strategies of resistance, however, are illustrated in the play, in spite of its realistic mode. If we look at the most prominent feature of feminist theatre, that is, rejection of the portrayal of dominant and repressive ideology, then Devi's plays definitely fall into this category. As Elaine Aston notes: "Feminist theorization of stage practice has been critical of those realist traditions of performance which work in tandem with dominant and oppressive representations of gender, and 'glorify the phallus' centre stage" (6). In Devi's *Mother of 1084*, although men have been portrayed as oppressive and domineering, Sujata and Nandini have been delineated as resisting against authority and the dominant ideology. Both women discover a way out and find a space where they can regain their subjectivity. Nandini vows to continue her mission even if she gets arrested again; Sujata, too, breaks her silence in the last scene, and refuses to conform to the existing norms.

Feminist approaches to theatre have been specifically critical of the theatrical texts in the realist tradition, as they operate within "systems of 'closure', their well-

constructed plots follow a linear pattern, and the subject of this kind of narrative is always male and its discourse is phallogentric (Aston 40). On the other hand the 'female' is "enclosed within the male narratives of realism" and is also defined in relation with the male subject, unable to affirm her subjectivity, having no agency; often the women are depicted in these narratives as the objects of exchange (Aston 40). If we look at *Mother of 1084* within this context, the play does portray Sujata in relation to her son, Brati, and Dibyanath's wife, but the men in the text have not been depicted as undergoing transformation or it is not their acts or their conflicts that have been the focus; on the contrary, both Sujata as well as Nandini have been given the subject positions, and the text traces the course that these women take, their decisions and their actions. Or it can be stated that the text does not follow a phallogentric trajectory, rather it revolves around the women, belonging to diverse segments of society, each woman in relation with the state and the patriarchy. In other words, both Nandini and Sujata have been illustrated as taking up active subject positions towards the end of the play, challenging authority and repressive tactics of the state.

Another significant direction which feminist playwrights have been following is inspired by Cixous's theory of feminine writing- 'écriture feminine'. As Aston notes that according to "Cixous, for a 'woman to write herself' she needs to be relocated, and 'un-made in the pre-Oedipal space of the Lacanian Imaginary, i.e. the pre-symbolic" ( 46). Her voice is 'the voice' that "sings from a time before the law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation" (qtd in Aston 46). Women need to break up the symbolic order which has muffled their voice for ages, and deprived them of their 'identity':

Voice-cry. Agony- the 'spoken' word exploded, blown to bits by suffering and anger, demolishing discourse: this is how she has always been heard before, ever since the time when masculine society began to push her offstage, expulsing her, plundering her. Ever since Medea, ever since Electra (Cixous and Clement 1987 [1975]: 93).

In *Mother of 1084*, Sujata and Nandini, both break up the symbolic order by their refusal to yield to the representatives of the state power. Sujata explodes at the end of the play when she spots Suroj Pal at the engagement ceremony. In the same vein, Nandini demonstrates a great deal of resilience in spite of the physical torture she has to endure during her incarceration.

In the same vein, another characteristic which Elaine Aston deems significant in the feminist theatre tradition is the ability of the 'revolutionary subject' in the case of feminist literature, the feminine, 'to be able to allow the *jouissance* of semiotic motility to disrupt the symbolic order' (Moi 170). According to Lacan, in order to become a healthy individual, the child needs to enter the symbolic order to be able to communicate and make himself/ herself understood. *Jouissance* is a term which cannot be translated literally, as it tends to lose its meaning in some way or the other. But roughly, according to Aston, the closest meaning can be understood as a sense of 'total joy or ecstasy' and in Cixous's perspective, it is used to "denote the pleasure of woman writing herself in the space of the pre-Oedipal, the pre-Symbolic" (Aston 56). I will not explicate these concepts in detail here because this is not the scope of this study, but Aston elucidates that "the examples which Kristeva uses and Moi summarizes are taken from the avant-garde poets and modernist writers. In the context of feminist theatre it is breaking up of dramatic dialogue, form, character etc., which is analyzed in relation to the semiotic and the possibility of *jouissance*" (56). To be precise, any text that has these elements: "non-



linear, structure, disruption of language techniques, use of percussion rhythms as a patterning device, etc”, contains the potential for jouissance, of breaking up the symbolic (qtd in Aston 56).

I have already discussed *Mother of 1084*, now I will examine the structure of *Barri/ The Acquittal* in the light of the feminist theatre dramaturgy. *The Acquittal*, like *Mother of 1084*, is also episodic, structured in non-linear fashion. *The Acquittal*, as well, moves back and forth in time, but the past has not been dramatized directly, like it is done in *Mother of 1084*, rather the incidents are narrated by different characters in retrospect. The space remains the jail cell throughout the play, which emphasizes the claustrophobic, suffocating surroundings of the inmates: “The acting area should be restricted as the cell is a confined space” (Nadeem 53). All action which happens backstage can be heard, not dramatized on the stage, for instance, the forced abortion of Mariam, her screams off stage can be heard but the rest is left to be visualized or imagined by the audience. Male characters/ prison guards are not represented on the stage but their voices can be heard off stage. There are clear stage directions regarding this aspect of the play: “The warders (male) should remain invisible and have loud and crude voices” (Nadeem 53). Absence of male characters is also an element which conforms very effectively to the feminist theatre strategies.

*The Acquittal* also, like *Mother of 1084*, and according to feminist theatre dynamics, has a female protagonist, Zahida, the narrator, who, as I mentioned earlier in the discussion, writes her diary in the prison, thereby giving voice to all the women inmates who have been silenced. This also conforms to ‘absence of a leader or a director’ noted by Karlyn Kors Cambell in her analysis of feminist theatre where she

argued that “the ‘consciousness raising’ rhetoric of feminism advocated collective self-determination by women, as opposed to the dominant rhetorical mode in which a single rhetorician persuades his listener(s) audience to accept his argument” (Aston 59). Both *Mother of 1084* and *The Acquittal*, gradually develop this collective feminine consciousness as the plays move towards the end. In the former, Sujata, Nandini and Somu’s mother develop that collective sense of having been wronged and start supporting each other. In the same vein, in *The Acquittal*, all the inmates can empathize with each other and the barriers and inhibitions felt initially are removed as the play progresses and the women come to know each other.

Moreover, Aston outlines three major strands in feminist theatre aesthetics that are mainly followed; bourgeois, radical/cultural, and socialist/materialist (64). As Elaine Aston notes that there have been many attempts by women to define “feminist theatre” or “rather lame assertion that anything about women is necessarily feminist” (64). Goodman, in a survey of ‘feminist theatre in Britain’ defines this as ‘loosely (re)defined as theatre which works in some way to present positive images of women, or to improve the status of women in the theatre(even if written by men or produced by mixed-gender companies’ (Goodman 68). However, according to Aston, Wandor’s approach of “seeking not to label but to ‘evaluate the nature of feminist dynamic,’ or dynamics” is more stimulating (64). Thus, in this context, both texts under consideration in this study can be labelled as feminist plays. But, it still needs to be looked at as to which category of feminist theatre can best describe these plays. I will not analyze both the bourgeois- and radical-feminist perspectives here but the plays under discussion roughly fall into the category of socialist/materialist-feminist dynamic. As Aston argues,

socialist/materialist feminism is distinct in its take as it identifies and locates oppression in terms of the complex pattern of gender, class, race, ideology, etc., and at the same time, seeks to transform the society (73). Basically, this kind of theatre was based on the acting methods and ideology theorized and practiced by Brecht and followed by feminists in the 1970s whose alienating techniques directly challenged the aesthetics and ideology of the classic realist tradition. The use of Brechtian techniques in *The Acquittal* emerges in the play's 'gestic techniques of disruption,' that incorporate the elements of dance, song, direct audience address, and the narrative structure which is episodic. On the other hand, *Mother of 1084* is also concerned with class related issues, and women in the play hail from different segments of society but women from the lower classes suffer the most, as is demonstrated through Somu's mother's plight due to economic imbalance. Basically, this kind of theatre is political, and concerned with oppression of the lower classes, especially women's exploitation. Both *Mother of 1084* and *The Acquittal* highlight women suffering due to extreme economic constraints and illiteracy which renders them powerless and unaware of their legal rights. But as I mentioned it earlier that there is one significant difference between the way both these plays have been executed aesthetically, and that is, *Mother of 1084* does not rely on or conform to Brechtian aesthetics, though it can be characterized as a socialist/materialist play. On the contrary, as I have already discussed *The Acquittal* relies on Brechtian techniques and incorporates folk songs, traditional dance, and larger than life style of dialogue delivery as an alienating device.

Now I will examine the plays from the lens of postcolonial prison theatre aesthetics as enumerated by Boire. According to Boire, post-colonial prison theatre

manifests power in two forms, and after the performance is over, the spectators are obliged to make a choice, a political allegiance. One is official-- the discourse of Law and Discipline, and the other is the unofficial, that is, a kind of 'carnavalesque parody' (22). While discussing the postcolonial prison theatre practiced in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, Boire observes certain generic features that run through this kind of theatre as a common thread, like theme, structure and techniques. They indicate a kind of shared legacy of colonialism and concern with social inequities and injustices prevalent in postcolonial societies existing during and after the process of decolonization. The most prominent characteristic employed on an overt generic level is the stock characters and situations, and in the covert manner is the element of the carnivalesque parody (22). Moreover, in Boire's view:

Like their ancestors in their chain- gang, post-colonial prison plays actively subvert the mechanisms of correction through a saturnalian parodic imitation. Like a conventional *bildungsroman*, most introduce a new inmate into an established community; stock features include reticence to advertise his/her crime; a sexual power struggle for possession of the new 'pet'; mock trials; a sympathetic adviser figure; a 'party' of initiation (often violent, sexual or both); and, most importantly, an emergence of a grotesque family structure. (23)

All the essential components of a post-colonial prison play listed by Boire can be discerned in *The Acquittal*, for instance, 'the initiation of the neophyte,' Zahida, the narrator's entrance into the prison cell has been portrayed quite dramatically, with her reticence in the beginning and other inmates' resistance to reveal the nature of their crimes. Class barriers that rendered Zahida as the Other, in the eyes of other inmates in the beginning, are removed gradually, and a sense of collective consciousness is developed among all the women. Similarly, in *Mother of 1084*, the bond between Nandini and Sujata gradually evolves; though Sujata is not an inmate, she has the

ability to empathize with Nandini when the latter recollects her experiences of the brutal process of interrogation and her days in solitary confinement. It is through Nandini that Sujata, a neophyte in the field of politics gets initiated in her newly discovered role—as a politically aware woman who can challenge the patriarchs. Though the carnivalesque nature in Bakhtinian sense of the term is missing in this play, transgression of the societal norms, subversion of authority, and defiance that characterize both women in the play, and the way they pair towards the end, align it with post-colonial prison plays.

The saturnalian moment in *The Acquittal* occurs when the inmates celebrate Marium's ritual of gode-bharai (filling the lap of the expectant mother with fruit), by singing traditional folk songs and performing Punjabi dance, though this celebration is ironic as the child will be born out of wedlock, as a consequence of Maryam's rape by the prison officials. I have already discussed this point earlier in the chapter.

Another aspect, in Boire's analysis, mostly employed as a recurrent trope in this kind of theatre is the isolation cell or the prisoners' accounts of torture perpetrated in solitary confinement, also referred to as 'butchery, a kitchen or a dungeon' (24). This is where female inmates are physically abused and sexually harassed, in complete isolation when everything is veiled from the outside world or other inmates. Both *Mother of 1084* and *The Acquittal* allude to sexual abuse of women which takes place in the dark cells; Marium gets pregnant as a consequence, on the other hand, Nandini loses her vision due to torture. Another characteristic that is usually employed in this kind of theatre is the role of abusive and crude wardens. Boire notes this in regards with the crucial role of the wardens in prison theatre in John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, Hilary Beaton's *Outside /In*, and Jim McNeil's *The Old Familiar Juice*. In Boire's view, "...

all revolve around a controlling hierarchy... Although they frequently mention the awesome power of the Warden, never once do they allow this character onstage. Akin to Foucault's principle of panoptic controller, the Warden is always a faceless authority, exercising power behind the theatrical curtain, away from the public gaze" (24). I have already discussed the role the male wardens play in *The Acquittal*, while *Mother of 1084* does not depict the wardens directly on stage, but the details of torture have been narrated through Nandini.

Precisely, both *The Acquittal* and *Mother of 1084*, are concerned with demonstrating structures of power and state violence, and the way they exercise their power over women's body, their comportment, exerting control not only over the body, but the mind as well. These plays elucidate the way women from all classes, especially the working classes are silenced; they are unable to exercise their agency; their subjectivities are crushed. I have already discussed the points of departure and affinities between these two plays.

Finally, I argue that the criminal justice system and prisons exacerbate the condition of an already marginalized segment of society, irrespective of geographical region, race or religion. Whether it is in the USA, or Britain, India or Pakistan, the rate of women's incarceration has been increasing for the past two decades, leading to sexual abuse and maltreatment in every mode imaginable that further traumatizes the women. Mostly, the imprisoned women are from the poorest and the marginalized communities, rendered more vulnerable due to their socio-economic conditions. These plays depict the failure of criminal justice system and the inability of prison system to rehabilitate the convicts, on the contrary, the rate of recidivism is on the rise.

Many theatre activists in the USA, who have worked inside prisons like Rhodessa Jones, Michael Balfour in the UK, Nadeem and Madeeha Gauhar in Pakistan, and Devi in India believe that theatre can be used as an effective medium to question the legitimacy of current structures of power that directly impact and control women's lives. Their plays and works suggest that there can be other alternatives to incarceration. As Maud Clark, a prison theatre activist writes: "Prison does not work, it is a brutalizing and archaic system whose violence perpetuates itself. ... An officer came to see the play, *Call My Name*, a play exploring women's experiences in prison, the officer came stumbling from the theatre saying, 'If this is what I've been doing—it's wrong' (106). Lastly, I would end my discussion with Baz kershaw's views in regards with prison theatre where he argues that:

Drama and theatre can significantly contribute to the collective and individual creation of autonomous subjects, especially through an engagement with the systems of formalized power in an effort to create radical freedom. Such freedom can be achieved through actions which combine resistant and transcendent ideological dynamics, which oppose dominant ideologies and also at least gesture to possibilities beyond them. (49)

Both Nadeem along with Gauhar, the artistic director of Ajoka theatre in Pakistan, and Devi in India have been writing against authoritative regimes and oppressive ideologies, with the intent to transform the established norms that are repressive, that subjugate women, and that suppress one particular section of society, that is, the subaltern. Through this kind of political theatre, they have sought to demonstrate that the state, through its repressive power play and its machinery, instead of erasing the class hierarchy and addressing people's problems, creates power structures and maintains the status quo.

Finally, I would say with Maud Clark, that “if theatre is working, audiences will be taken on a journey, they will feel what the character feels, their hearts will be engaged, their imagination awakened, they will understand the experience not only from their head but from the very cells in their body. This is where theatre can activate change and to posit possibilities structures other than prison” (105).



## Chapter 2

The Colonized Bodies: Modern Slavery and Commodification of Women's Bodies in Shahid Nadeem's *Dukhini*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamla* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

"The prolonged slavery of women is the darkest page in human history."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

"I resolved not to be conquered again."

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

It is generally perceived that slavery was a despicable practice that existed in the past, and is non-existent in the present day world. However, substantive evidence is somewhat a far cry from this miscomprehension which often obscures a wide range of longstanding problems related to slave-like status of women in South Asia. Joel Quirks enumerates new forms that slavery has acquired in the contemporary world and recognizes "contemporary forms of slavery" in his study ( 565). Quirks elucidates and categorises them as traditional slavery, bonded labor, "the traffic in persons and in the sale of human organs", forced labor, and prostitution etc. But I argue that this dark side of human civilization has always been and will continue to exist in many forms owing to globalization and a capitalist system that forges and deepens the gap between the haves and have- nots. Thus my focus will remain on the relations between organizations of sexuality, domestic production, systems of appropriation and exploitation of women in Pakistani and Indian capitalist society.

As this study examines power relations and the way women contend with coercive forces, one of the forms of oppression of women is the commodification of their bodies. Thus, this chapter will focus on the texts that have highlighted contemporary

forms of slavery involving women and the way these exploitative practices are still prevalent in some regions of South Asia. I will analyze *Dukhini*, a play by Shahid Nadeem of Ajoka Theater from Pakistan, *Kamla* by Vijay Tendulkar, and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* from India. All these works underscore one significant issue—modern day slavery or in other words, colonization and commodification of women's bodies. I argue that women's bodies are harnessed and controlled by patriarchal forces that coalesce with capitalist system. When their voices remain unheard, the female protagonists in these works chronicle their resistance through their bodies in distinct ways. But the question is what do they gain ultimately? Either they submit to the forces they are unable to overcome or they recourse to the only available alternative--death, to attain deliverance.

I also argue that women, when alienated from their bodies, are alienated from their 'selves' as well, which means loss of subjectivity or a fragmented self. In order to regain their lost selfhood, these women strive to reconnect with their alienated bodies. To elaborate my analysis I will rely on Marxist feminism as a theoretical framework, using Rosemary Hennessy and Michelle Barrett's observations. I will also draw on Carole Pateman and Kathleen Barry's works focused on prostitution and the commodification of women's bodies and the role of the spreading flesh markets throughout the globe. The plays also illustrate the Materialist Feminist view that "subjectivity is "discursively constructed to analyze the intersections of gender and class" (Hennessy xii). Thus keeping in view, the perspectives of materialist/socialist feminists I argue that the plays in this study manifest that a network of social totalities like patriarchy and capitalism plays a major role in increasing sexualization of women,

and an “intensified contestation over woman’s body as the site of reproduction in the “first world” and of production in “third world” (ibid. xiii).

All the three plays including *Harvest* evoke the image of the “...imperial precursor, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which saw millions of racialized bodies bought, sold and exchanged for the benefit of European mercantile expansionism” (*Postcolonial Plays* 215). Women who are trafficked, are often coerced into becoming sex slaves/prostitutes or domestic servants in the third world countries including India, Bangla Desh, and Pakistan that can be attributed to economic imbalance and lack of access to education in the lowest socio-economic classes. This state of affairs substantiates the fact that status of the subaltern women has undergone no considerable change even after more than sixty seven years of independence from the British colonial rule in South Asia. S, Huda writes about the alarming increase in human trafficking at global level, that according to some estimates, “every year 1 to 2 million men, women, and children are trafficked worldwide, around 225,000 of them are from South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bengla Desh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Maldives) (374-375).

*Dukhini* or *The Woman of Sorrow* by Shahid Nadeem of Ajoka theater, was a joint venture including Madeha Gauhar, the artistic director of Ajoka Theatre from Pakistan, who met Sisir Datta of the Bangla Desh Institute of Theatre Arts at a conference in Dhaka. Issues concerning both Bangla Desh and Pakistan were discussed and it was decided that women trafficking was the most serious concern which needed to be addressed. Whether it is a woman trafficked from Bangladesh and

sold in Pakistan, or a woman sold in a remote village of India, this custom, like in some other parts of the world, is still being practiced in South Asia, and is increasing at an alarming rate. These women are smuggled across the border through pimps or agents who lure the poor victims by their false promises of a bright future in the land of promise.

In this regard, the theme of commodification and the “spread of market exchange relationships” in these texts can be examined from the Marxist and Feminist perspectives as well. Within Marxist and Feminist traditions, the role of commodification and the growing sex industry have been highly censured. Marxist theorists, specifically, castigate the flourishing flesh trade, expansion of capitalist markets, and the resultant “effects of alienation, objectification, and the proliferation of other symptoms, disorders, and diseases we see under late capitalism” (Van der Veen 31). In the same vein, Pateman argues that the capitalist is not interested in the body of the wage laborer, all he needs is his labor, or the product of his services, on the contrary, a prostitute or sex slave has to sell her body which is not like the services of wage laborers like some feminists argue. In Barry’s view, “there are not separate parts of a self that can be taken as separate from the self. Some body parts, some physical acts cannot be relegated for sale while others are protected” (1995, 32). In this regard, Leslie A. Sharp also argues that the very sense of self-as-body is frequently obscured by commodification and how the process of objectification of a person “may obscure, augment, or alter constructions of personhood and/or social worth of human bodies; and the victimization vs the agential powers and activist concerns of persons in reference to their bodies” (290).

Moreover, it can be argued that enslavement and colonization work in conjunction and can be viewed with the same lens. “Thus, in this regard, objectification, and commodification transform persons and their bodies from a human category into objects of economic desire... It is for this reason that slavery and colonization so frequently emerge as metaphors for a host of commercialized and exploitative practices” (Sharp 293). The three plays demonstrate how female bodies are exhibited as commodities to be used as sex slaves, and prostitution as an institution of women’s exploitation. This is one site “where themes of production, reproduction, enslavement, and colonization frequently merge” (Brownmiller 1975: 391-2, Rubin 1975). Likewise, as Sharp notes, “women consistently emerge as specialized targets of commodification, where female body is often valued for its reproductive potential. Such bodies may, in turn require regulation” ( 293). This theme has been dealt with in *Harvest* at great length critiquing the Western advancement in the fields of science and technology that has rendered human beings as nothing but commodities that can be purchased in wholesale. I will examine each play in the light of the above mentioned concepts, and also look at the common grounds that the authors share and points where they depart and differ from each other.

Also, as Shahid Nadeem points out in his introduction to the play, writing *Dukhini* was an ‘unblocking process’ for him -- as a Pakistani writer, he kept in mind the ‘cultural milieu’ where people tended to erase the painful history of the separation of East Pakistan which became Bangladesh in 1971 after a violent struggle for independence. On the other hand, atrocities committed by the Pakistani army during the freedom struggle became an indelible mark in the history of Bangladesh. Thus, Nadeem deemed

it necessary to bridge the gap between the two countries, and therefore attempted to “link up with Bangladeshi artists and human rights activists, to rebuild the cultural bonds which had been violently broken in 1971” (188).

The script of *Dukhini* was originally written in Urdu, and later, some parts were translated into Bangla. Artists from both countries participated, keeping in mind the theme and objective of the play, which was finally performed in 1997 in Lahore and Karachi and then in Dhaka and Chittagong (Bangladesh). The play received mixed response in Bangladesh where in Chittagong it led to a controversy regarding the issue of collaboration between the two countries. “Some people boycotted the Dhaka show,” writes Nadeem, “and put up placards about the 1971 atrocities in Chittagong. However, there was an enthusiastic response from the audience and also from most theatre practitioners” (189).

*Dukhini* unfolds in a graveyard, with several graves including that of Dukhini in the center. On one side of the stage is a shrine, and at the back, barbed wire, indicative of borders between the two countries, illegally crossed by the traffickers. The stage directions serve to highlight certain signifiers like the grave which is an emblem of suffocating, sepulchral life women are consigned to. The first scene reveals women in silhouettes being led by male traffickers. The image of women passing as silhouettes is also an important signifier which denotes the subjugated position of women in society; also, women as dark shadows being led by men indicates their slave-like status evoking the practice of slave trafficking in ancient times. A Bangla folk Bhawai song is being played in the background. It is noteworthy that folk songs are a significant element of

postcolonial plays, and playwrights from India and Pakistan, consciously integrate indigenous forms of dance and music into their plays. Then the scene shifts to a government office where Pakistani and Bangladeshi officials exchange information about the 'body', the dead body of an unidentified Bangladeshi woman in the mortuary awaiting burial. Here the exchange between the officials is significant as it insinuates the current impasse between the borders on the issue of women trafficking and the dispute over unclaimed and unidentified dead bodies of women. This also signifies the status of women as mere defenseless bodies, reliant on men and the state for their disposal.

*Dukhini* pinpoints the complicity of different sectors of society that include dysfunctional male members of the victims' families, poor economic conditions and the capitalist structure, the agents who exploit the women by confiscating their documents and stripping them of their identity, and the corrupt officials on both sides of the border who often connive with the agents. Women all over the globe and more particularly in South Asia are identified with their physical bodies which is the root cause of their oppression in a patriarchal culture and society. Following is a brief excerpt from the play to illustrate this point:

Pakistani Official: I hope the matter will be dealt with expeditiously. The body is in the mortuary and cannot wait.

