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THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN THEATRE FROM GREEK THEATRE TO CONTEMPORARY THEATRE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The paper proposes to trace the struggle of women to find place in spaces of theatre. In the Greek times women could hardly occupy spaces in creative writings. During the Elizabethan age, there was little approval of the participation of women in theatre. When we move into the Eighteenth century there are quite a few women who are writing plays and the record of their works is found. In the beginning of the twentieth Century, the Suffrage movement was very prominent in Britain where women were fighting for their political and legal rights at almost the same time women were breaking new grounds in America as a part of the Harlem Renaissance – a period of intense creative activities by African-American writers, visual artists and musicians. The paper traces the long way still left to be traversed in their struggle in spite of the increasing strengthening position of women.

“The restoration of women to theatre history and to the living repertory is inseparable from advocacy for living female playwrights.” - Susan Jonas

The women in the Greek Theatre

The history of modern theatre can be traced back to the Greek times when theatre came in as a popular medium of entertainment. There were a number of playwrights whose plays continue to inspire and engage the readers and audiences alike across the centuries. The plays were mostly a part of the competition on the occasion of festival of Great Dionysia between the city states held annually where the dramatists presented their plays, not for commercial success but for the pride of the city state they belonged to (Zarrilli et al. 2006). Most of the plays were lost over the centuries. The actors wore masks and the chorus was not an appendage to the

main play as it came to be in the later developments of the theatre, but rather an integral part of the action and at times even a high point in the action.

It is interesting but the reality of the time was that women were not considered equal to men. They had no political rights and were only of use as bearers of children and as a part of religious ceremonies. The saying went at that time that “it is better for the women to be buried rather than to be married”. It was considered improper for women to even be seen around in public places and all the important decisions of the family and the state were taken by men. In such a misogynistic society, women could hardly occupy spaces in creative writings. But dramatists like Sophocles, Euripides have created a number of extraordinary women characters. Medea in *Medea* by Euripides fights the patriarchal society for her right to control her own

life and in the process kills not only her husband Jason's new mistress Corinth but also her own children from Jason, Electra in *Electra and Orestes* by along with her brother Orestes avenges for the murder of her father from her mother, Clytemnestra in *Oresteia* by Aeschylus murders Agamemnon who had forcibly married her after murdering her first husband. When he comes back from the Trojan war and spurns her, she plots his murder with her lover. What could have been the reason for such awesome stories woven around women? The probable answer is that like all great writers,

The picture did not change much during the next few centuries. The playhouses had often been frequented by prostitutes luring prospective customers. The church forbade public enactment of plays and theatres were closed down. But it was the church which later found the plays to be a very useful platform for propagating its views among the illiterate and common people through morality plays. This gave a new impetus to the theatre. Women still not welcome in theatres either as dramatists or even more as actors. But as Helena Modjeska puts it, the link between the ancient and modern theatre comes from the comedies by a woman, a German nun in the tenth century. Hrosvitha was a nun in the convent of Gandersheim. She was very well versed in the Latin literature and wrote a lot of poetry and some comedies. The comedies were all performed by the nuns of the convent before the royal court and high Church officials. The plays usually had very strong women characters. She was from a noble family from South Germany and entered the convent of Gandersheim as a catholic nun. She has almost 6 dramas in Latin written in rhymed prose. She wrote as an objection to the secular comedies and adopted the same style to write about the lives of saints. Her most famous work was *Gallicanus*.

But even during this phase of the phenomenal growth of theatre in England, there was little approval of the participation of women in theatre and men continued to enact roles of female characters. But in Italy and other countries across Europe, women were getting to be accepted on the stage. Isabella Andreini was among the most well known actresses during the late sixteenth century in

Italy and a member of the theatre company called the 'Gelosi'.

There were a number of rulers who not only patronized theatre but were instrumental in the development of theatre. Queen Elizabeth, Queen Anne (Wife of James I), Catherine de Medicis, Marie de Medicis were not only great patrons but were instrumental