Bangladeshi Official: I understand, brother. But we are a country ruled by Law. And the law has to take its own course. I hope the body is in ice.

Pakistani Official: Of course, brother. Our mortuaries have state of the art facilities. But the body has to be buried and the file has to be closed.  
(Nadeem 192)

This conversation between the officers unravels the gravity of the situation across borders that allows women trafficking through India. As the play progresses it becomes clear that many corrupt officials get involved in these transactions and facilitate the pimps and traffickers by taking bribes. It should be noted that women are referred to as 'bodies; the word 'body' is used in this scene seven times by the officials; there are more than 126 cases waiting in the queue, and more than 76 'bodies' buried as 'amanat' (as loan, temporarily).

This elucidate how these systems that enslave women, work and form vast networks through the globe, also adversely affecting third world countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Many non-governmental organizations and women activists have revealed a growing concern that in the recent decades, women trafficking has increased on a massive scale. Julia O' Connell Davidson notes how the trafficked women are exploited in an extreme form in the growing sex industry(5). Davidson dubs it as a form of "modern slavery," and victims of this form of abuse should be treated as such. The situation also raises the question as to why so many women relinquish life and turn into 'bodies' triggering the dispute between the two countries. This is because women are not passive objects upon which regimes of power are played out, rather their 'bodies.' It has become a cliché to say that women have turned into commodities; from the status of humans, they have changed into 'goods' to be evaluated, bought, and then discarded, but this is still an irrefutable fact. However, the transactions are not just made for bodies alone, body parts/organs are purchased, and smuggled to the first world countries as the market for this specific business is very lucrative, and has spread across the globe.



Scene 3 unfolds in a graveyard. This scene should be analyzed at length as it introduces other characters and the dead protagonist--Dukhini--Woman of sorrow. The graveyard scene in this play is intriguing as it is reminiscent of the Gravedigger scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The gravedigger enters with his assistant just like the gravedigger in *Hamlet*. Their conversation not only introduces the characters but also sets out the tone and theme of the play. The interchange between the gravedigger and his assistant is initiated with a question. The gravedigger asks: "Have you ever thought why we bury the dead? Why don't we burn them or their bodies in the river or leave them in the jungles for the wild animals to eat?" And then he answers this question himself according to the Muslim faith in the resurrection on the Day of Judgement, and the belief that everyone will be accountable for their deeds. But again the gravedigger reveals his skepticism and remarks: "... what about those who have suffered all the punishments in this life, whose lives have been worse than death why should they worry about the punishment after death?" (193) These are the very questions that the playwright poses in the play or it may be asserted that this is the major theme in the play-- the gravedigger's declaration that he has "buried those who had never lived" (193).

'Dukhini' is introduced as the conversation between the two proceeds and she is referred to as the 'nameless' woman who had committed suicide by immolating herself publicly. There is another elderly woman who visits her grave frequently and prays whom the gravedigger introduces as the "Mother of the Dead to protect the rights of the buried ones" (Nadeem 193). When the gravedigger enters the graveyard singing a famous folk song or 'mystic verses' as the playwright mentions: "O Mother, who should I

share with my sorrow and pain. I search for my beloved in the wilderness and cities, but can't find him" (193). While this song elicits a sombre and sorrowful mood, it also emphasizes the relationship daughters have with their mothers, or the affinity women have with each other, a point that Cixous makes: "In woman, a personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well national and world history" (882). Mai or the Mother and the other three women who visit Dukhini's grave and share their grief over her terrible death, creates the bond of sisterhood between these women. Cixous writes in this regard: "There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other--in particular, the other woman. In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter" (881). It is revealed through their conversation that all these young women are deeply embroiled in similar predicaments, i.e., trafficking and the resultant abuse at the hands of the traffickers. Also Mai's rejoinder to the gravedigger's remark explains this more: "There has to be someone to protect the unprotected. Don't you dare disturb my children" (Nadeem 195). Later, Mai's remark, "A grave has much space. A whole city can fit into it" (Nadeem 197) implies the grave-like living conditions of these women who are 'buried alive' and cannot extricate themselves from their dehumanizing circumstances.

The play reveals the circumstances that take place in the actual world, and the following account validates the world that Nadeem paints in Dukhini: A Bengladeshi journalist witnessed one such auction that took place in Karachi:

At night, girls were being brought to the slum and the auction took place indoors. There was no bidding because there was always an understanding between the procurer and the customers before auction.

Usually the younger and more beautiful girls were sold quickly and at higher prices. The unmarried and virgin girls were sold for 15,000 to 20,000 takka (US \$ 450-600).... The auction ended. Those who were sold went with the buyers. The rest returned to the place they came from. Everyone remained silent. It seemed that the girls were homeless, stateless, helpless, and speechless. (qtd in Paul and Hasnath 271)

Paul and Hasnath write about trafficking in Bangladesh, that New Delhi and Karachi are major hubs for transactions held at the international level for trafficked women as slaves, prostitutes, wives, or maids (271).

Moeena, Ambiya and Fatima, all three young women in the play have migrated from Bangladesh with the consent of their families in the hope to better their lives, with little knowledge that they were doomed to a life of slavery and bondage till death relieved them of their misery. Moeena, a sex slave recounts her experience: "I became the slave of the man who paid the right price. He now owns me, my body too. Dukhini, she was braver than us. She chose death over slavery" (201). This illustrates what McDonough and Harrison argue that in capitalism, "patriarchal relations assume a form dictated by capitalist relations of production"; patriarchy and capitalism are interrelated and have a tangential relationship (qtd in Barrett 17). Thus, women are positioned in two separate but interconnected structures of class and patriarchy, and it is the class women hail from which determines the conditions of the forms of patriarchy they are subjected to (*Feminism and Materialism* 11-46). *Dukhini* depicts the whole world as a huge 'marketplace,' a space where these bargains are made between fathers, husbands and the possible buyers; when transactions take place, the 'goods' are smuggled or transported from place to place, across borders to reach their rightful 'owners'. The net they are entangled in can never be cut off, though there are some

signs of rebellion, some efforts to cut the journey short, to reach 'home' that transform these women from mere 'objects' into 'subjects.' Annette Kuhn rightly argues that 'the family may be defined as property relations between husbands and wives and those property relations in action' (qtd in Barrett 18). Again, according to Kuhn, patriarchy and sexual division of labour are so interlinked that property (women), "the means of production of exchange values, is appropriated by men, and whereby this property relation informs household and family relations in such a way that men may appropriate the labour and the actual persons of women' (*Feminism and Materialism* 45, 65).

*Dukhini*, delineates these power relations working to appropriate women's labor and therefore gain ownership rights over women's bodies as well.

The women in *Dukhini* narrate their experiences of slavery and bondage, and the way they were exhibited like animals and goods and paraded in front of the possible buyers in the flesh market. Many Marxist critics and feminists refer to this often quoted statement by Karl Marx: "Prostitution is only a specific interpretation of the general prostitution of the *laborer*." In this sense, prostitution embodies "economic coercion, exploitation, and alienation of the wage labor" (Pateman 201). Prostitution not only alienates the women from their bodies but also from their selves, and this is what these plays illustrate. These women protagonists struggle to regain a sense of their lost selves by demonstrating resistance in different and subtle ways. Marxists and Feminists view prostitution as an "unnatural" phenomenon which alienates the person from her 'self' and why certain things should just be "not for sale" (qtd in Van der Veen 31). But unlike a wage labor, a prostitute does not only sell her services, she sells her 'self'. Thus, in this regard, she becomes a sexual slave unlike the wage laborer who sells his services

or labor because “there is an integral relationship between the body and the self. The body and the self are not identical, but selves are inseparable from bodies” (Pateman 60). The commodification and objectification of bodies leads to alienation of the self, and a loss of selfhood in a most derogatory manner.

The slave market scene in *Dukhini* bears resemblance with the scene in the Hollywood film *Twelve Years a Slave*, and a similar scene in *Kamla*, an Indian film based on Vijay Tendulkar’s play, *Kamla*, where women are brought to be inspected, objectified, stripped to be subjected to male gaze. Laura Mulvey notes, “All these women are bodies to be looked at, the place of sexuality, the objects of desire, and also the signifiers of the painful existence of multitudes in the oldest profession in the world” (qtd in *Muffled Voices* 94). While the male slaves are also objectified, women are described in corporeal terms, “With their bodies anatomized by the imperial/male gaze, the women are positioned as merchandise and are thus denied all sense of subjectivity... Women’s bodies are marked for consumption within imperialism/capitalism’s particular brand of patriarchy” (Gilbert 216). This is illustrated in the scene where young women recount their experiences when they were sold in the Auction Market, a place called Bangali Para in Karachi, Pakistan:

Flashback: The auction scene in Pakistan. Women are sitting in a line and customers come to examine the goods....

Agent 1: The girls are healthy, with strong limbs, have no illness. Almost all are virgins. I have taken great care to protect their virginity.

Customer1: But how can you guarantee that? There is usually breakage in such a long journey.

Agent 1: If there are damaged goods, I declare that. You can trust me. There is a concession for damaged goods. If you want second hand stuff, come to the other room. (Nadeem 200)

The scene depicts the way women are described in 'sales talk' as inanimate objects, debasing women to subhuman level. Furthermore, as Gayle Rubin notes that the "middle man's ingratiating 'sales talk' also gives weight to the theory that in patriarchal systems women function in a symbolic exchange which cements the relationship between men (Rubin 1975). Slavery existed in myriad forms where one party had the right of ownership for a specific period or permanently over the other. In Patterson's view too, dehumanization -- as a form of objectification is intrinsic to enslavement, often characterized by a profound sense of "social death" (Sharp 293). This point is elaborated in the play when the women recollect in a flashback scene how they were handed over to strangers by their own male relations, sometimes married off hoping to find a better future elsewhere. Pateman argues that men can easily "buy sexual access to women's bodies in the capitalist market. Patriarchal right is explicitly embodied in "freedom of contract" (189). But basically, as Pateman and other feminists like Alison Jagger argue, "it is the economic coercion underlying prostitution,... that provides the basic feminist objection to prostitution" (360). In Sharp's analysis, the commodified body historically emerges as a site of production, where living persons may be valued solely for their labor power. Human/woman trafficking, is one such precedent that can be associated with it.

Most women trafficked and then coerced into subjugation, struggle to disentangle themselves from the life of drudgery and humiliation but cannot escape their constraining circumstances, because they are dependent on pimps and traffickers who

threaten to hand them over to police as illegal immigrants. It is significant to note the kind of language agents and pimps use to describe the victims; women are equated with wild animals that have to be tamed. In this play, the agent refers to Dukhini as a “wild horse” who breaks “loose again and again” (Nadeem 2006). The question is to probe what tames these “headstrong and stubborn” women into subservience and that is explained by the agent’s revelation:

But their wildness is tamed by their circumstances, their debts, their hungry children, and their aging parents. They become docile during their journey from Jessore to Karachi. Their ego is flattened like grass under the feet of the elephants. (Nadeem 2006)

This image aptly paints the picture of the current conditions that compel women to abandon their homes and opt to migrate to foreign lands accompanied with men they have never encountered before in their lives. This reality exposes extreme conditions of poverty and destitution that force patriarchs of the poor families to blindly trust the pimps, agents or suitors who paint a rosy picture of a bright future which lures them like the pied piper’s magical music. Most women are married off to these strangers who take their brides to far off places and then disappear after selling them off in the sex market. Dukhini’s fate is described by the agent that she was sold by her own husband who brought her to Karachi and then disappeared.... “But Dukhini and her children were left at the mercy of the mafia. And when she was sold to the landlord from Bahawalpur, her children were also taken away. Obviously, who would buy a woman with children?” (Nadeem 2006). This picture illustrates the bleak world these women are imprisoned in, with no control over their lives or even their own children. This scene links this shadowy and shrouded aspect of the modern day world to the antebellum days and the ancient

times when slavery was rampant all over the globe. Sometimes borders create deep chasms between countries or continents, at times increasing the gulf so much that people across them who desire to reach the other end, cannot cross the boundary that separates them, and instead of reaching 'home' or to the 'promised land', they leave the bounds of their material existence and become immaterial. Existence, for such women, is a burden.

Another form of modern day slavery which has been dealt with in the play is maltreatment of the trafficked women who work as domestic servants and maids. Three scenes in the play sketch an outline of the kind of lives these helpless women lead in foreign countries. Bangladeshi maidservants in different households undergo verbal, psychological and physical abuse; often they are also confined like prisoners, and kept under strict vigil. House number three in the scene depicts an exchange between Fatima, a sex slave, and Bachoo, the pimp, who accuses her of stealing his wallet. The significance of this scene lies in the fact that Dukhini's self-immolation gives a new courage and inspiration to these oppressed women, enabling them to speak and face their oppressors aggressively for the first time. Fatima declares that she is another Dukhini and is no more afraid of Bachoo. In the same vein, Ambiya, another victim, says about Dukhini: "She has spoken, she spoke in the language of flames. Her death was her statement. Did you not hear her cries?" (212) In Cixous' words, when a woman breaks her silence and finally decides to speak, "She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she let's go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech" (881). Despite all the dehumanizing conditions as delineated in both plays, women do strive to resist



and rebel, refusing to be treated merely as bodies. Dukhini's suicide as described by other characters reveals her plight and rage towards her husband/owner or master. Her act of self-immolation is in fact an act of self-affirmation, a desire to set her body free and reclaim it. Fatima narrates Dukhini's last moments: "They say when her body was engulfed in flames, she was laughing" (*Selected Plays* 198). Her laughter is an act of resistance against all who constrained her and held her body in captivity; it is an act representing her autonomous subjectivity. Before setting her body on fire, Dukhini was furious and enraged like Medusa, and her laughter 'flowed freely from her ignited body.' This was a strategy she employed to dismantle the rigid patriarchal structures that kept her enslaved. In Cixous' words, she physically materialized what she was thinking; she signified it with her body. She incorporated her story into history (881). Dukhini's suicide creates furor after the news is published in newspapers and gets huge coverage by media. Her suicide raises many questions and compels the concerned authorities to reevaluate their policies about immigrant women and their molestation; the dispute over her body between the two countries is another issue being debated. Nevertheless, her death poses a threat to all the people involved in the illegal flesh trade and trafficking, and a threat to the very fabric of society which allows such inhuman practices. Elizabeth Grosz aptly writes: "If the body is the target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organization" (*Postcolonial Drama* 204). This is what these powerless women resort to doing, by documenting their personal history through their bodies.

The ending of the play, however, reaffirms the fact that the present system which controls, and enslaves women, will perpetuate in the same unmodified way. The three women, Ambiya, Fatima, and Moeena, who yearn to go back to their homelands demand their papers and money from the agent, but the agent refuses to return their money because, according to him, that money has been used to pay off their debts, instead, they owe him money. These women are powerless and forsaken; they cannot cross the borders because the borders have been sealed to control trafficking. They cannot return because they have already reached a point of no-return/no exit. The agent explains their debacle in these words:

Agent: Let us suppose for a minute, I write off the loan. And suppose you succeed in crossing the borders and reach Bangla Desh. What will you do then? No one will want to see your face. You will shatter their dreams. You will cause embarrassment to your families. I can guarantee that you will be forced to look for another Bilal or Bachoo to be brought back. To be auctioned again.

Mai: Let them go, Bachoo. Let them die in their own villages and be buried in their own graveyards.

Agent: Mai, I am being helpful to them. There is no way back.

Mai: But they will have to follow Dukhini's path if they stay here. (Nadeem 219)

But as the agent suggests to these women, "...they cannot go back. But they can go further" (Nadeem 219).

Bachoo paints the picture of another land of promise, another paradise on earth to dream about, where these women can emigrate and get settled. That dream land may be Dubai, Muscat, Sharjah or any other country in the Middle East, flourishing and producing 'gold'. Scene 16 announces the death of another Bengali woman, who like

Dukhini set herself on fire, but while people were trying to extinguish the fire, she kept on laughing. This very well depicts the never ending battle of these women against destitution, against duplicity and deception, perpetuated by patriarchal forces. For example, Catherine Clement and Helene Cixous in "The Newly Born Woman" (1975) denounce the "dual, hierarchical oppositions" set up by the traditional phallogocentric philosophy of determinateness, wherein "death is always at work" as "the premise of woman's abasement", woman who has been "colonized" by phallogocentric thinking (p 65).

To depict strategies of resistance that Dukhini and other women employ, Nadeem incorporates the elements of folk songs and dance within the fabric of the play. The technique is simultaneously both Brechtian as well as in keeping with feminist dramatic traditions, and also practiced by postcolonial dramatists. According to stage directions, Dukhini emerges from the grave in three scenes. "In the first scene, only her hands are visible while she dances from behind the grave. In the next scene, she is partly visible in the dim lighting. It is in the last scene that her whole figure comes out and she dances all over the stage. This performance not only serves as an alienating device, but also as an anti-realist technique employed by feminist theatre activists. And also, as Helen Gilbert argues, "the ways in which the reinscription and self-representation of colonized bodies translate into performance strategies is obviously a key issue for post-colonial theatre" (*Postcolonial Drama* 204).

Also, the fragmentation of Dukhini's body delineates her fragmented "self" which in Van der Veen's view "is a unified essence that constitutes the totality of the individual

and that, in its “normal” state, cannot be separated, fragmented, or decentered” (35). In Pateman’s view too, the role sexuality plays in relation to the self cannot be overlooked, as it is the defining component of an individuals’ self. Thus, the selling of sexuality relegates the prostitute to a subhuman level, and is a degrading and dehumanizing experience. (1988, 224).

In this regard, Nadeem takes the opportunity to make use of the dramatic form usually adopted by postcolonial dramatists. “Postcolonial theatre practices offer the playwrights opportunities to recuperate the colonized subject’s body—especially when it is maimed or otherwise rendered ‘incomplete’—and to transform its signification and subjectivity” (205). Dukhini’s performance around her grave is not only a reminder of what she and other women are subjected to but also an act which is potentially subversive. The dance sequence serves as a carnivalesque moment during the course of the play; also, her spirit serves the purpose of ‘dislodging the normal’, subverting the hierarchies, and ‘overriding all sense of decorum.’

The use of the elements of song and dance in the play not only serves to highlight the theme of the play but also creates a distancing effect. Folk songs in Bangla and some folk songs in Punjabi language add cultural richness to the structure; Qawwali (songs sung in the praise of God or Prophet Mohammad {peace be upon him} in the form of group, often using Sufi poetry as well) is another genre which is used to integrate mystic element in the play. The graveyard is used as a strong spatial element to denote that for the poor and destitute women, the whole world is a burial ground. As

far as the structure is concerned, it is episodic, and employs flashback technique that illustrate past events in the lives of trafficked women.

From the Indian soil, *Kamla* and *Harvest* are remarkable plays that deal with issues of trafficking and the body organ trade, at the same time censuring the capitalist system. *Kamla* is the story of a tribal woman who is bought by an investigative journalist, Jaisingh Jadav, to prove that women are still bought and sold like commodities in the remote parts of India. *Kamla* unravels in the drawing room of a beautiful bungalow in the posh neighborhood of Neeti Bagh in New Delhi, which belongs to an ambitious young journalist Jaisingh and his wife, Sarita. The first scene reveals Sarita as a subservient wife, receiving and noting down every phone call for her assiduous husband, who is apparently unavailable due to an assignment. Kaka Saheb, a retired journalist and Sarita's uncle, who is staying as a guest, is drawn as a foil to Jaisingh, and also serves as a contrast between old and new journalistic techniques. Kaka Saheb is the first person who makes Sarita realize that she obeys her husband slavishly, never ever questioning him about his whereabouts, which indicates her subdued position as a wife. Also, it reveals that the relationship between the young couple is not based on equity rather it is one that signifies master/slave dimension. Jaisingh always orders his wife around, while Sarita, slave-like, executes all her duties unquestioningly. The climax of the play occurs when Jaisingh arrives home with a strange and rustic-looking woman, barely covered in her torn and soiled saree. Later, it is revealed that the rustic woman, named Kamla, was bought from the flesh market of a remote Indian village where an auction took place. Jaisingh deliberately chose this woman who looked sick and weaker than the rest of the women on sale. The scene

where women are brought to be inspected is similar in content and execution to the scene in *Dukhini* where the auction takes place in Bangali Para, Karachi.

The play further reveals Jaisingh's latent hypocrisy and male chauvinist attitude towards women, including his wife, the maidservant, also named Kamla, and the woman bought from flesh market; these three women represent exploitation taking place at different levels in society. Though Jaisingh intends to expose with evidence that women are still bargained like commodities in flesh markets and then treated as sex slaves, inadvertently, he becomes a collaborator and a part of the exploitative capitalist network that treats women as inanimate objects. Kamla is forced by Jaisingh to attend the press conference in her soiled and torn saree, and faces humiliating and derogatory questions posed by scores of journalists. The poor, disenfranchised woman struggles to conceal her utter state of bewilderment and disgrace under the disturbing gaze of the callous media moguls around her by innocently smiling. The scene unearths the capitalist system that works to perpetuate the existing power relations, Jaisingh being the prime example of this system. Jaisingh desires to create furor in the entire media by introducing Kamla, as a sensational news story. Newspapers bank on sensational new stories in order to increase their circulation and thrive because of over-ambitious journalists who dig in for new controversies. Jaisingh, an energetic and aspiring young professional, paradoxically, commits the very crime that he intends to expose and eradicate from society. The situation takes on an ironic turn when he treats Kamla like he 'owns' her; he is her 'master', and she has to act or 'perform' according to Jaisingh's whims. The following exchange explicitly defines the master/slave dynamic between Jaisingh and Kamla, when he forces her to go to the press conference against her will:

Kamla: You go, master. What will I do there?

Jaisingh: Those people will want to meet you!

Kamla: *Hai dayya!* (O, devi: goddess) And me in this mess. Look at my clothes! I won't go there....

Jaisingh: (*His expression and tone of voice hardening as he speaks*) You will have to come, Kamla.

Kamla: I'm your servant, master. But I won't come today. I 'll come tomorrow or day after. As soon as I 'm well....

Jaisingh: I order you to come there with me. Today. (Kamla is silent.)

(Tendulkar 20)

Tendulkar exposes Jaisingh's hypocrisy brilliantly, when Kakasaheb argues with the former about journalism and moral principles. Jaisingh claims to uphold moral principles by broadcasting this social evil, that is, women trafficking, but ironically he too becomes a part of that evil network:

Jaisingh:(*eagerly*) There's a commitment behind it, there's a social purpose. So what if you don't recognize it? What I'm doing-- what are we doing-- there's a great need today for somebody to do just that. (*Kamla* 31).

In order to further reveal Jaisingh as an exploiter, Tendulkar illustrates Sarita's growth from an extremely submissive wife to a rebellious and strong woman, who can raise her voice against her husband's inconsiderate treatment of the poor woman, and her own exploitation at his hands. But this awareness comes only after Sarita encounters the unlettered and vulnerable Kamla that she also like her, has remained enslaved her whole life. The realization dawns upon Sarita when Kamla asks her the unnerving question: "How much did he buy you for?" Both Kamla and Sarita have been considered and handled as commodities, is a devastating truth that shakes Sarita out of

her unquestioning acceptance of her husband's dominance on her: "Listen to the story of how he bought the slave Kamla and made use of her. The other slave he got free-- not just free--the slave's father shelled out the money-- a big sum." Moreover, Sarita discerns for the first time that her relationship with her husband is a façade, and that she has always been treated like an inferior subordinate being not as an equal. As Sonali Jain notes, "More than that of a real woman, Kamla's role is that of a signifier of exploitation. She is the catalyst who brings Sarita, the educated, intelligent wife of Jaisingh, to her existential crisis and precipitates the fall of Jaisingh" (*Muffled Voices* 93). After her brief interaction with Kamla, Sarita refuses to submit to every demand of her husband, but in the end, she has to relent and support Jaisingh when he is devastated after losing his job and reputation. Furthermore, Kaka Saheb also, expresses his views regarding the working of patriarchal mindset in Indian society when Sarita determines to stand firm and not to be used as a plaything anymore. Kaka Saheb, though supports Sarita in the beginning of the play by making her realize that she yields to Jaisingh's unreasonable demands slavishly, towards the end of the play, he seems to be endorsing the patriarchal mindset. Kaka Saheb reveals that he too has treated his wife (who has always served him without any resentment) unfairly. This is how society works and how men perpetuate the power relations by making women acquiesce to their degrading position. Sarita, who shows some streaks of rebellion and courage towards the end of the play, yields again on seeing Jaisingh in that vulnerable condition. Sarita succumbs to the traditional role of an Indian woman dictated by age old customs that a wife has to back her husband under all circumstances, and has to remain 'pati-vrata' or ardhangini/better half of her husband. 'Pati' means husband 'vrata'



means vow, according to Hindu scriptures. On the other hand, Kamla has been portrayed as a passive sufferer, resigned to her fate, depicting no resistance at all. Perhaps she is an emblem of all those women who live in such abject positions aware of the fact that defiance might land them in greater hardships. She is handed over to a women's home in the end against her will, in spite of Sarita's protests. Both Sarita and Kaka Saheb censure Jaisingh for his debasing treatment of the poor woman at the press club. Jaisingh and his friend Jain, later dub that conference as a "terrific tamasha (spectacle)" and "drama" which was staged at the poor woman's expense which exposes their insensitivity to the real issue. Later, Kaka Saheb too realizes that "... Kamla is just a pawn in his (Jaisingh's) game of chess (Tendulkar 43) to this Sarita replies that her fate is not any different from that of Kamla.

*Kamla* is different from *Dukhini* in the sense that Nadeem portrays women as resisting and revolting against the system whereas *Kamla* perpetuates the existing patriarchal supremacy. *Kamla*, also addresses the issue of women trafficking but from a different perspective. Both Shahid Nadeem and Vijay Tendulkar expose the power relations and their play at three different levels where exploitation of women takes place: women as domestic servants or maids, women as wives, and women as sex slaves. In terms of plot, and location, the two plays are very different but what connects these works is the subject, that is, women's lack of autonomy and control over their bodies.

Tendulkar has written *Kamla* in a naturalistic mode, using realistic narrative techniques, with no use of song and dance or specifically folk elements employed by

Nadeem. As regards the structure of the play, *Kamla* can be categorized as a realist and conventional drama, displaying a linear structure with a proper exposition, climax and then the conclusion. Also it spans across the period of a single day or twenty four hours like a classical Aristotelian drama. Denouement or catastrophe occurs with Jaisingh's fall from grace, his dismissal from his esteemed position, and his final collapse. According to Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero, if Jaisingh is to be considered the hero of this play, his tragic flaw or hamartia is his *hubris*, his arrogance and an extremely ambitious nature. But, certainly, the play is not about Jaisingh; rather it delineates the power structures in society and the way these systems support and strengthen the existing status quo against the weak and the vulnerable, that is, women.

When compared to *Dukhini*, certainly, *Kamla* is remarkably different in its structure, execution of the story and dramatic techniques employed by both playwrights. Tendulkar's plays are notable for their plot construction as well as the element of suspense which makes the audience hooked to the play till the very end.

*Kamla* cannot be characterized as a postcolonial play in a strict sense as it does not employ any of the strategies generally employed by postcolonial dramatists except the language of the play and the character of Kakasaheb who represents the older generation and their values. Kakasaheb's stress on the use of regional languages by journalists to convey information to every strata of society not just to the privileged class alone, is a significant aspect of postcolonial drama. However, *Kamla* cannot even be categorized as a feminist play in spite of its thematic concerns and exposition of women trafficking as a rampant practice in society that needs to be eradicated. Though it is

about Kamla, a tribal woman, and her sale, exhibition and disappearance in the end, she does not undergo any change and does not attain agency or control over her life.

Another form of exploitation of women from third world countries, especially in South Asia, which is being condemned by transnational feminists is the practice of organ trafficking or egg/organ donation. The commodification of the human body or its parts (men's bodies are also commodified for this purpose), or specifically women's bodies for the purposes of reproduction or marriage is also a form of modern slavery or colonization. This issue has been highlighted very effectively in Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest*. Heather Widdows discusses both these exploitative practices and notes that trafficking for prostitution and egg/organ "donation" have led to bitter "border disputes," often transnational in character, whose territory is the female body" (6). These plays illustrate the coercive systems of power and domination that work to relegate the subaltern women to the status of slaves. The subaltern women in most parts of the world, including South Asia, Katrak notes, are alienated from their bodies, which she terms as "internalized exile" where the body feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency. In this regard, the women protagonists in these plays struggle to create a space to 'transcend exile' (2).

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) winner of the inaugural Onassis Prize for Theatre, is a scathing critique of the systematic exploitation of the masses in the third world by a vast network of organizations rooted in and working in tandem with the first world capitalist countries. Padmanabhan was better known as a cartoonist, and a daily comic strip writer in *The Pioneer*, an Indian newspaper. The play has dystopian

undertones as well as a fascination with the science fiction mode of writing which allows Padmanabhan to “cut loose from the annoying constraints of realistic detail (Sethi 101). The play revolves around a destitute, and unemployed young man, Om Prakash and his young wife, Jaya. The family also includes Om’s elderly mother, and his younger brother who has left home and works as a male prostitute to make his living. The play acquires Faustian tone when Om, desperate to find a suitable means for living signs a contract with InterPlanta Services which is an organization being run from The United States of America and deals in organ procurement and transplantation. Organ donors are mainly from the third-world countries like India, poverty-stricken and in dire need of a means of living.

This situation in the play throws light on one of the most disturbing trends in the late capitalist society all over the globe, which is to “exploit the bodies of the poor and disenfranchised, where paupers frequently emerge as being of greater worth dead than alive” (qtd in Sharp 296). Helen Gilbert notes that this Faustian pact between Om and InterPlanta organ transplant services spotlights the hollowness of a society lured into that bargain by empty promises of wealth (*Postcolonial Plays* 215). As the play unfolds, gradually, the full horrors of this kind of an unholy transaction also begin to emerge, with every member of the Prakash family fallen into the trap, except the undaunted Jaya who remains unimpressed by the seductive Ginni (female receiver) as well as Virgil (male receiver). These American receivers appear on the screen of the video device that is used in the play by the first world receivers to communicate with the donors, and simultaneously, to control and monitor their lives. This device is Foucauldian in the sense that it keeps the donors/inmates under its panopticon vigil, and creates a prison-

like, confining ambience. Om is chosen after undergoing a very lengthy and nerve wracking process of selection, where he, along with thousands of other potential donors, wait in a long and never ending queue.

Jaya is the only character who remains defiant till the very end, as she rejects all the agreements that later prove to be hallucinatory and unsubstantial. Both Om and Jeetu abandon their home and leave Jaya behind hoping to find a dream world elsewhere. This bargain validates the current debates over the distribution of valued body parts but simultaneously the devaluation of the human body and dignity of the self which is diminishing. This debate underscores one significant fact that substantiates Foucault's notion that "socially expendable categories of persons are ironically transformed into valued objects through their involvement in medical research" (1975). According to Kimbrell (1993) we are witnessing the global expansion of a "human body shop": The print media within the United States, for example, regularly publishes body "atlases" (Flye 1995) consisting of images of partitioned human bodies that expose an array of parts that can be either removed for use elsewhere or be replaced with parts of human or other origins (Sharp 297). Yet the most disconcerting fact is the question of "ownership of entire bodies, their processes, their tangible (and, increasingly, microscopic parts, and even of associated scientific knowledge (Sharp 298). In *Harvest* as well, we witness the complete hold that the receivers acquire over the bodies of the donors. Om and his family cannot eat the normal food, instead, they have to satisfy their hunger with capsules or pills. They have to remain germ free; Om and Jaya cannot enjoy their conjugal relationship as Om has declared Jaya as his sister. Their lives get totally transformed and controlled under the constant surveillance of the receivers. Near

the end of the play, when Jaya is left alone, as her mother-in-law has literally locked herself up in that video couch, Virgil appears on the video device and demands that Jaya donate her egg to Virgil in order for him to have a child. Jaya refuses at first, but then Virgil transforms himself into Jeetu, and gives an impression as if Jeetu is alive in his body, and Jaya will actually give birth to his child. But soon, Jaya gets to the bottom of the situation, and realizes that it's only an unreal image of Jeetu; it's not her lover in flesh and blood, but only an illusion. Jaya declines Virgil's offer and entreats him to physically contact her as a real man. On the contrary, Virgil is not able to fulfil this demand made by Jaya. Jaya is threatened that she will be transported like her husband and lover with the use of force but she remains fearless and defiant till the end. In this way, Jaya is the only character (actually, she is the protagonist in the play) who regains her subjectivity, and reclaims her rights over body and self.

The play highlights the practice of egg donation, another controversial issue which has given rise to heated debates among feminists. This amounts to regarding women as child producing factories, and as "walking wombs." A female Bangladeshi activist, F. Akhtar scorns Western feminist construction of the body as property as mirroring capitalist, patriarchal interests; to regard the body as property reduces it to "a 'reproductive factory', objectifies it, and denies it the "natural" reproductive power" of the body (Paetchesky 394-95).

"The medical realm is rife with potent forms of mystified commodification: Although organs are frequently described as "gifts of life", it is, in fact, a multi-million dollar medical industry where clients in need pay steep fees for the procurement,

preparation, transportation, and surgical replacement of body parts. The rhetoric of gift exchange disguises the origins of commercialized body parts, silencing in turn any discussion of the commodification process (Sharp 1994). *Harvest* is a brutal critique of the commodification of the healthy third world bodies by the prosperous first world countries. This phenomenon has been illustrated in terms of 'neo-cannibalism' by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (3-11) who argues that affluent but diseased citizens of the first world countries are becoming dependent on healthy but impoverished populations of the third world countries. This alarming rise in the tendency to procure 'spare' parts from the bodies of the developing countries has become another feature of the global capitalism that extorts capital through an inhuman trade. Shital Pravinchandra has analyzed *Harvest* from Marxian perspective and argues that "human organ cannot be equated with other objects produced in the third- world for first-world consumption because the organ is not a product of the laboring third-world body" (1). Pravinchandra writes that organs are not produced by the third world countries rather they are extracted through exploitation (1). This is an ugly face of global capitalism that has relegated humans to the status of organ producing machines and inanimate objects. Third-world countries have turned into huge markets for this dehumanizing trade which is worse than the slave-trade in the past or prostitution today. With almost no amount of effort and promises of unimaginable wealth is what lures the disenfranchised populations of the third world who live in abject conditions. According to Jean and John Comaroffs, for the impoverished masses living in the third world, capitalism today is characterized as a "gospel of salvation; as a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalised and the disempowered"

(292). *Harvest* demonstrates the lethal consequences of organ trade beautifully when Virgil tells Jaya: “We support poorer sections of the world while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves.... This is my fourth body in fifty years” (*Postcolonial Plays* 246).

Jaya is the only character in the play who understands the repercussions this pact would have from the very beginning:

Jaya: I'll tell you! He 's sold the rights to his organs! His skin. His eyes. His arse. Sold them! Oh God, oh God! What's the meaning of this nightmare! ... If you were dead I could shave my head and break my bangles-- but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece by piece?... (*Postcolonial Plays* 223)

The moment in the play when InterPlanata guards arrive to take Om with them is very touching, and depicts Om's mental anguish poignantly. The scene attains almost Marlowian dimensions in its depiction of the inner turmoil which accentuates the gravity of the situation and enormity of the pact with the organization, reminiscent of Faust's deal with the devil, and his utter despair in the end. Om shirks from fulfilling his commitment which illustrates his sheer lack of strength and character. InterPlanta gaurds arrive which creates panic:

Jaya: (exasperated) They will break the door.

Om: (sinks to the floor) I'll hide in the fridge. Ill just crawl along here, all the way to the fridge and I'll sit there, yes--

Ma: Why are you on the floor?

Om: I am hiding. (*Postcolonial Plays* 234)

Jeetu, who is also Jaya's secret lover, is transported by mistake instead of Om, and returns after successful extraction of his eyes, but his feelings of agony and being



wronged by his brother and InterPlanta transform into euphoria with Ginni's false hopes, and images of a paradise -like land of oblivion where he would be dispatched for good. Om also succumbs to the alluring charms of Ginni ( a computer- animated wet dream), and finally leaves Jaya and his mother. *Harvest* depicts both Om as well as Jeetu, turning into living cadavers, with their body organs extracted, and kept alive as long as their organs are needed through different devices. Sharp notes very aptly that "The objectification of donors is central to the procurement process as well, where patients are rapidly transformed into dehumanized "cyborgs" sustained in a liminal state by a complex array of technologies" (Sharp,Hogle, 1995a). Also, it should be noted how potential donors are transformed into "living cadaver" (1999: 65-6). Ma gets trapped in a video-couch, a device that is self-sufficient in every way and can cater to all her needs within that glass cocoon. Ma becomes oblivious to the sufferings of her family, and gets transported into a make-believe world of television. Om and Jeetu assume cyborgian existence with high-tech devices inserted within their bodies, and controlled from a distance of thousands of miles. Jaya is the last and the potential victim whom Virgil attempts to seduce and impregnate without human contact, making her believe that his is actually living in Jeetu (her lover)'s body, and she would give birth to his child. On the contrary, Jaya, not only refuses to be a baby producing machine/device, but also dares to question Virgil directly when he discloses his intentions:

Virgil: We look for young men's bodies to live in and young women's bodies in which to sow their children--

Jaya: What about your own?

Virgil: We lost the art of having children. (246)

But soon Jaya perceives the harsh reality when she tries to touch Virgil's body (now in Jeetu's image) but to her utter disbelief, her hand passes through the apparition with a crackle and she recoils horrified. Jaya strikes back on the module: "Then you are a phantom after all. An illusion come to mock me-- again!" (247) Jaya's indomitable will at this point in the play is remarkable when guards from InterPlanta Services arrive to "implant" a "device" to impregnate her, but she, somehow, succeeds in impeding the process. Death is the only way out for Jaya if she refuses to yield: "Huh, my life. It's not mine any more. You've shown me that. The only thing I have which is still my own is my death. My death and my pride--" (*Postcolonial Plays* 248). The play aptly demonstrates how the masses belonging in the third world countries are still colonized in this age of neo-colonialism. Women's bodies are already under strict control in the patriarchal culture, yet the trade in egg donation turns them into egg laying machines, which triggers a state of extreme sort of alienation. When human egg or the body turns into a commodity, how can its value be measured? In Karl Marx's view, the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labor involved in the production of that commodity (Marx 20-25) but if a commodity is produced in the circumstances where no labor is involved, its value cannot be measured. As Marx writes: "The idea of something thus created out of nothing is unacceptable to human reason" (25). According to Marxist view, when production exceeds the demand for a certain commodity, value of that particular commodity decreases, and that is the case with the number of human beings born in the third world countries. Their production on massive scale decreases their value, hence their bodies turn into cheap commodities, and are bought and sold in the flesh/organ market. In *Harvest*, Padmanabhan, by creating the character of Jaya,

proves that human bodies/eggs cannot be purchased or bargained like any other commodity. Jaya's defiance in the end, and her undertaking to embrace death is a testimony to the fact: : "But I'll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman" (*Harvest* 248).

*Harvest* can be characterized as a feminist play as it reinforces the idea of strong womanhood through the character of Jaya who delineates streaks of resistance under all circumstances. Om's mother, on the other hand, represents the complacent and traditional attitude of the women of older generation who submit to circumstances without showing resilience, and also, all those downtrodden women who find solace in a make believe world to obliterate the painful memories of their existence.

As regards the techniques employed, the play unfolds and ends in the same claustrophobic room which resembles a prison, and the whole family lives like inmates under panopticon gaze of their employers. The play is structured into three acts and follows a linear pattern, delineating exposition in the first act, the consequences of their unusually different choice in the second and the climax and finale in the third. The use of science fiction and futuristic elements lends the play a dystopian character as well, with a bleak view of the future world, especially for the citizens of the third world countries with their limited resources, and economic constraints.

Finally, it can be argued that all the three plays that I have examined successfully portray the subhuman status of the subaltern women, also establishing the fact that slavery still exists though we have entered the new millennium or a highly technologized age. *Harvest*, especially, validates the fact that even though we have been advancing

rapidly, human condition for the residents of the third world countries will remain unaltered. Women, all through the globe, have been, and will continue to be exploited as 'bodies,' or commodities to be bargained and disposed off. Whether these plays can bring about social change or not is another question, yet they provoke their audiences into thinking critically and to question the existing social patterns and status quo that relegate women to that degrading level. The plays also establish the fact that even after partition in 1947 of India between India and Pakistan, and then the independence of East Pakistan in 1971 that became Bangladesh, women have been subjugated and their status has not been uplifted so far. Despite the different treatment by the three writers in this study, thematic concerns remain similar, and that is what consolidates the point that in spite of being three independent countries, their economic conditions have remained almost static. Women in all these regions belonging to lower strata will continue to exist in the same graveyard like conditions, without any exit.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter

M(O)thers and Non-M(O)thers as Outcasts: Mahaswata Devi's *Bayen/The Witch*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*, and Shahid Nadeem's *Kala Meda Bhes/Black is my Robe*

"Our lives are as they are because some of us have children and some of us do not." Dowrick and Grundberg

In this dissertation, I trace the way power structures in Pakistan and India operate and how women's oppression in most cases is related to the politics of the body. Motherhood, another aspect of women's life, is also associated with the body and determines their status not only within the family, but is also subject to state control. A woman may not even control her reproductive capacity, as it is the patriarchy who has the control over a woman's womb. Maithreyi Krishnaraj rightly observes and this is what plays in this chapter interrogate, "Feminist reappraisal of the matriarchate is a political strategy to reclaim female power. Can one recreate the matriclan that provides power and support?" (3)

In this chapter, I argue that female agency, in Pakistan and India, is either negotiated through motherhood or through an absence of motherhood. The concept of motherhood with its different connotations has acquired more complexity as the feminist debates along this line of inquiry became more intense as well as contradictory. In India, a mother represents the "generative, nurturing powers of life, itself celebrated in temples, and sculpture, poetry and literature," (Krishnaraj 1). A mother is celebrated in Indian cinema, popular culture, and Hindu mythology, but at the same time, this pervasive respect and deification, according to feminists, essentializes women and restricts them in this prescribed role. As Veena Poonacha writes about the concept of motherhood in India, "The privileges of motherhood are determined by the conditions

under which a woman gives birth (whether it is under sanctioned marriage), the social location of the mother in the family, and the desired sex of the child” (*Motherhood in India* viii). Poonacha’s observation sums up the problems related to motherhood not only in India, but in Pakistan as well.

In the Western context also, motherhood is problematic as Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s points out, “the concept of *mother* which has always been idealized by the dominant middle class rhetoric of the recent past, can also carry this barely concealed trace of derogation, disgust, and dirtiness” (432). Hansen further adds that “motherhood offers women, a site of both power and oppression, self-esteem and self-sacrifice, reverence and debasement” (433). This observation validates the point I intend to make in this chapter about the ambiguous nature of women’s status as conventional mothers, non-mothers, and another category that is stigmatized and marginalized, that is, of the unmarried mothers. However, three plays that will be examined in this chapter, emphasize motherhood as an ambiguous and contradictory concept in India and Pakistan, also illustrating women as scapegoats, and sites where patriarchal ruses of power are played on. It is thus arguable that the position of the mother in Pakistani and Indian culture is “riddled with its history of psychic and social contradictions” (Hansen 433). Thus, this chapter reveals the disjuncture between the ideology that elevates motherhood and reality of women’s lives. Motherhood, instead of empowering women, disenfranchises them in certain situations.

All these plays that I will examine, illustrate that motherhood does not come to women easily, or when it does come, it is thwarted or aborted in one way or another. This figure of the mother without child in these plays ranges from the harrowing

circumstances of a woman who loses or relinquishes custody of a biological child (*Bayen*) to the traumatic emotional state of a woman who miscarries/ undergoes an abortion (*Barri/The Acquittal* and *Silence!*) or one who never becomes pregnant (*Kala Meda Bhes/ Black is my Robe*). I will focus mainly on women belonging to under-privileged classes, especially remote and rural areas in Pakistan and India where they are either regarded as commodities, or in some situations, as outcasts or persona non grata. The plays will highlight the exclusionary practices and superstitions regarding motherhood that are common in Pakistan and India, though there are some points of departure as well that stem from different socio-cultural and religious orientations.

To elaborate these concerns, I will examine Ajoka theatre's play *Kala Meda Bhais/ Black Is My Robe* from Pakistan, *Bayen/ Witch* by Devi, and *Silence! The Court Is in Session* by Vijay Tendulkar from India. These plays will address both the issues concerning women's subjectivity- being issueless or denial of rights/subjectivity/agency to mothers in certain cultural situations. I rely on the works by theorists like Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed while discussing Mahaswata Devi's *Bayen* because the play is very different in tone and thematic concern from the other two plays included in the chapter. All three plays stress on the emotional dynamics of woman's self when deprived of the status of motherhood, which in Pakistan and India is almost a mandatory condition for a woman to maintain her status as wife. Hence, woman's subjectivity in South Asia is tied to her identity as wife or mother, and she has to battle against various forms of domination, institutions or groups, and different forms of exploitation. I argue that one of the various factors that marginalize women in South Asian societies, is also in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions.

Before I proceed to analyze the above mentioned plays, I will discuss briefly the denial of subjectivity and oppressive conditions (regular) mothers experience due to diverse circumstances. One of them is exercised by the state apparatuses in Pakistani and Indian societies, as in Mahaswata Devi's *Mother of 1084*, and Shahid Nadeem's *The Acquittal*. I have already examined Devi's *Mother of 1084* in the first chapter, and Sujata's role in detail. Sujata, the *mother* in the play is perceived by her family and the state as Brati's mother, who was involved in anti-state activities. Sujata is marginalized not only by her family, treated like a pariah, but also is not allowed by the police to receive the dead body of her son, and observe his last rites as his mother and closest kin. The whole play revolves around her as Brati's mother, and her interaction with mothers of Brati's comrades who also lost their sons in police encounter. The play also demonstrates the plight of bereaved mothers from the working classes, their thwarted aspirations, and sustenance after they lose their sons. Sujata is doubly marginalized, for being a woman, and for being Brati's mother, as she is blamed for his becoming an infested wound, a threat to society.

Nadeem's *The Acquittal*, already discussed in chapter 1, also demonstrates the deplorable practice of arresting mothers in the absence of the accused or criminals as is the case of one of the inmates in this play. Jannat Bibi is an elderly woman who is incarcerated for a few months because her son is at large, and instead of him, she is languishing in the prison, praying all the time for him. This practice is also prevalent in India which has been indicated by Phoolan Devi as well in her diary where she recounts the agonizing experience of her mother when she was arrested in her absence and had to undergo police torture in the custody.



In both these plays, Sujata and Jannat Bibi, are mothers of alleged criminals, and as Katrak notes, woman's "exilic condition in patriarchal culture deepens in terms of her double exile as mother in situations that are profoundly alienating" (230). As a victim of state sponsored violence, Jannat Bibi is not only displaced, she is also perceived as a "criminal." On the other hand, Sujata as a consequence of her son's judicial murder, is not only alienated from her husband and children, but also from society that holds her responsible for his upbringing.

Another issue is the preference given to male child and marginalization of girl child in Indian and Pakistani society. As Katrak observes in this regard, "When a baby is born people shout very loudly, 'It's a boy,' or they say in a dead voice, 'It's a girl.' This saying by village women indicates the prejudice and death-like unwelcome given to a girl-child from the moment of birth" (235). This issue is more seriously prevalent in Indian society than in Pakistan, and women who give birth to girls do not attain that status and privileges that are accorded women who bear sons. This problem does not pertain to Hinduism or Islam, as it is more specifically related to cultures and traditions in India. People in Pakistan have deeply embedded Indian culture due to shared history till the independence, and in rural areas and less literate sections of society where families depend on sons for economic reasons, this prejudice exists. Mostly, owing to ignorance, women are blamed for giving birth to girl child and men often remarry to have male heirs. A useful study which focuses on this issue in India is entitled, *A Lesser Child: Girl Child in India*, published by Women's Studies at Bombay.

Mahesh Dattani is an eminent Indian dramatist who mostly writes about gender based biases and, "invisible issues" related to sexuality, in Indian society. Dattani's *Tara*

focuses this mindset of society, where a boy is entitled to more advantages and prerogatives than a girl. The story centers on two conjoined twins who are separated through surgery, but later the boy discovers to his horror that his mother, preferred him over his sister during the surgery which resulted in the girl's disability who finally died. The play reveals the tensions between the girl-child and the husband and wife, also illustrating the guilt which the mother feels and her inability to face the horror of the act she committed. The play is a brilliant exploration of the deplorable practice which compels many Indian couples to resort to foeticide when they discover the sex of the unborn child. One major reason for this heinous practice is that the women who give birth to sons, gain ascendancy to power after becoming mother-in-law. On the other hand, mothers of daughters lose their status as girls are considered a financial burden on parents because of the custom of dowry given at the time of marriage.

I have discussed the subjugation of mothers of girls in India, and the state sponsored violence on mothers whose sons/daughters are implicated in crimes. Now I will examine Devi's *Bayen*. Devi is one of the best-known writers in India, also a social activist who in her oeuvre has raised voice against class and racial segregation and injustices.

*Bayen/ Witch* (1998) addresses the issues concerning women's subjectivity-denial of rights/agency to mothers in certain cultural situations. The play illustrates double marginalization of women in rural and remote areas of South Asia owing to superstitions and patriarchal structure that work as the collective unconscious, permeated in the very fabric of society. As Vanashree observes, branding women as witch or daayan or chodail has prevailed in Indian society as a common practice of

patriarchy that also gets endorsed by the women of the community, but the fact that it is gendered can not be ruled out as most of the accused and victims are women (224). Moreover, Vanashree notes that superstition assumes significance as “an important discourse of power” that extends penalizing power to the patriarchal or feudal establishment in the remote and rural areas, which further enervates the already suppressed sections of society, women and the subaltern. To malign the victim, diverse tactics, like “gossip, malicious rumors, mythic or folklores or imaginary tales” are used (226-7). In *Bayen*, according to the villagers’ superstitious beliefs, women who bury children, when possessed, have the ability to raise the dead babies from their graves; they kiss them or suckle them, and then transform into bayens. In this regard, Bayen is definitely a maternal figure, but one which is abject, dehumanized, and expelled from human society.

The protagonist, Chandidasi, a mother, is branded as a witch, therefore assuming the status of the Non- Mother, life-taker instead of a life-giver. Chandidasi is Othered and feared even by her own husband and son. She exists off-centre, along the margins of the small village, shunned by everyone, bereft of her humanity. Chandidasi, becomes an abject figure, both feared and fancied; her identity shifts between human and the non-human, subject and the object, some -Thing that is both loved and loathed simultaneously. The play depicts the emotional dynamics of woman’s self when deprived of the status of motherhood which in most South Asian societies is kind of a mandatory condition for a woman to maintain her status as wife. Especially, in *Bayen*, the mother becomes an absent, and unnatural figure, and the traditional role of the mother is challenged in this play where the role of Chandidasi, the female

protagonist, as a guard of children's grave, is given preference to her role as a mother and wife. In this case, the traditional role of the mother gets subverted, instead, Chandidasi's vocation subsumes her nurturing, nursing role as the mother.

The setting of the play is unusual and unnatural, as is the thematic concern of the playwright which illustrates this paradoxical situation that after becoming mothers, in some cases, women are doomed to otherness and subordination instead of ascendancy and power. The mother whose role is fundamental in a child's life, gets excluded all of a sudden from the child's life as her vocation, and calling as the dome is essential and holds more significance. But Chandidasi is labelled as a Bayen not a witch, which is slightly different in nature, as Malinder, Chandidasi's husband, explains it to their son, Bhagirath: "They'd have burnt her to death if she had been a witch. But, son, a Bayen's not for killing. Kill the Bayen, and the children start dying" (*Five Plays* 87). The story of Chandidasi, and her tragic dehumanization by the villagers including her husband, can be attributed to the phallogocentric ideology because it confirms her position as the 'Other.' As Hélène Cixous argues in "Sorties", that dominance of phallogocentric ideology in social and linguistic terms Others women and confirms their subservient status in society. "Cixous' plea for women to : 'write about women and bring women to writing... through their bodies,' (*Laugh of the Medusa*) because it focuses the reader's attention specifically on the female body and difference by means of its reproductive ability and the effects of postnatal trauma" (Mitchell 107). By allowing the reader access to what is essentially a maternal experience, Devi offers a text that emphasizes the significance of a woman's role within the family unit , which in turn suggests that women also deserve the social status equal to male members in male dominated societies.

Devi critiques 'regulating systems of authority that determine 'normal' behavior while marginalizing and policing the abnormal, thus making the social attitudes toward gender, visible, highlighting at the same time, the coercive patriarchal ideology. The play aims to explore the 'insidious power of alien images that are not only forced on women but at times embraced by them' (Basourakos 280). In other words, Devi examines how the witch image, a 'discrediting and devaluing image of womanhood' (ibid. 280), functions to distort the potential of women.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault illustrates the way the genealogy of torture and discipline works and how it represents the display of power on the body of the victim or scapegoat/subject in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The way power relations work today is what Devi has demonstrated through *Bayen*, and Chandidasi's victimization validates Foucault's argument. The villagers torture Chandidasi, mark her; not only verbally but also by branding her with infamy, and leave her physically and psychologically scarred that cannot be effaced. She is treated like a condemned criminal, and is imprisoned and quarantined in a secluded and deserted place within the periphery of the village. When the curtain rises, she is introduced as "utterly exhausted and despondent" figure, "at the end of her tether, dragging her reluctant feet like some condemned ghost debarred entry into human society" (*Five Plays* 75).

The element of spectacle is significant as it depicts mob mentality, and according to Foucault, "public exhibitions of punishment serve as a socializing process, writing culture's codes and values on the minds and bodies of its subjects" (Adair 453). Devi depicts this in scene 3, when the mob arrives in the graveyard, Chandidasi sitting

by the grave of a child, guarding it in the dead of night, but at the same time extremely tired, sleepy, and perturbed over not being able to nurse her suckling child. The mob arrives and she is accused of being a Bayen:

Chandidasi: Who's there? Who are you?

Gourdas (savage): See for yourself, Malinder, you bastard. It's your wife, the Bayen, that's been killing our children. Why don't you ask her yourself? Who was she talking to? Whom was she fondling?...

The Mob: (awestruck, they point their fingers at her). You're a Bayen.

Chandidasi: (her eyes wandering from face to face, in sheer bafflement). I came to guard the grave. ... (*Five Plays* 87)

In spite of her pleadings, nobody cares to listen to her including her husband, Malinder, who begins to dance frantically, beating a drum with a wild frenzy, and declares that his wife has turned into a Bayen. Chandidasi is dragged away by the mob, cast away to a desolate and forlorn place, no longer allowed to communicate with any individual. Thus, the mother, whose breasts are oozing with milk, is turned into a Monster/Other.

In the Foucauldian sense, Chandidasi becomes subject of the ideology, whose body is inscribed, punished and displayed as "the dangerous and pathological other." She becomes a victim not only of patriarchal ideology but also of age old superstitions and myths that have superimposed the collective unconscious of the people. This dehumanizing practice works on different levels where a nexus of patriarchal, social, and cultural ideologies operates, and the poor and disempowered women are marked like "deviants," publicly punished, and "made to bear and transmit signs in a public spectacle that brands the victim with infamy" (Adair 454).

Chandidasi's body becomes a sign of public devaluation and the fear of death; it also represents the marginality of her existence within the corroded social system. The social set up also demonstrates the way men become the sole bearers of order, and of law, abiding by the laws that are clearly constituted to degrade women. Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous- feminine illustrates the way femininity is feared and abjected in contemporary society. Chandidasi's husband supports the inhuman social system that vilifies his wife, unable to provide her the support that is required of him as the bulwark and fulcrum of her life. Chandidasi gets positioned as an irrational, ill-boding and ill-fated figure, as a signifier of death and destruction.

It is necessary to note how Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine intersects and relates with Julia Kristeva's notion of the Abject. Creed argues that Kristeva's notion of the abject and the concept of the monstrous-feminine are intertwined and overlapped, and that, "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying , horrific, abject" (Creed 1). Creed has analyzed the portrayal of the monstrous-feminine in the horror films, but her argument that abjection is central to the recurring image of the monstrous-feminine can also be related to the monstrous in Devi's *Bayen*. For Creed, "it is the femininity itself that is monstrous", and that women have been historically "constructed as 'biological freaks' whose bodies represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality" (6). In the case of Chandidasi, her maternal body becomes problematic; her "breasts ache, at bursting point, with all the milk, and the suckling child at home" (*Five Plays* 86). She is accused because her sari was "dripping with milk," when her child was away from her, and also because she was singing a lullaby in the absence of her child. This physical evidence is

enough for the mob to validate her identity as a Bayen, and excommunicate her. This process of naming and confronting the abject, according to Kristeva is 'sublimation', "I name the abject, in order to keep it under control (11). Also, by naming it and recognizing it thus, and because of its incomprehensible nature, we are overwhelmed by it, and need to expel it constantly and forcefully. In this regard, Chandidasi becomes one that must be repulsed; one who cannot be assimilated, and one who must exist across the border. According to Kristeva's notion, in order to become a subject, one needs to separate themselves from what they are not. Kristeva questions, "How can I be without border?" (4) She argues that we cannot exist without defining our boundaries, and the abject is what must be repulsed because it cannot be assimilated (3) Kristeva elaborates upon different structurations of the abject, one of them is related to the maternal body, and the prohibition placed on it. Chandidasi represents the maternal body that is considered defiled and an abomination. This breaking away with the maternal figure, in the case of Chandidasi, can also be related to what Kristeva terms as 'primal repression,' which she contends is "the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the the Other, to divide, reject, repeat" (13). Chandidasi is equated with the "threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder," (13) a sort of uncanny and threatening world which the primitive societies marked out in order to preclude it. Thus, designating Chandidasi as a bayen is an attempt by the villagers to exclude what threatens their identity, and also to 'release the hold of the maternal entity' (13). This factor explains as to why women face the threat of witchcraft accusations far more than men. As Deborah Willis argues in her book, *Malevolent Nurture* that village-level quarrels and accusations of



witchcraft often arose out of conflicts between women. “The witch”, Willis argues is a “mother gone bad,” and the general perception that the woman in question has transformed into a “perverse and destructive mother” provides legitimacy to the accusation (13-14). Also, Soma Chaudhuri notes that “the men who are the decision makers, use the conflicts between women to serve other interests. The women (the accused witch and those initiating the accusation against her) are thus scapegoats in the entire conspiracy by the men in the village” (1220).

The play also highlights the conflict between a woman’s vocation and her responsibilities as mother. Chandidasi’s vocation as a Dome to bury the dead children has been a continuation from generation to generation, and her ancestors were esteemed highly in the rank of Domes. After the birth of her son, Bhagirath, Chandidasi finds it physically not possible to raise her son while carrying out her duties as a Dome, because she has to guard the graves of the dead children during nights. Chandidasi attempts to renounce her profession but she is pressurized by the villagers to continue as there is no one to replace her. The situation places Chandidasi at a crossroad where she has to choose either her motherly instincts and raise her son as a normal mother or fulfil her duties entrusted on her by her ancestors. She struggles to make Malinder understand the “quandary” she is in, but in vain: “It hurts to do the job these days, the job handed down to me by my ancestors, my hands rebel, and yet I have to go on doing it” (*Five Plays* 82). Chandidasi’s predicament here can be juxtaposed with the situation of women who need to work or struggle to maintain a balance between their work and their duties as mothers. The play, in Mitchell’s words, presents “juxtaposing issues associated with motherhood, such as the effects of post-natal trauma and the

challenges associated with the woman's inability to fulfil her maternal potential" (*Of Monsters and Men*). However, Chandidasi succumbs to the pressure of her village folk and finally agrees to bury the dead body of the little girl named Tukni whom she cared for like a mother, but ironically, it is at Tukni's grave while performing her duty that she is suspected and then branded as Bayen.

Chandidasi's figure assumes an ambivalence; she frightens and yet fascinates simultaneously which is another aspect of the concept of abjection in Kristeva's view. Chandidasi's adolescent son, Bhagirath's fascination and fear of the mother that he has been separated since she was excluded from society is an instance of the encounter with the abject. In scene 4, which is also the last scene of the play, after Bhagirath confronts his mother for the second time, he can hear her approaching from a distance with the sound of the canister clanging and the lullaby she is singing:

Bhagirath: (to himself). I'll not look on her face, I'll just see her face on the water. There can be no harm if I don't look on her face. I'll look on the shadow upon the water. The other day I didn't. (*Bayen* 99)

When Chandidasi realizes that her son is speaking to her, she warns him: "It's forbidden to talk to us... I am a Bayen" (*Bayen* 99). Bhagirath replies aptly: "I'm talking to a shadow" (ibid. 99). Chandidasi has indeed become just a shadow of a human being, a dark side of womanhood, and a non-mother since the day she was separated from her suckling child. Chandidasi does indicate to her son the boundary that has been created between the mother and the son by the community that Bhagirath should not traverse. Yet, Bhagirath's desire to be reunited with his mother demonstrates that there is a vacuum in his life for mother's love which needs to be filled. However, this scene

strongly delineates what the people as well as Malinder as Chandidasi's life partner fail to recognize, that is, Chandidasi's humanity and her role as a caring, nourishing mother.

The stage in the last scene is immersed in a grim red light while a train is heard rumbling and approaching from a distance. Chandidasi is shown moving towards the train tracks to speak to her husband but she detects some men spreading bamboo poles over the tracks, probably dacoits scheming to stop and plunder the train. She tries to warn the dacoits to remove the poles as it would cause a terrible disaster but they escape after they recognize the Bayen, scared for their lives. Chandidasi in her attempt to bring the fast moving train to halt, loses her life. This is the moment of recognition of her humanity and an affirmation of her motherhood when the villagers arrives at the site of the terrible collision, and realize what a sacrifice she has made in order to safeguard the lives of hundreds of people. Devi here affirms Chandidasi's 'maternal essence,' after the latter performs what is considered 'natural' for a woman in such circumstances, that is, wives/ mothers/female subjects' role as 'self-sacrificing', and 'life givers.'

Chandidasi's positionality as a bayen renders her 'unnatural' and therefore as a 'non-mother, on the contrary, her life-giving performance in the end raises her stature to that of the Mother as a nurturing, and protective figure, and her identity is affirmed in the maternal relationship to Bhagirath which was denied before. The villagers who had excluded Chandidasi from their society, now accept her as one of their own when the train guard announces a posthumous award for her heroic act:

Guard: ... Who's she?

Shashi (a villager): (looks around at everyone, clears his throat). She's a Dome woman , sir, one of us. (Bhagirath in hurt wonder, looks at his Shashi first, then at his father.)...

Bhagirath: Let me tell you all. You can write it down.

Guard: Who are you boy?

Bhagirath: (gathers courage). She's my mother. Guard: Mother? Bhagirath: Yes, sir. ... my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, sir. Not a Bayen. She never was a Bayen, my mother. (*Bayen* 103)

The last scene elevates Chandidasi's status from Bayen into a deity, from Non-m (other) into Mother, but her apotheosis occurs at the cost of her life. Also, by laying down her life to save the train from the disastrous accident, Chandidasi not only reclaims her identity but agency as a subject as well. As I argued in the 2nd chapter as well that subaltern women who have no agency or control over their lives when they are alive, take charge of their lives by choosing death and reaffirm their subjecthood.

In the same vein, the narrative in Ajoka Theater's *Kala Meda Bhes / Black is my Robe* portrays women along the discursive and essentialist notions of gender and agency. The focus of the play will remain on the question of women as non-mothers, and the status of Motherhood achieved in an "unusual" way. Two themes are running parallel within the fabric of the play, one is the ostracization of women from domestic space for being infertile, and the other is the exploitation of the impoverished villagers by the fake Peer (a spiritual leader) due to their superstitious mindset. In villages and less literate segments of society, women visit peers/spiritual healers in order to acquire charms and amulets that they believe, would cure them of their infertility. Superstitions and influence of peers is pervasive, especially in rural and less developed areas, even in urban areas where people believe in the efficacy of the karamaats (miracles, or miraculous treatments) supposed to cure people.

*Kala meda Bhes/Black is my Robe*, was first performed in April, 1996 at Goethe Institute, Lahore, directed by Madeha Gauhar, and was later performed at various venues in India and Pakistan. An English version of the play was also given a stage reading at the Lark theater, New York, in October 2002 (Nadeem149). The theme and story of the play was inspired by a small piece of news in an Urdu paper:

In the remote village of Umarkot, in Sindh (province in Pakistan), a water carrier, who had two wives, but no ox, had bartered his spare wife for an ox belonging to a peasant, who was in possession of two oxen, but no wife. A local defender of morality, then, found himself questioning whether or not such an exchange is permitted by shariat (according to Islamic law). (Nadeem 147)

This news fascinated both Shahid Nadeem, and his wife Madeha and they ventured upon this production which ruthlessly denounces not only the way women are treated as exchange products but also the way the famished and downtrodden villagers are exploited at the hands of fake peers (a spiritual leader, usually heading a shrine and holding economic power of the feudal as well). As regards the title of the play, it has been taken from the Sufi poet, Baba Fareed's verse which translates as: "Black are my clothes and black is my robe/ I am full of sins but people call me a saint" (Nadeem 147).

The play is set in the desert area of Cholistan in South Punjab which also shares borders with Rajasthan, desert area in India. Mostly the land is arid and water is scarce; a few water resources or wells are controlled and monitored by the local feudal lords or the peers who also evoke fear in the people and demand unquestioning obedience. Village folks lead extremely indigent lives surviving only on bare necessities of life, mostly dependent on their cattle and land for their existence which in turn is sustained by the amount of rain the land receives or the availability of water. The play revolves

around the lives of Wasaya, a villager in his thirties who has two wives, both issueless, and waiting for a miracle to happen as the result of the Peer's dua (prayer) or blessing to be bestowed with children. Sundri, in her late twenties is the senior wife while Sohni, is the younger and the new, co-wife whom Wasaya marries when the old wife fails to conceive. The play aptly illustrates how being infertile is problematic in societies where women with no children still represent the "other" and are threatened by replacement or divorce on the same pretext. As Adrienne Rich notes, "Woman's status as child-bearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like "barren" or "childless" have been used to negate any further identity. The term "non-father" does not exist in any realm of social category" (*Maternal Theory* 6). Being barren is equated with aridity of the land in the play which is the major and recurring motif; people yearn for water which is scarce and simultaneously, Wasaya longs to have children. Women and the land are thus the digging grounds for men who are pursuing their quests. Within domestic space, especially in rural areas, women have assumed the position of dependency, and of otherness.

When the curtain rises, two narrators enter along with the whole cast dancing to a drum beat, and the story unfolds gradually. The play basically portrays a world which is falling apart because of drought, and the total control on the only well in the village by the Peer Khoi Shah (Saint of the well). However, the villagers, owing to their naivete and ignorance, are unable to comprehend the intrigues of the Peer who along with his goons subjugates the entire population of the village under his control. Furthermore, the first scene introduces the water carrier, Allah Wasaya, along with his new wife, Sohni and the first and barren wife, Sundri; both women are victims of the system where

women are exchanged with money or cattle. The opening scene juxtaposes women with cattle when the narrator here indicates two very significant factors that can affect a poor villager's life : "And a healthy ox is as important as a healthy wife" (Nadeem, 150).

In the first scene, Wasaya celebrates his second marriage as well as the ox that his new wife, Sohni, has brought as her dowry which will facilitate his income. Another major character, Opra (the outsider) is introduced here, no one in the village knows about his origins or backgrounds, yet he interacts with the villagers as their mentor which means a rift in the power structure established in the village by the Peer and his allies. Opra or the outsider wears a black robe which adds to the mystery which shrouds his enigmatic personality. His black robe associates him with the saints who used to wear black robes, and is also emblematic of his mysterious and possibly sinful or criminal past that he may have concealed from the villagers. Opra acts as an omniscient figure who gets to the bottom of all the strange happenings that the superstitious villagers associate with the effects of evil eye or black magic, or the wrath of Peer Saeen if they disobey him. The figure plays a vital role in the play as the title refers to the robe he wears which adds to the mystery that surrounds him, but also, he influences the villagers with his valid reasoning and convincing oratorical skills and succeeds in removing the fear of the Peer that haunts the people day and night. Opra exerts some influence over Sundri as well, as she also like Opra, opts to wear the black garment or robe in the end.

In Pakistani and Indian societies, a woman is not considered whole unless she is able to extend the family; becoming a mother consummates the marriage. Becoming a mother is the only accomplishment which authenticates a woman's existence, and this

has been delineated in the play brilliantly. Sundri's 'empty womb' signifies the paradigms of heteronormative, and patriarchal society. Her identity as a specimen of perfect woman is challenged by her husband as well as by society for being infertile, and because she has not been able to utilize her gender specific duty as a 'life-giver.' When a woman is not able to perform 'natural' femininity, she becomes different or deviant in regards with her barrenness or infertility, therefore outside the boundary of 'natural' femininity, and cannot be considered a 'normal' or 'real woman' (A Hall 122).

Therefore, Sundri as the discarded wife, and the new wife, Sohni become arch-rivals and fight in public to become a laughing stock in the whole village. This scene not only heightens the tension between the two wives but also creates an element of crude humor in the play:

Sundri: You may be a bride, but I was the first, okay!

Sohni: I will bear a child and celebrate, okay!

Sundri: You can't bear a child, you will mourn, okay!

Sohni: You have a black tongue and an empty lap, okay! (Nadeem 153)

This aptly consolidates what Adrienne Rich argues that childless women, throughout ages, have been frowned upon as not "real" women, and this observation is also supported by Ashurst & Hall: "A woman's capacity to create, bear and nurture a child is the very essence of her womanhood, her unique and special capacity-- prized, feared, envied, protected, and celebrated" (97).

Visiting the Peers is a usual practice in rural areas in Pakistan because of their superstitious beliefs that these peers have spiritual powers that can solve all their problems and can even bless them with male child. Peer saeen, the evil incarnate, in



the play is the last hope for the unlettered and superstitious villagers who trust him blindly, and attribute everything good or bad to him. Thus, the villagers pay their respects to him whenever an auspicious event happens or a catastrophe befalls them. Wasaya, as well visits the Peer with his new wife along with the ox to get his blessings and amulets so that his wife may get pregnant, and his ox remains healthy. The Peer fears that his power over the villagers might be curtailed if Wasaya's business of water carrying flourished with the help of his new ox, so he recommends a daily dose of the "blessed" medicine for his ox which in reality is a kind of slow poison ultimately leading to the ox's death.

This incident is relevant to the remaining events as it leads to the climax of the play when another peasant, Ditta, who has an army of children but a sickly wife, loses his wife. The scene very aptly delineates the equivalence between the fate of women and that of cattle, and how significant an ox is in the life of a poor peasant whose sustenance depends on the beast, and leads to the ultimate exchange that happens against Sundri's will. Sundri becomes a commodity, exchangeable with an ox which means that she is lesser in value to her husband than the ox because, according to the French economist, Condillac, "It is false that, in the exchange of commodities, equal value is given and obtained. The contrary is true,. Each of the two contracting parties, invariably gives a smaller value for a greater one.... Why? The value of things resides solely in their relation to our wants. What is more to one man, is less to the other and vice-versa" (qtd in *Capital* 25). The degrading barter illustrates that Sundri has transformed into a "useless" object that can be discarded without her will. Sundri, like Chandidasi, is cast away, divorced by Wasaya, in order to marry Ditta who needs a wife

for himself, and a Mother for his children. The barter highlights the demeaning circumstances that women have to face in South Asian societies on being infertile. Being infertile for Sundri leads to her double marginalization; she is excluded from her household, and gets divorced which is another stigma for women. As Ervin Goffman notes how bodily signs that depart from the “ordinary and “natural” are deeply discrediting. His observation regarding social stigma related to epilepsy, divorce, mental illnesses and infertility in the United States is relevant to childless women in South Asia, especially in Pakistan where such women are discredited in the eyes of the family. In this regard, Sundri is reduced “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 3). As a wronged woman, Sundri bewails in front of her second husband: “I don’t blame you, Ditta. I was only hurt by Wasaya’s attitude. He threw away ten years of companionship without a wink” (Nadeem 170). What happens with Sundri validates the fact “a child solidifies a wife’s often fragile bond with a spouse in an arranged marriage and improves her status in joint family and larger community...” (Riessman 112).

Access to power is another factor which impels women to become mothers, on the contrary, childlessness denotes lack of power and agency. Indian (and Pakistani) women, Riessman observes, “are keenly aware that their reproductive capacities are an important source of power, especially when they lack it from other sources” (112). In *Black is my Robe*, Sohni, Wasaya’s second wife enjoys a more empowered status as she is valued by her husband more in the hope that she will extend the family. Sohni exploits this situation to her advantage by literally not doing her share of household chores, leaving all the burden on Sundri alone. The question is how do women in a

society where pronatalism is the dominant ideology, retain their identity and sustain their status? In this play, Sundri after getting forcibly married to Ditta, reclaims the status of a wife and acquires duties of motherhood, though involuntarily. From the status of non-mother to the mother, Sundri has to grapple with her position as a subordinate and find ways to resist and attain agency. Scene 8 depicts Sundri in her new household in the position of a mother, feeding her step children who address her as Mother Sundri. The beauty of this scene lies in the fact that she fulfills her role as a nurturing, nourishing mother, and not only that, she is also depicted as a supporting wife when she tells the children that she believes in what their father believes and would support him in his search for a new well:

Child: Mother Sundri, I am hungry.

Sundri (while feeding him): God knows when your father will find the well.

Child: Mother, why is father searching for the well? When did he lose it?

Sundri: He is searching the well so that the village people can have sweet and cool water to drink and don't remain dependent on Peer Saeen's well.

Child: But why doesn't anyone else look for it?

Sundri: because no one else believes in it. (Nadeem 171)

Sundri, after assuming the role of mother, gains her status and subjectivity within the new domestic sphere which was denied to her before. In Ashurst & Hall note, "Birth is the only defense against the inevitability of death, an intimation of our immortality, of our new hope for the future. When a woman has a child, she confirms for herself and for others that she is a complete woman, fertile, and capable of biological task of creating and perpetuating life (97). Here, Sundri, though not a biological mother to the children of

her new husband, becomes a loving matriarch, having new hopes for a peaceful life ahead.

As regards the strategies of resistance adopted by Sundri, she demonstrates her defiance in overt and sometimes in subtle ways. She retaliates whenever she is censured:

Sohni: How can a woman be so merry when her husband has just married another woman.

Sundri: Why not. You want me to cry and beat my breast! But I will not give you that satisfaction. I will be merry. I will laugh and talk merrily with strangers. And you can watch and be jealous. ... Remember Sohn, Sundri is a tough nut to crack. (Nadeem 159)

As Riessman notes, “resistant thinking also occurs in family contexts, where it often substitutes for speaking out...” (123). Sundri speaks whenever she can to register her protest, at times by refusing to do household chores, but ultimately, she is unable to decide her fate when Wasaya divorces her against her will. Maasi (the woman matchmaker in the play) arranges her marriage with Ditta saying: “Why, who ever asks a woman’s consent?” (Nadeem 169) This episode in the play validates Gayatri Spivak’s claim that a subaltern cannot speak; she can only submit to the forces outside her power, and wait till the time is appropriate for her to reveal her strength. This happens ultimately, when Ditta, is brutally killed by the Peer’s goons, after he finally succeeds in his quest for water. This incident is another blow to Sundri, who seemed to find a space where she found autonomy after her displacement. Sundri, during her celebrations along with the villagers, is left bereaved once again. But, instead of submitting to the Peer’s oppressive and hegemonic control, she challenges him in front of the whole village folk, accusing him of the murder of her husband. This reveals Sundri in a new

light, as an undaunted and unyielding woman who exposes the Pir's dark deeds, bringing an eye witness, Reshma, and Opra who supports her. Sundri, no longer remains a passive sufferer, rather she develops as the play progresses, only to emerge as a nourisher and a mother figure for the whole village. After regaining the charge of the well, she declares that she will give water free of charge to all the folks, and puts on the black robes left by Opra. This signifies the shift in her status, from the weak and oppressed woman to that of a saint like figure. She too, like Chandidasi, assumes an elevated status, from her exile to apotheosis, not as a mother-goddess in a Hindu society, but that of a saint-like mystic more appropriate in an Islamic society. Black is the color associated with saints and Dervishes which signifies spiritual elevation and a negation of worldly and materialistic life.

Another form of oppression that childless women in Pakistan bear has also been highlighted in this play, and that is, extreme form of ignorance and superstitious beliefs in the power of spiritual healers and so-called peers. Sohni, Wasaya's new wife, also childless, is taken to the Peer, in the hope of becoming pregnant with his blessings. The Peer directs Wasaya to leave the woman at his residence for the whole night so that he may complete a special kind of prayer for them, with his evil design to rape Sohni. The body of the wretched woman, in order to become mother, is violated and abused, which is another dark side of the pronatal societies in India and Pakistan. Women undergo all kinds of rituals, go to any extreme to obtain charms and amulets for the sole purpose of becoming mother, a status which can assure them of the right and respectable place within the domestic domain. But, getting raped by the so called religious/spiritual

healers and thugs is a common practice in rural and far fetched, and isolated villages where access to education and health care is non-existent.

However, the ending of *Black is my Robe* like *Bayen*, reinforces the image of mother as life-giver and nourisher, simultaneously, underscoring the fact that women can achieve that status only through self-abnegation and self-denial.

Vijay Tendulkar's play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* and Shahid Nadeem's *Barri / The Acquittal* raise another tabooed subject, that of unwed mothers. This is another problematic aspect of motherhood which renders such women as socially stigmatized and outcasts. Whether the pregnancy of a woman is the consequence of rape or betrayal by a lover, woman is always seen as a culprit, not as the wronged or abandoned victim. Becoming a mother unlawfully is the unimagined sin and depravity that can not be condoned in both Indian and Pakistani societies, irrespective of religious beliefs and culture. *Silence! The Court is in Session* aptly illustrates this kind of mindset that blames women in such situations, leaving out men without any penalty. Nadeem's *The Acquittal*, on the other hand, highlights the plight of a woman who gets pregnant as the result of rape by prison officials during her incarceration. Both these plays also highlight how society takes charge of the lives of such women and their unborn children, laying bare the prejudice and misogyny permeated in the very fabric of the mindset that censures only women. Both these plays consolidate Foucault's notion of biopower or the privilege of sovereign power to be able to "dispose" of the life of children or slaves of the state (258).

*Silence! The Court is in Session* explores the dilemma of unmarried motherhood, and the conflict between an individual woman's desires and the moralizing pressure of society. The female protagonist Leila Benare, a diligent and talented school teacher is cheated twice in her life by her two respective unlawful lovers, one was her maternal uncle when she was just fifteen, and the other is a married man, professor Damle. The play begins when a group of artists gather in a community hall to rehearse for a show, *The Living law Court*, to be performed in the village. The rehearsal transforms into a mock trial to acquaint Samant, one of the novices, with the court procedures. The mock trial, initially supposed to be just a game, assumes serious and frightening overtones when Benare, the accused, the unmarried pregnant woman (in the trial) is charged with the crime of infanticide. The trial demonstrates what Foucault termed as *anatomo-politics of the human body*, the power over life of an individual and its anatomical functions as well (262). In today's world, this form of power is exerted by the state, bureaucratic machinery and the juridical system, socio-cultural control over an individual's life and his/her choices is also one of its forms.

As the mock trial or play within the play progresses, reality and fiction merge and Benare's personal life, which the other artists and colleagues are aware of, is brought to surface to be dissected ruthlessly by all the actors. Benare, the imaginary accused, turns into a real criminal by the accusers, who in this make believe play, expose their hidden biases and grudges against her. Mrs. Kashikar, wife of the actor who plays the judge, turns into a vehement upholder of morality, and in spite of being childless herself, is unable to empathise with the feelings of a pregnant woman. Karnik and Ponshe's remarks in this matter are very pertinent: "The crime itself is imaginary. What more do

you want? It's all imaginary... That's what it is. Ponshe: Only the accused is real" (90). During the course of the trial, one actor remarks that "when there is a woman in the dock, the case does have a different complexion, that's true" (73), especially when it is about a "charge with social significance," which involves a woman who is supposed to be of a suspicious moral conduct.

The play paints different nuances of motherhood as the trial proceeds, Sukhatme, the prosecutor in the trial defines it in these terms: "Motherhood is pure. Moreover, there is a great--er--greta nobility in our concept of motherhood. We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind. Our culture enjoins to perpetual worship of her" (79). Mother is elevated to the status of a goddess, worthy to be worshipped, and also, equated with motherland, "higher than heaven" (79). In Indian culture, and Hinduism, there are different goddesses like Durga Ma, and Kali Mata that are emblems of strong mothers, and are invoked to protect and safeguard from evil. Moreover, Karnik defines mother as the "one who gives birth" to which Sukhatme retorts: "Mr. Karnik, who is the mother-- the woman who protects the infant she has borne-- or the one who cruelly strangles it to death?" (84). On the other hand, an unmarried mother is considered "a sinful canker on the body of the society," and it is even more "immoral to let such a woman teach, in such a condition!" (112, 113). Several definitions of motherhood are highlighted in the play, including mother as a life giver and a destroyer simultaneously. But motherhood without marriage, or in other words, without the stamp of approval from society is always "considered a great sin" by religion and traditions. Therefore, existence of an immoral woman is a "heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood" (114). It is of significance that all the co-actors in the



play, during the trial, act as a mob, behaving in the manner of a herd, and just like Chandidasi is harassed by the villagers when she is accused of witchcraft, Benare too is humiliated in the witness box. One by one, all the so-called witnesses speak and malign her character, exposing their own insecurities and thwarted dreams.

Another significant aspect of the case that Tendulkar raises here is the absence of the men who caused Benare's fall from grace. Professor Damle, when called as a witness, is absent, which is also a typical case of absent fathers in such circumstances. Professor Damle, being a married man, has committed adultery, but he is not denounced, bringing to light the dual standards practiced and preached by patriarchy in the Indian society. A woman strayed from the right path is considered a great threat to the "existence of society," but such a woman can be understood in regards with a term coined by feminists as a representative of "non-patriarchal motherhood", a mother in a "subversive, culturally unintelligible and impossible position" (Hansen 441). The narratives in all the plays included in this study, reinforce the premise that autonomous maternal subjectivity is an impossibility in situations when women somewhat breach societal norms. Women in such situation are rarely allowed to speak or register their protest, rather they are underrepresented. Benare, when finally allowed to speak, is granted only ten seconds, which ensues in a soliloquy which has become a landmark in the history of Marathi theater in India. Benare, in the soliloquy, recounts past events that shaped her life and led to this debacle she is facing at that moment. Her narrative is a testimony to the fact that women in Indian and Pakistani societies are not autonomous subjects in certain situations as they are not allowed to choose their life partners due to societal and religious norms. Benare's first love, with her maternal uncle was thwarted

when her mother came to know about it as it was a horrible case of incest. Her affair with Professor Damle is yet another failure due to the fact that the man was only interested in her body, not in a long term relationship: “He didn’t want my mind, or my devotion--he didn’t care about them! [feebly] He wasn’t a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! [screaming]” (*Silence!* 118). Benare, then declares (in the soliloquy) that she carries Damle’s child and intends to give birth to it:

And now it carries within it the witness of that time-- a tender little bud--of what will be a lisping, laughing, dancing little life--my son--my whole existence! I want my body now for him--for him alone. [shuts her eyes and mutters in mortal pain.] He must have a mother... a father to call his own--a house-- to be looked after-- he must have a good name! (*Silence!* 118)

This is how the soliloquy ends but the audience or the readers are left uncertain as to whether Benare has actually spoken at all, as she is given only ten seconds and she stands motionless and the rest of the people in the court freeze as well. The only sound that can be heard is that of the clock ticking. And, when the time is up, Kashikar declares that “The accused has no statement to make” (118). The soliloquy serves the function of bringing to light Benare’s past life in her own words but at the same time it succeeds in creating an ambiguity which remains unresolved till the play ends.

Institutions of power, here represented by the mock court, taking the charge of Benare’s life and body, denigrate her as a source of evil, and a condemned body. The court gives the verdict to terminate her pregnancy as the mother as well as the child born out of wedlock would be a bane to society. This is also a form of biopower, which is manifest in the growing importance assumed by societal “norm”, at the expense of the juridical system of the law. The law has the power to terminate the life of those who transgress it; it exerts its influence as a menace “with its continuous regulatory and

corrective mechanisms” (Foucault 266). This is also notable that Benare who is charged of infanticide, is ironically sentenced to have her pregnancy aborted. A verdict that manifests the controlling mechanisms and strategies of the state and society simultaneously against an individual, especially, if it happens to be a woman. As Sukhatme declares during the course of prosecution that “ ‘Woman is not fit for independence’... That is the rule laid down for us by tradition. Abiding by this rule, I make a powerful plea... Miss Benare is not fit for independence” (115). After the judgment is passed, Benare protests but no one pays heed to her. She finally collapses due to mental and emotional exhaustion. In the meantime, it’s time for the actual show, *The Living Courtroom*, as the people from outside the hall want to get inside, and break the spell. Everything normalizes except Benare who remains motionless with the bottle of Tik-20, a poison, lying close to her, implying a suicide attempt by her. The ending remains dubious as it cannot be determined whether Benare is alive or dead, leaving it to the spectator’s imagination. One serious point that Tendulkar successfully makes is that women like Benare remain voiceless, or even when they struggle to speak, their voice is muffled. Though during the process of prosecution, she struggles to be heard, at times, making fun of the whole trial, but no one takes her seriously, and she is dismissed by her co-actors that it is just an imaginary case. Arundhati Banerjee rightly notes about Benare’s soliloquy:

...Tendulkar leaves us in doubt as to whether or not Benare at all delivers the soliloquy, thus suggesting that in all probability what she has to say for herself is swallowed by the silence imposed upon her by the authorities. In fact, during the court proceedings, on several occasions, her objections and protestations are drowned by the judge’s cry of silence and the banging of the gravel. (Banerjee viii)

This mock trial or the play within the play brings to surface the ambivalent attitude of society toward motherhood, a society that is not able to perceive the anguish a mother or a potential mother feels when she is threatened from all sides and distanced from her child who is not yet born. Such traditions in patriarchal societies create divisions and rifts between women as well, and women who support such oppressive tendencies in society, are termed as “patriarchal women” by some feminists like Elaine Hansen. In this play such a woman is Mrs. Kashikar, who supports and even facilitates the lawyers to present evidence against Benare. The play reveals that an unmarried mother in Indian (in Pakistan as well) society can not be seen without the contradictions and biases associated with the stigma of immorality, which even divests them of the right to motherhood. The play reveals the tragic, and irreparable trauma that women have to undergo in such degrading circumstances. Thus, the play demonstrate that sex is a political issue, “tied to the disciplines of the body: the harnessing, intensification , and distribution of forces...” in a Foucauldian sense (267). Regulatory measures to exert control over sexuality of women helps maintain patriarchal ideology with a direct control over reproductive systems of women. The whole society represents a suffocating, and carceral world, where women are confined, unable to find liberation.

There are repeated references to the closed door in the hall, which is the only exit. Benare’s failed attempts to opening the door in the play is emblematic of the claustrophobic atmosphere of the world around her which has trapped her and she can find no way out of her dilemma. Benare, has reached a point at that stage of her life where there is no exit for her; also illustrating the fact that she is under people’s scrutiny

and “panopticon gaze” all the time. The play ends with a poem that is being sung in Benare’s voice softly:

The parrot to the sparrow said,  
 ‘Why , oh why, are your eyes so read?’  
 ‘Oh, my dear friend, what shall I say?  
 Someone has stolen my nest away.  
 ‘Sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow... (121)

The play is an ironic denunciation of the social ideologies that question the integrity of woman alone on the basis of her sexuality. In most of his plays, Tendulkar remains a bitter critic of the institution of marriage, and society in general. “The women characters”, notes B. Wadikar, “are treated with compassion and understanding, though Tendulkar is not a self-acknowledged feminist without indulging himself in feminist slogan-mongering” (73). Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Sarita in *Kamla*, and Rama in *Sakharam Binder* are the major figures and the plays revolve around their desires, frustrations and failures. These are all victims of circumstances and a misogynist society.

Just like Benare, Marium in *Barri/The Acquittal* by Shahid Nadeem, is a victim of men’s lust and violence. This play has already been discussed in detail in the first chapter of this study, but here it is relevant to indicate some common grounds that tie this play to *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Arrested because she was dancing at the shrine of a Sufi Saint, Marium is awarded three months imprisonment but when the play unfolds, she is already five months pregnant as a consequence of her repeated rapes by the jail officials. Mariam has been portrayed as a saint-like figure, a dervish, as is

evident from her name which alludes to Virgin Mary. Also, she is punished for being deviant, as a 'mast' or lunatic. Marium is forced by the jail officials to undergo abortion to conceal the crime perpetrated within the prison cells. Marium's case demonstrates the extent to which state and society control a woman's life; she does not even have the right over her unborn child. Like Benare, she is bereft of her agency, the only mode of resistance she adopts is her dances in a trance-like state, and songs by Bulleh Shah that she occasionally sings. Bulleh Shah's poetry was considered subversive and iconoclastic during his times in India and he was condemned by religious clerics. Marium's connection with that Sufi poet implies her defiance in the face of oppressive measures taken by the state to force her into submission.

But what is analogous between Chandidasi, Sundri, Benare, and Mariam, is their plight as mothers and non-mothers. All these women are denied subjectivity as individuals, and are treated as deviant or deficient, not only on account of their motherhood, but also on the basis of their femininity. These plays support the view presented by Adrienne Rich that "motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" (7). In Rich's view, women are controlled by being lashed to their bodies (7). Women in all these plays are tied to their bodies, and are excluded, sent on exile and condemned in every imaginable way. They are silenced, in spite of their subtle forms of resistance, their protests remain unnoticed.

The inquiry into whether these plays fall under the rubric of feminist drama is a complex one because there is not just one specific definition that constitutes and characterizes that kind of theater practice. None of these works can be strictly regarded as a feminist drama, if we note groundbreaking theater practices that have been

introduced by some British and American feminist playwrights. However, each of these plays is characterized by their thematic concerns that foregrounds a woman protagonist, whether it is Chandidasi in *Bayen*, Sundri in *Black is my Robe*, or Leila Benare in Tendulkar's play. Devi's *Bayen*, appropriates various anti-realist techniques, like the use of song and dance, non-linear, episodic structure which fluctuates between past and present, creating a dream-like atmosphere on stage. Some feminists scathingly critique the constraints of realistic mode usually adopted by dramatists which in their view portrays women in stereotypical roles assigned to them in the socio-symbolic order. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan note: "Getting raped, going crazy, and , of course, dying-- this is what women appear to do most often in realistic theater" (5). This implies that women have only appeared within "death space," or "space of absence, negativity, unrepresentability, is where femininity most often takes place" (5). But it may be noted in these plays that the female protagonists, in spite of occupying "death space" as in the case of Chandidasi, or, denoting "lack" as a childless mother in the case of Sundri, they are portrayed in positive light. Creating a space that denotes "negativity" as in Benare's case, Tendulkar paints her as a progressive woman who dares to defy socio-symbolic norms.

Samik Bandyopadhyay notes the gradual transformation in Devi's dramaturgy during her second phase of playwriting, that is," in 1976-77... she chose a slightly different form, with songs and rituals and evocations providing a historical field for action" (*Five Plays* xiii). *Bayen*, opens with Chandidasi singing a lullaby to her distanced son, Bhagirath: "Come , sleep, come to my bed of rags,/ My child god sleeps in my lap..." (*Five Plays* 83). This song can be heard repeatedly in the play, along with the

rattle of her canister, which creates a hauntingly elegiac atmosphere in the play, aptly representing the trauma of the grieved mother. The element of dance, which is also used as a flashback technique breaks the linear structure of the play, time moves back and forth unravelling all the circumstances that led to Chandidasi's transformation from a mother into a Non-mother. *Bayen* is different from *Mother of 1084* and some other plays in terms of its employment of the elements of folk songs and dance sequences which aligns with postcolonial as well as feminist drama being written and performed worldwide. As regards the structure of the play, it is episodic, with only four scenes that fluctuate between past and present simultaneously, blurring the sharp lines between different time sequences and spaces. The scenes move from the graveyard where Chandidasi watches the graves to her home with Malinder in the past to the hovel and the railway tracks in the present.

*Bayen* allows comparison with Caryl Churchill's play *Vinegar Tom* which also involves the scapegoating of poor women by the farmer Jack and his wife Margery. Churchill also like Devi, observed how "petty and everyday the witches' offences were", and she wanted to write "a play about witches with no witches in it; a play about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation, prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves" (qtd in *Feminist Theatre and Theory* 43). Churchill has used episodic structure and songs that break up the narrative, creating a critical distance, a technique that Devi employs in *Bayen*, which is in keeping with the feminist theater practice as well.

Nadeem in *Kala Meda Bhes / Black is my Robe* too, employs episodic structure, and folk songs and dance as essential elements; the Qawwali, a genre which originated



in Sufi tradition are also incorporated. When the play unfolds, two narrators introduce the characters and comment on the story in the manner of the chorus. The first scene has been written along the lines of prologue in Greek drama but the narrators disclose that the play is a *swaang*, that is, a traditional play that used to be performed in Punjabi language. This technique of involving narrators in the action of the story creates a distancing effect which is in keeping with Brechtian tradition. Digging of the well, a symbolic act which runs throughout the play can be interpreted as a critical social gesture which is emblematic of barren, infertile women.

Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*, on the other hand blends various songs and poems that Benare sings from time to time in the play, especially the last song, that elaborates the thematic concern of the playwright. These songs also shed light on Benare's character as a zealous, poetic, and romantic person who actually intends to lead her life according to her desires, not by the norms and dictates of society. Another anti-realist technique employed by Tendulkar in *Silence!* is the play within the play or the device of meta-theater. According to Richard Hornby, this technique "may break the 'fourth wall' of the conventional theater, reaching out to assault the audience or to draw it into the realm of the play. At many points during the progress of the trial scene, characters deliberately refer to the unrealness of the whole play, to dramatic art in general, and to the theater practice itself, breaking the boundary between illusion and reality. Thus, basically, this technique helps Tendulkar in creating an anti-illusionist and alienating effect, also, breaking the realistic structure of the narrative which aligns it with feminist theater practice.

Lastly, the question whether these plays fall into feminist theater paradigm or not is debatable and a highly contentious point because there are scores of definitions that describe this genre but none of them can define it in an all encompassing or comprehensive way. In Megan Terry, a noted playwright's view, "anything that gives women confidence, shows them to themselves" (qtd in *Feminist Theatre and Theory* 155). In the same vein, Karen Malpede, another eminent playwright, notes, "Feminist theatre practice as I practice it is concerned with women surviving and creating new and human communities out of the wreckage of the past" (ibid. 155). Keeping in view these definitions, *Bayen*, then can not be described as a feminist play as it presents a very bleak and nihilistic view, with the female protagonist sacrificing her life. Though Chandidasi, by sacrificing her life, attains the lost status of motherhood in the end, she achieves it by embracing death. *Benare*, on the other hand, ends on a very dubious note, uncertainty regarding her fate prevails, and the viewers are left in suspense, imagining possible turns that her life might have taken. But, still, the play successfully conveys the message from a woman's standpoint who faces the sexist society in her predicament. Nadeem's *Black is my Robe*, however, successfully portrays Sundri's transformation from a passive and humiliated wife to an undaunted and courageous woman who defies the devilish Peer Saeen and his goons, and also, emerges as a mother figure for the entire community in the end, not resorting to annihilate herself, which is positive ending.

Another view is presented by Donna Mitchell who writes that: "Cixous endorses feminine writing as the solution to the predicament of 'antilove' as 'woman has never had her turn to speak' (Cixous 7). She believes that the presence of female works in

literature will 'bring the "Other" to life (ibid., 20) and re-introduce women to herself by giving her access to her native strength' (ibid., 8). In this regard, Devi's *Bayen* is just such work that highlights a marginalized woman's predicament to the fore; Benare is another 'othered' woman whose debacle has been dealt with from a woman's point of view by Tendulkar who is a male playwright. Furthermore, Cixous emphasizes the importance of female writing's responsibility in addressing the taboos associated with woman, and stresses the inclusion of the mother's voice in literature by linking the notion of feminine writing to the image of breast milk, claiming that 'there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink' (ibid., 9).

All the three plays I have discussed, deal with the issues of motherhood, concerning women's predicament when they are disgraced and are forced to exist in a liminal state owing to their status as a mother or non-mother. The women portrayed in these plays delineate problematic motherhood due to diverse cultural practices, ideologies, and superstitions related to specific cultures. For instance, foeticide is a practice more common in India, but it does not exist to that extent in Pakistan. Hence, this is not a subject focused on by Ajoka. Witch branding is also a custom prevalent in India in tribal and rural Indian regions where literacy rate is very low and people are imbued in a culture of myth, folklores and superstitions. While in Pakistan, unlettered masses rely on peers who are mostly fake and deceive people to extort exorbitant amounts of money, though their practices are absolutely against the tenets of Islam. In short, these dramatists have transcribed the experiences of women who become or cannot become mothers in Indian and Pakistani societies illustriously. These plays are about mothers and non-mothers, and demonstrate women in different quandaries from

women's standpoint which should be the main objective of a playwright who writes not from the space of a specific gender. Again, these plays provoke the viewers. readers to think and create a dialectical relationship with the audiences, questioning the hegemonic cultural practices that render women subservient.

## Chapter 4

### Exclusionary Practices and Performing Women: Tripurari Sharma's *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa* and Ajoka Theater's *Aik Thi Nani /A Granny for All Seasons*

This chapter illustrates the representation of performing or dancing women as the cultural or societal Other, especially in regions of Pakistan and India where Muslims are in majority. As a part of this dissertation, it focuses on another mode of disciplining of the female body, also addressing the shifts in ideologies pertaining to its representation on stage. The chapter concerns with how “social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement which also signals inclusions and exclusions of the performing women within the social fabric” (Desmond 1993 33-63). Women as courtesans or performers have been vilified in this region but this marginalization exists in different nuances and represents such women as desirable, despicable, alluring and repelling simultaneously. Their status has undulated through the ages; they have enjoyed the status of prima donna as devadasi in pre-colonial area, and have fallen as low as a “nautch girl,” a derogatory term coined in colonial times by the British. As Jonas A. Barish notes, this “anti-theatrical prejudice” or disapproval of the performers has existed since the age of Plato till the present times. Barish enumerates the derogatory expressions that are drawn from theatrical activity that tend to be pejorative, and belittling. For instance: “acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene, making a spectacle of oneself....” (Barish 1). This question, Barish rightly notes, is not restricted to the Western world alone, as “in India, until recent times, actors belonged to the despised castes, and were subject to crippling social disabilities” (2). Barish has not specifically referred to the gender of the

performers, but it should be noted that if male performers are denounced, how can women performers be not looked at with prejudice.

To discuss these issues, I will analyze the status of performing women in India in chronological order and attempt to depict how the identities of performing women transitioned as the ideologies and power structures changed before and after the independence in 1947. I will begin with a brief discussion of how women have been associated with the 'body' in Western and Eastern cultures including specifically Pakistan. I will then briefly discuss Tagore's play, and then analyze a few films that depict images of courtesans in different eras. But my major focus will remain on Tripurari Sharma's play, *Azizun Nisa: San Sattawan ka Qissa*, and Ajoka Theater's play, *Aik thi Nani/ A Granny for All Seasons* from Pakistan. I will also analyze how performance style are coded with social identities, and how bodily movements can be signifiers of resistance within specific contexts. I pose this question with Janet Wolff, whether the body is a site of cultural and political protest. Thus, the chapter will analyze the cultural politics associated with representation of the performing women, and discursive constructions of the body.

Another objective in this chapter remains to present a comparison between the way performing women are perceived in India and Pakistan respectively, also illustrating changes in ideological discourses concerning this issue as the societies along both sides of the border developed after independence. There is much in both societies and cultures that has remained consistent but there also exists a sharp divide owing to different religious ideologies prevalent in the two countries. The question I explore is whether the female protagonists in the plays under discussion resist or reinforce

dominant conceptions of gender in post-independence India and Pakistan, and whether these playwrights are dramatizing essentialized notions of gender or portraying the female subjectivity as transgressive or subversive. Before proceeding to the discussion of plays and giving the cultural background, I will briefly discuss how women have always been associated with the body, and how that impacts the way they are viewed when they perform on stage or in front of male audiences.

Women have been perceived as the body, and visualized as sex objects, and the body's desires have been coded as feminine. As Fredrika Scrath puts it, "Something that must be contained or controlled, its powers channelled, within civilization, and politics is the art of this containment" (2). "Much of the Western political thought", writes Scrath, "expresses a profound ambivalence toward the body" (1). The body and its desires have been considered a threat to society, and not only that, it has also been associated with animality, with baser instincts, as opposed to soul or mind in Western thought. The same can be applied to South Asian cultures and ideologies. The question is what happens when the female body is displayed within the parameters of a specific (public) space? It may disrupt the dominant ideology; it may be perceived as a threat to social norms prescribed for an *honorable* woman. As Wolff posits, "the preexisting meaning as a sex object, as object of male gaze, can always prevail and reappropriate the body despite the intentions of the woman herself" (82). "There is every reason to propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is a site of repression and possession. The body has been systematically repressed and marginalized in Western culture, with specific practices, ideologies, and discourses controlling and defining the female body. What is repressed, though, may threaten to

erupt and challenge the established order” (Wolff 82-83). Wolff’s observation can be rightly applied to South Asian societies, as in Pakistan and India, women have to deport themselves according to the dominant ideology. As Mary Douglas notes, “the body operates as a symbol of society across cultures, and the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning bodily behavior can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies” (qtd in Wolff 83).

Since the body is evidently marginalized in the Pakistani culture, dance is inherently a subversive activity. The marginality of dance as an art form in Pakistan, compared with acting, singing and other modes of performance, has had no considerable appeal. The use of the female body on stage, in an Islamic state, is in itself, transgressive. However, ambiguities and contradictions still exist and have always prevailed regarding the perception of the female dance performer in India and Pakistan.

Now I will give a synopsis of how female performers were perceived in Indian culture before the independence and how they have undergone transitions with the passage of time.

#### Status of Performing Women in the Pre- Colonial Era

Before the colonial rule in India, in the nineteenth century, dances were performed mainly within temples, by devadasis, the independent servitors of the temples (Nijhawan 102). Devadasi or “royal dancer’s body”, as Nijhawan puts it, “is another popular site of contestation and is linked mythically to her *apsara* (mythic dancing girl, seductive and alluring) archetype, from whom she is said to have descended” (102). They were patronized by the elites and notable families of the time, and were not allowed to marry as they were considered ‘servants of the gods’ or



‘married’ to the deities, devoted only to worshipping. Devadasis devoted their time and energy not only in perfecting their art but also provided sexual services to their sponsors which was a socially accepted custom in that era. The point to be noted is that devadasis were not stigmatized or debased in pre-colonial times, and were accorded high social status. As Anna Morcom puts it, “Because they will never be widowed-- something seen as highly inauspicious in Hinduism-- they are particularly auspicious, or ‘always auspicious’ (*Nityasumangali*), which is key to their role in temples” (7). However, in Nijhawan’s view, by academics, the figure of devadasi is treated as a

ghost of all Indian dancers, oppressed, misunderstood, reformed... Colonial and nationalist discourse colluded in the middle nineteenth to early twentieth centuries to debase her and reduce her to the lot of a prostitute(whose story is less well documented) and lead her to disease, poverty and general misery. Social reformists then reawakened her in art in order to save her from the nationalist anti-nautch movement and in the first half of the twentieth century brought her to the concert stage to make her ‘respectable.’ As academics woke up to the damage caused by obliging social reformers who collaborated (in a spirit of apparent rebellion) with colonial power, the devadasi’s story became a convenient emblem of a spiritual-erotic pre-colonial nation that was apparently lost because of colonialism. (102)

In the same vein, history of Muslim courtesans is not dissimilar to that of devadasis.

Unlike most of devadasis who performed within the space of temples, Muslim courtesans performed within the space of their kothas (salons) or public spaces on special occasions like wedding ceremonies.

However, plays written about those times, still reflect the social bias that existed against performing women. I argue that performing women were marginalized even in precolonial times, contrary to studies that depict their elevated social status before the arrival of the British in the subcontinent. As Morcom writes about the status of courtesans in precolonial times, “While courtesans such as Sahib Jan (depicted in the

film, *Pakeezah*) did not have an equal status to their patrons, they did have an important role in society and culture. They had the potential to gain wealth, esteem, skill, and --in significant ways-- respect” (3). Morcom is right that courtesans enjoyed the luxuries bestowed on them by their patrons and earned ‘respect’ but still, I argue, they were not and could not be assimilated into the mainstream society by getting married to respectable men. They existed along the periphery, and could not be accorded the status and honor that ‘respectable’ married women enjoyed. In a way, they were glorified and erased simultaneously, fascinated desire but denounced for having loose morals.

Tagore’s play, *Natir Puja*, and the iconic Indian film, *Mughal-e-Azam* (The Great Mughal) illustrate my point well. Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Laureate, poet, playwright and novelist, wrote *Natir Puja* (Dancing Girl’s Worship) in 1927, which Murali Sharma notes, “is informed by the revivalist rhetoric of dance which sought to found a spiritual base for dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak” (96). *Natir Puja*, is the story of a “worshipping palace-dancer,” dating back to the era of king Bimbisara (c. 546-496 B.C.), a contemporary of Buddha, and the founder of the empire of Magadha. Tagore transformed a Buddhist legend into a beautiful musical drama, interspersed with dance performances and devotional songs. Tagore has painted a dancing girl, Srimati, in a very unique and exquisite color, as a devotional Buddhist, who is looked down upon by the queen, Lokeswari, and the princesses owing to her lowly profession, and her devotion to Buddha. Tagore has turned Srimati’s dance performance into an extreme kind of devotional and spiritual practice, creating a different image of a dancing girl on stage. Srimati (the nati)’s performance stuns all the onlookers as she discards her

ornaments and dazzling outer garments one by one, revealing her saffron garment of the Bhikshus in the end (Tagore 87). Marjorie Sykes rightly argues that “the Nati (dancer) by her sincerity and her devotion redeems the so-called degradation of her calling and vindicates by her death the innate majesty of her spirit” (Tagore 88). Tagore’s play highlights the discriminatory attitude of the aristocracy towards dancing girls even in king Bimbisara’s age which substantiates my argument this bias against performing women existed in every era.

*Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), directed by K. Asif, starring legendary actors, Dilip Kumar, Prithviraj Kapoor, and Madhubala, narrates the tale of the Mughal prince Salim who later became the Emperor Jahangir, and his love for a royal maid/courtesan, during his father, Akbar the Great’s reign between 1556- 1603. Before its film adaptation, the story was also dramatized by an eminent Urdu dramatis, Imtiaz Ali Taj in 1922, though the stage drama was based more on the legend and did not rely on historical facts alone.

The story of the film has been glossed over for cinematic appeal and artistic purposes with some distortion of facts that lack historical evidence, but some historians do admit that Anarkali, indeed might have been a maid or courtesan who allured the prince with her charms which led to a severe rift between father and son. She first appears in the film, performing as a statue (by painting herself in marble colors because the sculptor could not finish his work in time) to be unveiled by the prince by the shot of an arrow. Nadira, the statue comes to life to the utter amazement of the royal onlookers, which makes the prince fall madly in love with her. Nadira is given the name- Anarkali (pomegranate blossom) by Akbar the Great, after her enthralling appearance. She

performs several dances in the royal court or sheesh mahal/palace to entertain the prince and the emperor Akbar and his Hindu wife, Jodha Bai. The film delineates several tensions between father and son, the conflict between Salim's militaristic lifestyle and his bohemian tastes, his appreciation of music and poetry, and his training as a hardened and toughened soldier. His love for a dancing girl assumes a threatening aspect, leading the prince to confront his father ultimately in a battle. The film not only presents class conflicts, it also reinforces the established norm that a courtesan or lowly dancing girl/maid cannot nurture aspirations to become a royalty. The film depicts a power struggle between the Emperor Akbar and his son at various points on the issue of an unseemly love affair and undignified and inappropriate match. It also underscores the marginalized position of dance performers in society even in the reign of Akbar the Great, who was known for his religious tolerance and liberal ways. Though historians, cultural anthropologists and feminists are of the view that courtesans were preservers of culture and high art, and were much valorized before the colonial rule, *Mughal-e-Azam* represents courtesans as lesser 'subjects' within the palace.

The film sketches out two spaces that are juxtaposed: one is the male dominated space, represented by the Emperor Akbar, the battlefields, wounded soldiers and gory sights where the prince was sent away to be trained in the arts of war, to remain untainted by the luxurious and debilitating ambience of the palace. The Emperor encounters his son after a lapse of fourteen years, wearing his armor which signifies the authority, control and male order established in the state. On the other hand, there is another space—a maternal space—represented by the queen, who is of Hindu origin, and who greets her son amid the splendor of the luxurious palace hall surrounded by

beautiful maids. She orders them to arrange a grand soiree of music and dance, and invite Taan Sen, the renowned classical singer of the era, and the most proficient dancer, and exquisite beauty, Nadira (Anarkali) to perform in the court, to make prince Salim forget the afflictions he suffered in the battles. The palace, a space where the prince can cherish the softer side of his nature, is constantly at war with the image of ironclad Emperor, who would not hesitate to vanquish a tiniest spark of insurgency against the established order. Anarkali, represents that streak of nonconformity that keeps on nurturing, and which eventually compels father and son to confront each other in the battle field. The Emperor announces death sentence, that is to be entombed alive, for the irreverent courtesan who dared to dream of attaining the status not meant for her. But the unexpected conclusion reveals that she was provided a secret passage to escape that terrible death. The famous tomb still exists in a busy bazaar, named Anarkali, in Lahore, the capital city of Punjab in Pakistan.

The final dance by Madhubala (who played Anarkali) was an iconic performance, the song, “pyar kia to darna kia” which translates as “If you are in love, nothing can intimidate you, or there’s no place for fear in love” demonstrates the courtesan’s defiance, and her undiminishing love for the prince. During the dance performance, the camera remains focused on her eyes that express insolence and provoke the Emperor to issue her death warrants. As the performer, she alone occupies the space, moving on the stage freely, and her image is reflected in hundreds of mirrors on the walls of the palace hall which indicates her hyper-visibility. This image indicates that dancing women, though objectified and conspicuous, remain mere reflections of their real, authentic selves. They are not looked at as individuals with agency but this image is

what Anarkali attempts to invert. Anarkali's will to overpower the king and her determination to attain the impossible is so invincible that she places a dagger at the king's feet which means that she will not surrender. At the end of this performance, she gets chained and manacled but remains resilient even during her incarceration in the dark and dingy cell. Her dance is an expression of protest and resistance against relations of power and complicity, and the story has been the subject of a number of historical and ethnographic analyses over the years.

The film representation of Anarkali as a courtesan and her quashed desire validates the fact that performing women were considered debased and a threat to the established social order even in the magnificent era of Akbar the Great. Moreover, in the Foucauldian sense, both Anarkali and Salim as subjects are controlled, regulated, and are prohibited from making choices according to their own free will. Anarkali becomes "the juridical subject" that is produced through certain "exclusionary practices that do not "show" once the juridical structure of politics has been established" (Butler, 2). In other words, Anarkali becomes the subject who is produced and then "restrained" by the regulatory hegemony of the state, but at the same time, she is the one who stands before the law, defiant. The scene where Anarkali is being bricked up represents a suffocating, claustrophobic existence for such women, a state of being buried alive, which is enacted till the last brick screens Anarkali completely within the wall. This scene also reverses the previous image which objectified her, with her magnified visibility during her performance, and here, she is rendered completely invisible.

I briefly discussed how the performing women have been represented in drama and film depicting the pre- colonial era in India analysing Natir Puja and Mughal-e-

Azam, now I will analyze plays that focus on the shifting identities of such women during the colonial rule. As mentioned earlier, the devadasis-- female temple dancers of South India-- are something of a “celebrated case” in the colonial history of India, but as colonial rules and regulations started being imposed in India, their practices of dance and ritual were banned during the social reform movement of the 1890s, with the sole objective of “civilizing” Indian women (Meduri). These regulating practices, suppressing and banning indigenous dances under colonial rule, are “an index of the significance of dance as a site of considerable political and moral anxiety”( qtd in Reed 506) . Thus, Indian female dancers or devadasis in that era were regarded as not only a moral threat to society, but also a political threat to colonial regimes. “Local dancers were viewed as excessively erotic, and colonial agents and missionaries encouraged and sometimes enforced the ban or reform of dance practices”( qtd in Reed 506).

Gurajada Appa Rao’s *Kanyasulkam* (1897,1909), and Tripurari Sharma’s *San Sattavan ka Qissa: Azizun Nisa* (1998) are plays that portray shifting identities of performing women in India in the colonial era. However, I draw on P. Murali Sharma’s study on representation of dancing women in the first play mentioned above because of non-availability of the text. Appa Rao was a Telugu playwright who sought to bring social reforms through the medium of theater and believed that in order to reach the masses, literature should be written in the spoken dialect (Murali Sharma 83). Rao’s *Kanyasulkam* (Girls for Sale), written and produced in 1897 and reproduced in 1909 is a critique on anti-nautch reforms initiated by the English, which was later on perpetuated by the middle class Indian men. The character of Girisam, an Englishman, asserts Sharma, deconstructs the conception that it is the English educated, urban, middle

class men who are the agents of reform (83). The play reveals that along with the British, middle class Indian men also supported the social reforms concerning the devadasi culture. The figure of Madhuravani in the play represents an intelligent, and alluring courtesan who hails from Devadasi community, adept in performing arts like dancing and singing. Madhuravani is portrayed as an unconventional woman who has agency and control over her life. Not intimidated by public opinion, she freely associates with men belonging to upper castes. Though she is denounced as a woman of lowly nature, avaricious and “sexually aberrant,” she is not without morals. Madhuravani is conscious of her individual, free spirit which is perceived as deviant: “Why should I hide anybody? I’m neither a wife nor a widow. The man who visits me comes like a prince, openly” (*Kanyasulkam* 22). On the other hand, Girisam juxtaposes the chaste Indian widow who is considered an epitome of ideal womanhood, with the courtesans who are considered adulterous and untrustworthy, in these words:

GIRISAM: From the moment I saw her, I have nothing but hatred for dancing girls and city women. I positively abhor them, their cunning words, and their deceitful ways. Damn it. They are all insincere. I wonder how I was such an ass and fell in to Madhuravani’s trap. There is no comparison between Madhuravani and this woman. Madhuravani is a cheap piece of coloured glass, and this woman is a pure diamond...This woman is Buccamma! She is a pure, chaste widow. WIDOW written in golden letters! (*Kanyasulkam* 74-5)

As Sharma notes, *Kanyasulkam* also highlights the ongoing debates on devadasis in colonial India. The play illustrates the tension between Saujanya Rao, the social reformer, and Madhuravani (who is disguised as a man because Saujanya Rao would never allow a nautch-girl into his house), “where she highlights the double standards of the supposedly ‘respectable’ men who advocate social reform” (Murali Sharma 88) :



STRANGER: To marry a widow and to be anti-nautch – are these two things necessary for a person to be a good man, sir?

SAUJANYA RAO: Marrying a widow depends on a man's likes and dislikes, but a man who has connections with a nautch-girl can never be called a respectable man.

STRANGER: Is that all sir, or are there other requirements- like never seeing a nautch girl, never talking to her, never attending a nautch dance, and so on?... if you don't call the nautch girls to dance, how do they make a living?

SAUJANYA RAO: They can marry and that takes care of it... but why can't nautch girls get a good education, live by other professions, and lead a moral life?"

STRANGER: If they did, would people like you marry them, sir?

SAUJANYA RAO: What kind of a question is that? I will never marry a nautch-girl. I won't even touch one – not even if a pile of gold as high as I stand is offered to me. (*Kanyasulkam* 232- 34)

The above quoted exchange indicates the social stigma associated with women performers, and the reform campaign that was undertaken by the British and Indian middle class and elite men. Saujanya Rao represents the mindset of patriarchy in the wake of the twentieth century, bent upon excluding "nautch girls" from the "respected" circles of Indian society.

The play also highlights how religion is used and misused in order to elevate women to a higher pedestal as devadasis, and paradoxically, the same women are reduced to the status of "unchaste", and sexually aberrant "nautch girls/prostitutes." The play focuses on this ambivalent mindset of society during colonial days which the following exchange between Madhuravani and the social reformer illustrates very well:

MADHURAVANI: The Bhagvad Gita. Sir, is this the kind of book good people read?

SAUJANYA RAO: This is a book that converts bad people into good people. MADHURAVANI: What does it say, sir?

SAUJANYA RAO: Those who read it find an invaluable friend.

MADHURAVANI: Who is that friend, sir?

SAUJANYA RAO: God Krishna.

MADHURAVANI: Will Krishna make friends with a nautch-girl, sir?

SAUJANYA RAO: Krishna will make friends with anyone who believes in him. God does not discriminate against anyone.

MADHURAVANI: So, Krishna is not anti-nautch? (*Kanyasulkam* 241)

As Sharma notes, “It is an orthodox Brahmanical patriarchy that has set up this institution and now demands its abolition to further its agenda of social reform” (90).

According to the above discourse, any woman who embraces the holy book, and renounces her sinful practices-- dancing, can be purged and be accepted into mainstream society as a “reformed” woman. Also, the institution of marriage is a license for a woman to “respectability”; a woman needs a “male” savior in order to survive.

*Kanyasulkum* documents the ongoing debates concerning the status of devadasi and courtesans, a dying culture in the colonial India. On the one hand, she represents the nationalist trope of chaste Indian womanhood, and on the other, she has to cleanse her image of the corporeality and sexuality attached to “Sadir”, a dance tradition associated with Devadasi tradition. The role of religion in regards with women and performance in India, has remained ubiquitous, and the traditional “sadir” a form of dance performance which gradually degenerated into a corporeal practice, associated with Hindu temples and religious rituals, after independence acquired the status of a highly esteemed spectacle representing the Indian nationhood.

#### *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa*

Tripurari Sharma, a notable playwright, actor and director has been working in the field of theater since 1979, also associated with a theater group-- ‘Alarippu’, also involved with traditional Indian theater forms (Mukherjee 119). As Nandi Bhatia observes, “Sharma’s work has remained committed to the depiction of characters, many of whom remain relegated to the fringes of society. These characters range from lepers

in *The Wooden Cart* to working class women in *Bahu* (1979), courtesans in *San Sattawan ka Qissa* and Anglo-Indian women in 'Traitors' (2001)" (101).

Sharma's *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa*, though written and staged in the late twentieth century tells the tale of a nineteenth century courtesan who donned the garb of a soldier to fight the British during the mutiny of 1857, a consequential event in the Indian history. The play, according to Nandi Bhatia, is a dramatization of history, which "involves a conscious subversion of not just elite forms of historical production but entails a reworking of historiography in ways that enable an interruption of both dominant and alternative narratives which gloss over the stories of women who exist on the margins of history" (101). Hence the play based on actual story, renders Azizun Nisa who was a renowned courtesan, visible as a freedom fighter during the momentous rebellion of 1857. Bhatia notes that the historical moment of 1857 attracted considerable theatrical attention, and numerous plays were written and staged, films were also made including Dion Boucicault's *Jessie Brown: The Siege of Lucknow* (1858), which was also staged in New York, Gurcharan Das's *Larins Sahib* (1970), B. Ahmed's *The Rani of Jhansi* (1995), and Upal Dutt's *The Great Rebellion, 1857* (1986). Other women who fought against the colonial rule, some "dalit viranganas' (war heroines belonging to low caste communities) have received recognition in literature. But, the complete invisibility and exclusion of courtesans is noticeable, when figures like Rani of Jhansi are given more prominence in film and theater (Bhatia 105).

*Azizun Nisa* traces the transition in the status of courtesans after the Anti-Nautch movement started and the traditional courtesan culture patronized by aristocracy/nawabs began to decline. Lucknow was the hub of culture and a center of

aesthetes and connoisseurs of art. The opening scene in the play illustrates this transition from grandeur and splendour of the palaces of Lucknow to the dirty and noisy bazaars of Kanpur where British and native soldiers, instead of aristocracy, visit the courtesans, not to be entertained by high art and culture but for their sexual gratification. But opening lines in the play, spoken by Azizun reveal her determination and strong will power that a woman of her stature is unlikely to possess: (Both women, playing a board game, chauparr) “Look here, Adila. I can’t lose. Whether it’s you or circumstances... victory pursues me like a supplicant imploring for a meeting” (*Staging Resistance* 120)

In the very first part of the play, at another point, Azizun discloses that unlike other courtesans of her time, she would not submit to a nawab (prince or an aristocrat): “I would’ve stayed back in Lucknow, Adila. But obeisance to any prince is not possible for me... and it was becoming progressively difficult to avoid it. Even though I wasn’t one of the hundred lights of the sheesh-mahal” ( a palace built using cut glass) (*Staging Resistance* 121). Sharma disrupts the stereotypical representations of courtesans as seductresses, and portrays Azizun as a woman who dares to challenge the British, and valiantly fights in the battlefield along with other freedom fighters.

The play paints the displacement of Azizun as a highly sophisticated and admired courtesan from Lucknow to the murky bazaars of Kanpur, from the private and comfortable space of her salon to the battlefield, and her transformation from an aesthete to a soldier who does not detest the sight of gory arena where mutilated bodies of soldiers greet her. *Azizun Nisa* unfolds amid the vociferous bazaar in Kanpur, where Azizun is playing chauparr with her companion within the confines of her private salon, with music and dance performances accompanying as the backdrop. The place

is frequented by merchants, moneylenders, and the British and native soldiers alike, and this exchange between Azizun and Adila illustrates the point well:

Azizun: The money-lenders are to run the household; the soldiers are for entertainment.

Adila: They will always come to your *mehfil* (the music and dance soiree of a courtesan); that enhances their prestige. No sooner than a few gold coins come in their hands, they think they have acquired royal taste. But where can they get refinement and the culture? That comes only with tradition and custom. And you are wasting your treasures on such as these hoping that they would some day learn to appreciate your art. But they are controlled by foreigners and foreigners care nothing about honour and respect. (*Staging Resistance* 122)

As Reed asserts, and the play illustrates, “dance was also a site of desire, and colonial accounts record that male colonists were often captivated by “native dancers”, sometimes even joining them in dances. Thus, in many colonial arenas, dance tended to generate multiple and contradictory policies and attitudes” (Reed 506).

Among visitors is also included Azizun’s lover, Shamsuddin Sawar, an Indian rebel and former soldier in the army, who is wanted by the British. Azizun’s prudence and prowess in her dealings with the British and the elite are revealed in the scene, when a British soldier arrives at her salon, unannounced, to look for her lover and traitor, Shamsuddin. Azizun happens to meet Shams and his rebel comrades, close to the river, vowing to assist them in their struggle for independence. The narrative of the play disrupts the conventional representation of a courtesan by revealing her in this new light:

Mohd Ali: The matter is not of your interest. ...We’re preparing for a battle.

Azizun: That which has begun in the lanes of the city. My home is in one of those. How the situation changes I can see from my windows, the whole day. What don’t I feel? The helplessness of slavery? The sense of despair? The slowly aggravating coldness?

Mohd Ali:... You might disapprove of my manner. but what is a woman’s interest in matters of war?

Azizun: As in her life.

Shams: This isn't love; it's war.

Azizun: And I love this war that has already knocked on my door. (*Staging Resistance* 143)

Sharma's representation of Azizun Nisa adds a new dimension in the conventional portrayal of dancing women or courtesans, and in the historiography of the mutiny which is "replete with many myths" (Bhatia 110). Azizun and Shams mention Mangal Panday, a renowned war hero who fought against the British, as their inspiration, but the play focuses mainly on the unprecedented contribution of a courtesan in the struggle for independence, unrecognized so far. Azizun is not exhibited in her professional role as dancing, singing or luring men with her seductive charms, but she is revealed combating hand in hand with the rebel soldiers, disguised as a man.

Another stereotypical image of women, as nourishers or life-givers, is also dismantled in this play, as Azizun is not portrayed in this light which proves Bhatia's point that Sharma has created an image of 'virangana' or warrior, not a woman 'too full o' the milk of human kindness.' Sharma subverts this conventional image at various points in the play, for instance, the first is based on the true story of the Eurasian daughter of General Wheeler, who lost her life during the mutiny. Azizun does not even spare the anglo-Indian character, based on this incident, in her passion for revenge and wrath against the injustices perpetrated by the colonial rulers. At another point in the play, Azizun, remains adamant in spite of Zubaida's pleadings and allows the assassination of British women and children who are sheltered in the *bibighar* (house of the ladies) during the battle. This image of Azizun, as an unscrupulous, heartless warrior, in Bhatia's words, "complicates her position," also, depicting "power play and

gender politics to comment on the extremes of war and the misuse of power even by women like Azizun” (111).

At various points in the play, Azizun abandons her traditional gender role, by opting to perform like men, proclaiming to have renounced her identity: “That woman is not unkind... she’s just toughened herself... as tough as a man” (*Staging Resistance* 157). Later in the play, after a fierce combat with a soldier, Azizun asserts: “I must complete what I’ve set out to do. I’m not a mere woman. He should have treated me like a soldier. Fought and killed me... But no, in his eyes I remained a mere woman” (*Staging Resistance* 166). The dynamics of gender and power have been illustrated throughout the play as Azizun refuses to play her prescribed social role as a woman. In part vii of the play, when one soldier pleads Azizun to perform her socially assigned role as an entertainer, using her seductive charms:

Soldier: Who would know better than you, Azizun, how bad this spectacle is. Why don’t you become gracious to your admirers again?

Azizun: I...? No. I don’t remember those things anymore.

Soldier: Ravish your admirers again with your charm....

Azizun: No. Talk of sword and ammunition. (*Staging Resistance* 167)

But, contrary to culturally established notion of ideal womanhood, Azizun perceives herself as a harbinger of change and as a source of power, abnegating her essential self. She even goes to the extreme of misusing her newly acquired gender role when she persuades Roshni, another dancing girl to adorn her feet with ankle bells and perform to entertain the soldiers, against her will, thereby, forcing another woman to adopt her traditional role. Sharma, by revealing this negative aspect of Azizun’s strength, establishes the fact that power corrupts, and that, when a woman attains agency, she too, may perpetuate the established power structures in society. In other

words, the play may be underscoring the age old belief that women, if given access to power could dismantle the very fabric of society or would be unable to maintain stability and order.

Furthermore, the play also subverts the conventional portrayals of courtesans in literature, film and theater which is a major contribution by Sharma in the genre of courtesan literature. The way courtesans were reviled in the nineteenth century India after the anti-nautch movement initiated by the British is illustrated in the play through a brief encounter between a British official and Azizun Nisa. When the official insinuates that her abode is a brothel, a habitat of sin and lustful life, Azizun Nisa takes it as a slander and retorts: "Such accusations are baseless. I am not a prostitute. I am a dancer. I am an artiste. I do not wear the veil but I am not a public woman. People in the city... acknowledge me as a courtesan, a poet, a lyricist. I am not in the flesh trade" (*Staging Resistance* 133).

Lata Singh writes that the collective impact of these regulations imposed by the British triggered the loss of patronage and subsequently, the courtesans also had to face material penalties for supporting the rebels during the mutiny which brought about their fall from the esteemed position as a cultural institution to the status of debased prostitutes (1679). Tripurari Sharma in one of her interviews commented in this regard:

That these women are treasure houses for culture and expressions are devalued, conveniently forgotten and consequently lost, and they are seen merely as entertainers and available for sex work. These are two distinct things. The kothas (salons) had music, dance and entertainment but the courtesans were not available for all. Their relationship was of choice. This has done a great deal of damage to these women, their bodies, their identity and culture. (qtd in Singh 2007)



Policies of the British remained duplicitous towards courtesans, dispossessing them of their wealth, maligning them, and simultaneously, using their services for their entertainment. In a bid to reduce their control over nawabs, the new government gained access over most of the real estate bestowed by nawabs on courtesans, and “discredited the nobility who associated with them as dissolute and immoral. Yet when it came to matters such as using these women as prostitutes for the European garrison, or collecting income tax, the eminently pragmatic British set aside their high moral dudgeon, and decreed rules to make this possible” (Singh 1679). This debasement of courtesans and the subsequent elimination of their culture, created a community of prostitutes and sex workers who were available to soldiers and commoners alike.

Hence the resentment and acrimony that courtesans felt during Colonial era was justified, and most of them supported the nobility battling against the British rule. But, viewing their sacrifices for independence against the colonial rule only in this context would reduce their contribution, and perpetuate their invisibility in history. As Singh asserts, “Looking at their participation in the 1857 revolt merely from the point of view of such anger would be to overlook the courtesan’s political consciousness and agency” (1679). Azizun Nisa reveals in the play her political awareness and prowess in such matters several times and her strength in taking decisive action at the appropriate moment is also emphasized. As Sharma points out in her interview that she deliberately did not highlight this aspect, and painted Azizun Nisa from a different angle: “Azizun Nisa’s contribution was a call of conscience and not a craving for personal gain or political power... Her stake seems to be that of conscience, more of a desire to transcend” (qtd in Singh, 2007, 1680).

Azizun Nisa, as a woman, not only as an artiste, transcends her essentialist role, and emerges as an iconoclastic, rebellious figure, able to challenge the British and Indian patriarchy alike. Sharma, in her portrayal of Azizun Nisa, a Muslim courtesan, has given voice to all those women who remained invisible, either due to gender bias or because of Hindutva ideology of the 1990s (Bhatia 115).

My discussion would remain incomplete without mentioning and examining a few Indian films, mega-hits in the history of Indian cinema, that have represented courtesans or dancing women as protagonists. *Anarkali* (1953), *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Devdas* (1955, 2002), *Pakeeza* (1972), and *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006) are films that have achieved monumental success at box office, and have are considered classics of Hindi cinema. One common aspect among all these films is the depiction of courtesans or performing women and their exclusion from society.

*Pakeeza*, produced in 1972 by Kamal Amrohi, was another classic and one of the most successful films in the history of Indian cinema. Kamal Amrohi has created a dreamlike atmosphere, with palatial spaces where performances of courtesans take place, and splendid music which enthralled the viewers when it was released after more than a decade of process. The film narrates the story of a Muslim courtesan, Sahib Jan, known for her mesmerising beauty, melodious voice and dancing skills, played by famous Meena Kumari. The first scene reveals Nargis, the late mother of Sahib Jan, performing a beautiful dance in kathak style, and a burning candle in the background denotes her state as a woman whose life is wasting away drop by drop till it finally extinguishes. Allen and Bhaskar argue that the opening shot depicts a dingy and claustrophobic chamber, which evokes the metaphor of the kotha (salon) as a

tomb, “while the circling of the moth around the flame is a dance of death” (23). In the same manner, the graveyard is an important signifier, which depicts Nargis languishing away, after her ouster from her husband, Shahab-ud-Din’s home, whose family had rejected her as a daughter-in-law. Nargis breathes her last in the graveyard, after giving birth to a daughter, who later transforms into bewitching Sahib Jan. From the very outset, the film sets the tone, and the atmosphere of a prison-like existence of the heroine. The imprisoned bird in the gold cage, being guarded by a black serpent is a recurrent motif in the film, indicating the asphyxiated state of Sahib Jan, who feels entrapped in that kind of living.

Her first performance in the film with the song: “inhi logon ne le laina dupatta mera,” (These are the men who snatched my scarf.) castigates the whole patriarchy, the complete hierarchy from the dyer to the sepoy/soldier, who have dishonored her. As, the scarf or ‘dupatta’ is a symbol of honor for a woman in the Muslim and Eastern countries, stripping a woman of her head scarf denotes a grave offence and infamy. In other words, performing in front of men brings disgrace and notoriety, as it is considered inappropriate for women hailing from noble families.

Sahib Jan, along with her aunt, moves to another city, the Pink Palace in Lukhnow, to establish a new settlement to escape her father, who has been searching for her since he came to know that he had a daughter from Nargis. During the long journey by train, a forest officer, Saleem Ahmed Khan encounters Sahib Jan in the compartment while she is asleep, captivated by her beauty, he leaves a note in her toes admiring the beauty of her feet. This note, which became very famous reads : “Excuse me, by chance I came into your compartment, and saw your feet. They are very

beautiful. Please do not place them on the ground, lest they become dirty, yours, a fellow traveller.” This is the precise moment when Sahib Jan becomes aware of what being in ‘love’ means, and starts dreaming about her unknown lover. The train journey revolutionizes her whole existence, and she becomes reluctant to perform before men. As she becomes acutely aware of her shameful existence, after settling in “Suhagpur”, notes Anna Morcom, “her mode of performance becomes increasingly disembodied” (4).

The next performance by Sahib Jan depicts a transformed individual, with her restrained movements, focused only on her feet, taking small measured steps, appropriate to the theme of the song: “chalte chalte, sar-e-rah, yunhi koi mil gaya tha” which translates as “While walking along, I came across a traveller by chance.” She performs *Abhinay*, moving only the upper part of her body, notes, Morcom, while remaining seated on the ground, and making expressive gestures through her hands (4). This kind of performance is controlled and restrained in a way which is not meant for sexual arousal. As Sahib Jan becomes deeply entrenched in her new found love, she keeps drifting away from her previous life as a courtesan.

Every time the train passes by, rumbling and hooting, it evokes in Sahib Jan, an incredible urge to meet her unseen romantic lover. The hooting train serves dual purpose, on the one hand, it creates in Sahib Jan, a desire to renounce this life--her corpse-like existence, and on the other hand, it reminds her of her impurity, and the fact that she would not be accepted by a respectable man. However, it has been implied in the film that she remains chaste, as she escapes her debut as a courtesan on a boat excursion with a client. The boat is attacked by elephants and she is rescued, and

recognized by her unseen lover, the forest officer, Saleem. She escapes another unwanted sexual encounter, and remains untainted till finally her wedding with Salim, who happens to be her cousin, takes place in the end. The 'male rescuer' provides the space where the courtesan figure can dream about the possibility of attaining an untainted life and true love (Morcom).

Sahib Jan's final performance, is the most dramatic scene in the film where her feet, which are fetishized throughout the film, literally get tainted with blood when she deliberately stamps her feet in rage over the broken shards of glass. The performance takes place at her father's residence which happens to be her lover's abode as well, at his wedding function. Here the denouement, and recognition scene takes place, and finally, she is accepted by her blood relations, not because her being a courtesan is forgiven but due to her family origin. "Pakeezah" means 'pure' and she remains unsullied, body and soul, for her husband, which is the norm in a patriarchal society.

According to Morcom, the so- called happy ending of the film, and Sahib Jan's marriage with Salim, who turns out to be her cousin, depicts "modernity as a savior" (2). "Salim as a forestry officer," notes Morcom, "represents a professional new order, contrasting in attitudes to feudal patriarchs such as his father and grandfather" (2). Morcom further adds that the train, emblematic of modernity in a number of Indian films, represents the space where new relationships can be possibly developed. Also, the film subverts the old order where married men could "enjoy extramarital relationships with women who could not themselves marry" (2). However, social reality was significantly different from what was depicted in the film, as courtesans, after partition, were not deemed as respected as they were before the colonial era.

Moreover, their salons had transformed into brothels as their status dwindled downward. Thus, women performers occupied a liminal social status, as Morcom notes, and their exclusion from mainstream was absolute (3).

Additionally, as Allen and Bhaskar argue that *Pakeezah*, is an instance of the Muslim courtesan film, whose “defining feature is the particular status that the courtesan is accorded as an emblem of culture and refinement even as her circumstances are portrayed as morally compromised” (20). This line of argument validates my argument that dancing women were considered morally debased even when they enjoyed a life of luxury, refinement and elevated status as artistes. Poonam Arora rightly argues that despite the fact that the film ends on a positive note, it’s not without a streak of gloom, and a sense of pessimism embedded in the whole film (66) . The film illustrates the state of unsheltered and socially outcast women in graphic details that leave a profound impact on the viewers.

*Devdas* (1955, 2002), *Sadhna* (1958), *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006), and scores of other films demonstrate courtesans as excluded figures, living along margins, and unacceptable by society. *Sadhna* is another film that ends happily, when the heroine, a performing woman and prostitute, is rescued by a man, who accepts her as his wife after many trials and tribulations. Umrao in *Umrao Jaan*, and Chandralekha in *Devdas*, depict the courtesan protagonists as solitary, tragic figures, rejected by their lovers, and hence, society. Moreover, Arora notes that the protagonists of both *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* yearn to be reunited with their kindred, and to be assimilated in the mainstream society and live honorably through marriage with the men they love . But, unlike Sahib Jan, Umrao's hopes to find her love remain thwarted, and she is revealed

in the final scene of the film looking at her own reflection in the mirror (67). While Sahib Jan's veil, in the final scene of the film is lowered, to signify that her face will no longer be the focal point and target of male gaze, and which also marks her acceptance into respectable society.

Another question arises as to why Indian film makers have been obsessed with the figure of the courtesan, especially with the culture of Muslim courtesans during and after colonial times. Poonam Arora explains this fascination of Indian filmmakers in terms of Hindu/Muslim binary in the nationalist discourse. Arora argues that the specific genre of the Muslim film within Indian cinema, reverses the binaries of Hindu and Muslim identities. Therefore, this genre portrays the Muslims as "feminine, exotic, and seductive" instead of representing them as "masculine, fundamentalist, and separatist" (*Order and Partialities* 61). Faisal Devji explores this question in his essay, "Hindu/Muslim/Indian," and argues that this "benign" and feminine construction of the Muslim in the films serves a dual purpose for the Hindus. Primarily, it removes the threat of the supposed "enemy within," also constructing the "Muslim woman as a figure of romance (usually in the role of a courtesan or veiled innocence): an archaic-exotic representative of the seductiveness of Muslim culture" (9). But adds Devji, this fascination is not benign, as it evokes illicit pleasure and "rape fantasy" (9). Thus Muslim woman is the incarnation of the *historical romance* between the Hindu and the Muslim. However, I do not agree with this explanation as scores of Indian films have represented courtesans and prostitutes as protagonists or major figures. For instance, Chandralekha in *Devadas*, Sadhna in *Sadhna* are depicted as Hindus, but they are as marginalized and excluded from society as Muslim courtesan figures have been shown.

Now I will examine the status of performing women in India after Independence as the nationalist discourse transformed the role of the courtesans and female actors considerably. Both India and Pakistan view the performing women differently, with their increased visibility in the former, and extreme invisibility in the latter. After independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, performing women in India were elevated from the status of “nautch girls” or “prostitutes” to that of India’s cultural and national icons, using Bharatanatyam as their mode of performance, a dance form that was basically developed by Devadasis in the past. “Classical performing arts” in Morcom’s view, “have now become a middle class preserve, an important form of cultural capital, and a respectable career for women” (109). Female performers of Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and many other forms, are being celebrated as national icons and image of the “Incredible India.” The most important factor that has legitimized and established the classical performing arts as a “respectable, and middle class zone” is the exclusion of hereditary, ‘disreputable’ female performers. Thus it was only after the exclusion of low class, sex worker/prostitute from the arena of performing arts that the ‘respectable’ women started to actively embrace the art form (109-111).

The same can be said about the performers in the Indian film industry or Bollywood, they gained recognition and respect only after the industry was ‘sanitized’ by eliminating the female hereditary performers from this zone as well. Filmmakers and directors started to hunt for reputable female artistes or high class courtesans to gain respectability (Morcom 115).

However, Nijhawan’s take on the current status of dancing women in Indian popular culture is quite engaging, and in her view, dancers in India tend to stimulate a



“curious confusion in the minds of the audience-- or perhaps filmmakers, choreographers and censors... a collision of fascination on the one hand and fear on the other” (100). In Nijhawan’s observation, dancers in India exist in “a ‘fantasy’ space, and are often denied ‘realness,’ and yet it is a space with potential for production of emerging cultural and gender ideals” (100). Morcom notes, “From the 1990s, however, Bollywood dance became popular in Indian diaspora communities in the developed world and in India itself. Middle class girls now perform what are often sexy numbers in public in sometimes skimpy costumes, without being seen as disreputable or equivalent to prostitutes, but rather as normal and trendy. Thus, Bollywood dance has become a new, legitimate zone of national culture-- a genre in the real world as opposed to just in or for movies” (117). Acting in Bollywood film today is considered prestigious and lucrative as it grants stardom and affluence which majority of aspiring young women from the middle classes dream about. Nandi Bhatia traces this transition in the identity of an Indian female performer in her article examining the Bollywood film *Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon/ I want to Become Madhuri Dixit* (2003). Bhatia analyzes the changing representations of Nautanki (a traditional form of folk theater in India) in Hindi cinema arguing that nautanki remains largely marginalized and has lost prestige, simultaneously, films have broader audience appeal that also establishes “hierarchies that operate in the cultural realm” (2009, 9-21). The film attempts to establish that cinema is “the appropriate cultural medium for fulfilling the Nautanki actress’s desire for greater social success” also maintaining that Bollywood is being recognized and acknowledged globally as a growing and popular industry (Bhatia 2009, 9). This hierarchy in the cultural realm also validates my point that actresses performing on

stage are not accorded prestige even in India where nautanki continues to shrink and lose its appeal in the audiences, and Nautanki actresses face derision and bias which still exists to some extent.

#### Status of Performing Women in Pakistan

On the contrary, in Pakistan, the status of the performing women declined considerably, and remained extremely ghettoized, and tarnished. The relationship of Islam to all forms of arts, including drama, has been equivocal and has remained a controversial issue in all Islamic countries, including Pakistan. In Pakistan, art has received patronage by some governments such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government in the 1970s. However, art and artistes witnessed a great deal of antagonism by other governments, particularly during General Zia's so-called Islamization in the 1980s. General Zia's rule was extremely detrimental to the growth and production of art.

Pakistan's film industry was affected the most, and is still struggling to revive. Zia's extreme measures to enforce Islamization in the country created a great divide in the psyche of the nation, between the religious zealots and the liberals who were inclined towards leftist tendencies. Many poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Habeeb Jalib who raised a voice of protest through their revolutionary poetry, were incarcerated; thousands of people were tortured brutally. "Thus, it is a combination of Islamist ideology", Fawzia Afzal Khan notes, "the vested interests of military and civilian (feudal) ruling elites, and the profound anti-cultural bias of the Muslim middle class left behind in Pakistan after partition, that has resulted in a contempt for dance and theatre, which are seen as 'borrowing' elements of 'Hindu' culture and life" (2). No doubt, the development of drama and theatre in Pakistan cannot be researched without studying the beliefs and

the ways in which people circumvented religious barriers. Khalid Ahmed, (a co-founder of Tehreek-e-Niswan, an alternative theatre group in Karachi), writes:

For most of our fifty-year old existence we have been ruled by military dictatorships. The brief interludes of civilian rule have seen the dominance of a political coterie which is largely feudal. Obviously, neither of these ruling partners can be expected to look upon serious cultural activities with favour since these lead to questioning and questioning can lead to change. Any activity which make people think, arouse their critical faculties and lead to their emotional re-awakening is suspect, and theatre is indeed a highly subversive activity since in spite of all the censorship laws it is far less controllable than other media such as film, television, etc. (*Dawn Tuesday Review*, 25 Feb-3 March 1997 p.5.)

More than anyone else in Pakistani society, performing women bore the brunt of Islamization during this repressive regime. Women could not appear on television screens without covering their head; intimate scenes were subjected to censorship, and dance performances by women on stage and television were banned. However, as Irna Qureshi notes, working on television is still considered more respectable than working in films (185). Qureshi argues in her study on female performers in Pakistan that professional singers, dancers, and actresses are known as ‘Kanjar’ and are associated with Hira Mandi (Red Light Area), Lahore’s vice district. “So despised is their occupation in Pakistan that the ethnic marker ‘Kanjar’ is a common term of abuse, not dissimilar to the English ‘whore’ (qtd in Qureshi 183).

Plays in this discussion, highlight the binaries of religion and art, mullahs and clerics which have split the society into two antagonistic halves of liberals and extremists. *Aik Thee Nani* (There was once a Granny), *Bullah* (A Sufi poet ), and *Burqavaganza* reveal these tensions in society that have turned the masses into schizophrenic personalities, torn between two worldviews.

*Aik Thee Nani /A Granny for All Seasons* (1993) is based on the true story of two sisters Zohra Sehgal and Uzra Butt descending from an aristocratic Muslim family of Rampur, India, they started their careers as actors/performers in the 1930s (Nadeem, 83). After the partition of India in 1947, both were separated, one of them, Zohra, chose to stay in India, and continued her career as a dancer and a stage/TV / film actress. Whereas, the sister who migrated to Pakistan, had to undergo a complete transformation in order to survive in a conservative society. As Fawzia Afzal Khan writes, "The play serves, then, as a secular critique of the official Islamist doctrine that forces all women to accept its repressive regime; it also questions the very basis for the separate creation of the Pakistani nation-state as distinct from India" (62). The following review published in *Times of India* sums up the gist of the play:

Politics tore them apart, art brought them together. It took four decades, a semi-autobiographical play and a Pakistani theatre director to bring the two sisters--one Indian, the other Pakistani--together on the Indian stage once again.... The two sisters who once shared the same stage and were then forced to play out their roles independently, stand out as metaphors for the two nations-- India and Pakistan--themselves. Nations with a shared cultural heritage and a string of ties that history failed to untie. (Nikhata Kazmi, Delhi, 26 March 1999)

The play unfolds in the living room of a traditional middle- class household, amid the hustle bustle of preparations to welcome the (Dadi, paternal grandmother) grandmother's sister who is arriving from India. The much anticipated re-union of the two sisters is taking place after twenty five years of partition, and a lot has changed, even the two sisters, both in their seventies. As the play progresses, it is revealed that Dadi, the sister living in Pakistan has raised her granddaughter, Sabeen, who is a young woman in her early twenties, and her parents are living abroad.

Scene 1 serves the purpose of exposition and Dadi reveals that her sister, Tahira Rehman, who is also Sabeen's maternal grandmother, was highly gifted and talented even as a child:

Dadi: She would stage plays with her dolls, playing different roles or she would become a dance instructor to girls in our neighbourhood. Hardly a day passed when our father didn't have one of the neighbours come in complaining.

Sabeen: Complaining?

Dadi: Yes, complaining that she was making the girls do odd things.

Sabeen: odd things!

Dadi: I mean dancing and staging doll weddings. Parents in our neighbourhood would not allow their children to go that far. (Nadeem 89)

Dadi insinuates that even in those days in India, before the independence, performing dance and related activities were looked down upon by society, especially when young girls were involved. Dadi reiterates her point that "one has to be mindful of what the world thinks... especially if you are a woman" (90). The play demonstrates how Sabeen has been raised by Dadi, keeping in view these regulatory and controlling mindset of society. This dialogue also informs how "social identities are signaled, formed and negotiated through bodily movements" (Desmond 29). Since their childhood, girls are taught to restrain their movement, and their comportment, as the "body operates as a symbol of society across cultures, and the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning body behavior can be understood as functioning of social rules and hierarchies" (Wolff, 83). Any transgression of the limits set by society is considered a threat to the power structure, and is usually uprooted on seeing the slightest sign. Dancing is considered a transgression of the boundary created by Islamic culture and moral order, and hence, is abhorred in Pakistan.

It is in this cultural backdrop that one of the sisters (Dadi) has sustained and conducted herself, and has also undertaken to instill the same values in her granddaughter. Scene 2 is the reunion scene, revealing Nani, the sister from India, as the exact opposite of Dadi, wearing a colorful and bright sari. which reflects her gay and lighthearted demeanor. After Nani notices certain changes in the personality of her sister, she inquires: "So you have given up sweet things. (*Meaningfully*) What else have you given up? (92). Another incident that proves to be too disturbing is when Nani empties her bag to distribute gifts she brought for everyone from India, including ghungroos (ankle bells) which are worn by dancing girls. Dadi simply cannot conceal her astonishment; the maid, Rani, moves a few steps back in shock. Traditionally, ankle bells in Pakistan are worn by dancing girls, majority of whom hail from red light areas, existing along the periphery of society. Nani 's ankle bells are a reminiscent of forty years of her life as performer, and according to her, "Each bell carries a story" (Nadeem 96). For, Dadi, who has completely metamorphosed into a different person, after her migration to Pakistan, adapting herself to the established traditions and customs, and a religious ideology of society. In such society, ankle bells are viewed as a stigma, which only women from 'merasi' or 'kanjar'(derogatory words used to refer to people related to performing arts) families wear.

Moreover, the play also illustrates the nexus between performing arts and prostitution in Pakistan, which prevents women from respectable families from taking up acting or dancing as professions. Whether Sabeen should act or not, is the conflict between sisters, and the major question that the play explores. Sabeen is portrayed as an extremely talented young woman who participates in college dramas, and is desirous

of becoming an actor, but the conservative Dadi cannot let her join a profession which is not venerated in Pakistani society. Nani, who has given her forty years to acting and performing on stage can recognize the potential in Sabeen and arranges for her a tutor who starts giving her singing lessons when Dadi is away. The tug of war between both sisters starts when Dadi discovers them practising singing and dancing in her absence. That is the turning point in the play which forces Nani to reveal how Dadi also used to be a performer, but after her migration, she repressed all her talents and acted in accordance with the norms of an Islamic society, too scared of the taboo that was associated with this profession. The play not only focuses on this contention between the two sisters but also the alterity between the two cultures that separates the boundary. Nani comes from India, a country which has given performing arts and dance an elevated status after independence, whereas, in Pakistan art forms declined considerably because of a hostile attitude of the state and society.

Moreover, the play also comments on the current state of plays being produced for commercial theater, which Dadi denounces as being vulgar and lack taste and refinement. When Nani comments in her excitement about a number of advertisements in the paper about stage plays, Dadi remarks: "Rubbish. These are not plays, just shows full of vulgarity. This is not the theater you are thinking of" (Nadeem, 105). This exchange between the two sisters illustrates the decline of commercial theater in Pakistan which cannot cater to the taste of educated middle and upper classes.

Additionally, the play brings to the surface another aspect of Dadi's personality that she has suppressed all these years-- her other half, the actor, performer, and dancer, concealed from all her blood relations and acquaintances in Pakistan. Act 2,

scene 2, reveals Dadi sleepwalking and speaking the dialogues from Agha Hashar Kashmiri's play, which she used to perform before partition. Rani, the maid, gets scared at seeing her in such a bizarre and agitated state. However, Dadi strives her best to curb her natural talent, and repress the artiste in her self by wearing a mask to show to society. Soon, this facade is laid bare, when the next morning Rani discloses the secret to Sabeen and Nani to their utter surprise but this disclosure makes the latter confident that she can reignite the spark suppressed for so long in her sister. In the meanwhile, on Nani's encouragement, Sabeen signs a contract with a TV producer to act in a play, and continues to take singing and dancing lessons secretly. A harmonium covered by a tablecloth in the living room indicates the declined status of art in the country, also implying that those who are engaged in these fields, have to remain in hiding, especially women. Sabeen's secret lessons represent the invisibility of women performers or in other words, their marginalized existence, their struggle to attain respect and recognition in society.

Furthermore, the play undertakes to reclaim the lost glory and significance of all art forms in Pakistan's repressive society, especially when Nani, in her attempt to teach Sabeen some moves of kathak dance, stresses:

Nani: Dance. (undoes the bundle which contains the ghungroos/ankle bells) All the beauty that exists in the world, all that is proportionate, all that is poignant is found in the dance. When I danced, the entire universe danced with me. Flowers, flowing brooks, birds, they all danced with me, unmindful of all else. Dance, my child, is a complete performing art. It has everything: theater, music, sculpture, pain, pleasure. (Gets up and dances) I want you to learn to dance. (Nadeem 133)

The element of song and dance is deemed "an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film", and stage plays in Pakistan, but women are usually



displayed as sexual object which is the “leit-motif of erotic spectacle” (Mullvey 4). This explains the strong antagonism against women participating in performing arts which is also supported by religious doctrines. Islam does not allow women to reveal their beauty, or to become visible in front of men unrelated to them, hence, veiling or taking hijab is a religious obligation. Dadi, in her attempt to follow religious obligations, renounces her acting career and, instead, reinvents herself as a new woman, perfectly embedded in the religious ideology of Pakistan, after the partition. Hence, Dadi is remoulded according to pre-existing notions of how a woman should behave, and carry herself in society so she does not become a ‘sexualized object.’ Dadi, after being recast in the new, socially accepted mould, exerts the same pressure on Sabeen, to make her comply with the established norms in the phallogocentric society. A turning point comes when Sabeen’s fiancé, Behzad and his mother arrive while the former is taking music and dance lessons to their utter disbelief. Sabeen here emerges as a resilient, rebellious young woman who can disrupt the existing norms when she decides to break her engagement. Both mother and son react to the spectacle in a very conventional way:

Behzad: But Nani, it is improper for a Pakistani girl to be wearing anklets. It is un-Pakistani.

Sabeen: (comes close to him and stares at him) Since when have you become an authority on what is Pakistani? What have you done that could be called Pakistani? Your gelled hair, your dandy clothes, the way you walk, or that disco gang of yours, are they more Pakistani than others?

Behzad: That’s pop culture, universal culture.

Nani: Well said, Behzad. You are prepared to adopt every culture in the world but you are not willing to own your own heritage, developed by your own people...

Siddiq: It is shameful that girls should sing and dance. (Nadeem 134)

The above quoted conversation demonstrates that society views women from a different lens, attaching no stigma to the same career when it is adopted by men. The reason behind this gender bias is that women, specifically are viewed as objects of 'male gaze' or 'scopophilia,' as Freud put it, and fulfill the 'voyeuristic phantasy' of the spectators (Mulvey 3). Male actors/performers are not discredited or debased in Pakistani society as women associated with this profession are who are specifically interpellated with derogatory terms like "kanjri" or "randi," (whore or slut). This substantiates Mulvey's argument that women traditionally are exhibited on film screens and stage "with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (4).

But the significant aspect of the play is that it attempts to dispel this belief that dancing women are merely objects of sexual desire, and hence despicable. Sabeen and Nani, educated women from respectable families, by adopting acting as their profession convey the message that performing women should not be equated with sex workers or prostitutes, as is the usual misconception in South Asia. Nani asks this question from her sister who blames her for neglecting her duties as mother: "Can't a performer, a dancer be a good mother, a good wife at the same time (Nadeem 137) ? However, it is revealed that Dadi's strained marital relationship was due to the fact that she was an actress, which his conservative family never accepted, remained an indelible mark, ultimately triggering her husband's untimely demise. Dadi (Sabira) blamed herself for the tragedy; abandoning her acting career, she erected around herself an iron curtain, and ceded to Pakistani culture dominated by religious ideology. Nani speaks vehemently about bigotry and religious dogmatism of Pakistani society: "Had I come away with you people (to Pakistan), I would have been strangulated; the artist in me

would have died a painful, lingering death” (Nadeem 137). The play depicts a typical Foucauldian society, where every woman is under scrutiny of the people around her, and has to concede to the dictates of patriarchy.

The play, however, ends on a positive note; with Nani’s efforts, Dadi, re-embraces her old, authentic self which she had submerged in her past, and both Dadi and Sabeen sign contracts to act in a television play. The play, in fact, serves as a bridge to reconnect the lost traditions that many Pakistani artists think, they had left behind in India. “The old lady,” Shaista Sirajuddin rightly observes about the play, “brings about a re-ordering of attitudes” which leads to “healing of the emotional and ideological breach between the sisters” (Nadeem xix). As the chasm between the sisters is bridged, “the play quickens a vivid and hopeful metaphor of the two halves of the subcontinent healing their differences and learning to relate with each other” in an unprecedented way (Nadeem xix). It is still an ongoing debate, whether India and Pakistan share the same culture and traditions, or are different. In fact, the play was also criticized for being pro-India by some critics, and for advocating for cultural values that we as Muslims and Pakistanis can not own as our own.

As regards the structure of the play, it is linear, and presented in a traditional realist mode, sprinkled with some comic elements which make it distinct from various other plays written by Shahid Nadeem. “Gone are the graphic images of existence in extremis,” notes Siraj-ud-Din, “in derelict slums, prison cells, graveyards, and desert landscapes” (Nadeem xviii). The play employs humor and witty sarcasm to denounce the stereotypical sexist attitude of Pakistani men, exposing the duplicity in existing in social mores. However, the play can be characterised as a feminist play in spite of its

traditional form, owing to its thematic concerns and the major questions it poses.

Another remarkable aspect of the play is that it is not about one central character, rather it revolves around two sisters and their tussle regarding their granddaughter's choices, and their own decisions and attitudes toward life. The major point is that all the three protagonists are women, and the play illustrates the way they confront their choices and their subsequent consequences, their defiance against all odds, and consistency.

Another play by Ajoka that highlights the same bigoted attitude and fanaticism against performing women is *Barri / The Acquittal* which has already been discussed in detail in the first chapter of this study. Marium, who has been portrayed as having a 'spiritual persona' is incarcerated for having danced at the shrine of a saint during the anniversary celebrations at the site. Marium remains imprisoned for more than her sentenced term and is abused by the jail officials which reflects again the duplicitous standards of society against women, and performing women's expulsion from the mainstream. Marium, mostly sings Bulleh Shah's poetry who was a sufi poet in the eighteenth century, a rebel, and an iconoclast. Marium's dances, though transgressive according to ethos of an Islamic society, reveal her defiance against power structures, including the jail officials guarding the prison cell.

This is significant to note that all the films and plays that have been analyzed in this chapter, delineate the female protagonists struggling against the authoritative, dogmatic system, and upholders of morality. Additionally, courtesan protagonists like Sahib Jan in *Pakeezah*, Umrao in *Umrao Jaan*, and many more that have not been reviewed in my study, need a 'male rescuer' in order to be 'sanitized' and to be embraced by the 'nobility.' Though there are exceptions as well, as in the case of

Azizun Nisa, who does not require the support of her lover, instead, she proves to be his buttress during the mutiny of 1857. This image painted by Tripurari Sharma completely subverts the traditional images of courtesans so far depicted on silver screen or on stage. Sharma's *Azizun Nisa*, as well, can be characterized as a feminist drama as it depicts and centers around a female protagonist; traces the growth of a woman, and also illustrates how she gains agency. In the same vein, Nadeem's *Aik Thi Nani* as well, portrays the protagonists as strong, and resilient women, who can challenge the existing, gender based biases that marginalize such women.

However, as I have already mentioned, at the core of the contemporary zones of performing arts lie the conflicts that female performers confront in patriarchal cultures, and modern India and Pakistan's responses to these contradictions.

Sharma and Nadeem have endeavored to represent performing women from a different angle, as rebels, crusading against the established patriarchal system which is against the grain if considered from the stereotypical images portrayed in films and drama. The plays and films examined in this chapter illustrate that not much has changed in both countries after independence, especially when it concerns the way women are represented on media. The way women performers are represented also depends on the nature and kind of their performance, and also the space they occupy during that performance. For instance, classical dance performers in India are highly eulogized, on the other hand, performers of kathak, like Naheed Siddiqui, Nighat Chaudhry and Sheema Kirmani, in Pakistan are still struggling to gain respectability. Women, especially those associated with film industry and theater have to fight hard battles to 'sanitize' their tarnished image, as all performing women are viewed as being

morally compromised. Yet, a complex web of dual standards, diverse attitudes, religious and cultural mores renders the performing women more enigmatic, their identities also shifting according to changing perspectives of the public. In Murphy's view, the juggling through which both actresses and audiences try to resolve fundamentally polarised interpretations, such as 'equality and inequality, virtue and corruption, honor and shame,' is termed 'sleight of mind' (16). Ironically, a large community of dancing girls and professional actresses still exist in the Islamic republic of Pakistan, battling to shift their identities, struggling to remove their association with inherent 'immorality.'

## Conclusion

This study attempts to create a niche for Pakistani theater, especially, Ajoka Theater in the field of world drama, also giving scholarly attention to eminent Indian playwrights like Mahaswata Devi, Vijay Tendulkar, Manjula Padmanabhan and Tripurari Sharma. Shahid Nadeem and Madeeha Gauhar are pioneers of alternative theater in Pakistan, and serve as models for many upcoming theater groups in the country who have been writing and producing plays, emulating Ajoka as their model.

There is no doubt, and I am reiterating the fact that theater has been flourishing in Pakistan since decades; it was being practiced even before the birth of Pakistan, but it somehow dwindled in the 1980s due to General Zia's repressive policies. It was through the efforts of Gauhar and her team that it succeeded in surmounting all the obstacles and created a voice against the totalitarian regime.

The dissertation makes an important scholarly contribution in analyzing Ajoka theater's representation of the images of women, simultaneously, looking critically at the plays that deal with the same issues concerned with women in India, represented by Indian playwrights. The issues dealt with in the plays in this study are related to women who belong to the subaltern classes, or, are marginalized due to their calling or vocation. As I have also mentioned in my introduction that not all women, in Pakistan or India, are oppressed. I agree with Mohanty's view that third world women should not be perceived as "a singular, monolithic subject" as they are represented in some recent feminist texts in the West (61). My intention here is not to comment on the hegemony of the Western discourse on the third world women, neither have I attempted to 'encode and represent cultural Others' from the point of view of 'the native informant'. My

purpose here in referring to Mohanty is to dispel the perception that all the third world women are 'oppressed.' I wish to draw the attention of my readers to the fact that women discussed in this study should not be discerned without locating their contexts, class, and religious and cultural orientations. In the same vein, gender relations as well, should not be viewed with a simplistic lens where one class is dominant and the other is the dominated and therefore, oppressed. Socio-economic conditions, ethnicity, class, and religion are the factors that nurture and shape women and their subjectivities.

I have focused on four specific ways in which 'women' as a category of analysis is used in the plays that I have selected in this study, and these plays do not just represent these women "as a homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as implicit victims of particular cultural and socio-economic systems" (Mohanty 62). I have selected playwrights who have dealt with the same issues concerning women, from the case of female inmates, to women trafficking, from the problems related to motherhood and to the invisibility and vilification of the performing women across both sides of the border. It was not my intention to equate all the texts that I analyze; each text that I have examined has its respective strengths and weaknesses. The plays have explored different avenues and modes that are employed in suppressing women's voice and exercising control over their bodies.

The question is to what extent power relations can suppress women's voice? Have these plays portrayed women as vulnerable victims or incapable of answering back or as resistant beings? Or, I pose the question using Spivak's words, can the subaltern speak? Or, finally, as Spivak proposes, can the voice of the subaltern be represented by the intellectual? Dukhini, even in her death, could not be effaced



completely; her invisibility transforms her into a resistant 'subject' after her physical death. Jamila in *Barri* dares to defy the authority of the whole patriarchal set up which leads to tragic consequences. In the same vein, Mahsawata Devi's female protagonists are also resilient and powerful beings who can question the status quo. Both Nandini and Sujata in *Mother of 1084*, challenge the state, and Chandidasi in *Bayen* reclaims her motherhood and humanity through her death. Her silence is more powerful than her loud protests at the time of her ostracization by the angry mob. It can safely be said that female protagonists or the subalterns, in the plays by Nadeem, Devi, Padmanabhan, and Sharma, can speak.

However, I would like to add that Tendulkar's female protagonists are not as powerful or rebellious as Devi's or Nadeem's characters are, though, he does highlight the issues most oppressive to women in his plays like no other male Indian playwright. Kamla in *Kamla* has internalized her exploitation as a norm, with a stoic acceptance. Benare's state is kept ambiguous as we do not know whether she actually spoke or collapsed due to extreme pressure on her during the trial. During the course of the trial, she is 'told' to remain 'silent,' repeatedly which reinforces the play's major stance.

Additionally, the comparative scope of this study is an endeavor to enhance harmony and collective consciousness among women who have been combating against similar injustices across national lines. Pakistanis and Indians have shared history, culture, and land till 1947 split the country into two separate nation-states. Therefore, it is hard to discern differences until they are based on religion which was the major divisive factor during the colonial rule. Thus, playwrights from India as well as

Pakistan, have attempted to articulate the standpoint of the oppressed classes and have been striving to amplify the voices of the marginalized through their art.

Thus, it is not surprising that most of the plays in this study share similar themes, patriarchal ideologies of control, same biases and duplicitous standards of morality when it is related to female sexuality. Tendulkar's plays focus on these double standards in Indian society which is also applicable to Pakistani systems of patriarchal control. Mahesh dattani and Girish Karnad as well, like Tendulkar, focus on forbidden aspects of sexuality and tabooed subjects in Indian society.

However, the issue of female sexuality is significantly ignored by Pakistani playwrights, and remains an anathema in Pakistani literature including drama. Before the partition, an eminent Muslim female writer, Ismat Chughtai revealed the forbidden aspect of Indian society during those times, that is, homosexual desire between women. But, even after the publication of her groundbreaking short story, *Lihaaf (The Quilt)* before the independence, this subject is still considered a taboo. Nevertheless, themes related to sexuality are presented in a lurid manner in commercial Punjabi theater, which is considered risqué, and not appropriate to be viewed by educated or elite classes or women. Ajoka and many other groups who have worked toward developing alternative theater have brought women back to the spaces that were reserved exclusively for male audiences.

Nonetheless, there do exist certain points of departure when it comes to modes of oppression pertaining to women across both sides of the border. The problem of Sati or widow immolation is not an issue in Pakistani postcolonial or feminist scholarly debates, though it has remained the major focus of Indian postcolonial and feminist

theorists consistently. Dowry deaths is almost non-existent in Pakistan, but it is one of the burning feminist concerns in India. Female foeticide is another major issue that Indian society is facing at an alarming rate and which has also been focused in literature and feminist debates today. Although male child is considered precious and more auspicious in Pakistani society as well, female foeticide does not exist as a widespread social practice, as it is against the tenets of Islam. Though, state violence against women, rape incidents and domestic violence happen across borders and are highlighted in plays by writers from both sides.

Furthermore, compared to Pakistani alternative theater which is still struggling to make its mark around the globe, Indian theater is already an established phenomenon due to its ancient and rich dramatic tradition. Although Pakistani theater is still evolving, Ajoka, Lok Rehas and others in Punjab, and Napa and Tehreek-e-Niswan in Karachi have contributed significantly in establishing and reviving the lost tradition. Still, Ajoka is the most prominent theater group and have been experimenting and striving to present dramas with an objective of bringing social change.

Lastly, the question is as to where do I situate Ajoka theater in relation to the world theater? I assert that Nadeem and Gauhar have made a significant addition to the world drama, especially in the field of South Asian and postcolonial drama. Nadeem and Gauhar have not only made use of Brechtian tradition, but have also employed postcolonial strategies in their plays, like the use of indigenous languages instead of Urdu or English which they view as representing the status quo. They also perform and do street theater following Augusto Boal and usually highlight the issues concerned with the most oppressed segments of society. Likewise, Devi and Tripurari Sharma come

very close to Ajoka's ideology and theater practice because they also represent the most marginalized sections of Indian society including the Dalits, working class women, and lepers. Gayatri Spivak, the most noted Indian feminist and postcolonial theorist has examined Devi's short stories but has left her plays untouched.

This dissertation attempts to show that drama and theater can best engage with systems of formalized power and pave a way to creating spaces for resistance against the hegemonic cultural practices. The playwrights do not offer solutions but at least they can make the viewers think critically and question the status quo.

Lastly, this study is a humble attempt to bring these extraordinary works to notice in the field of dramatic studies as well. South Asian dramatists are usually ignored when it comes to designing world drama courses, as they are not duly acknowledged in the academia. My attempt has been to explore what has been ignored and left in oblivion and I hope this study will attain this objective.

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### Conclusion

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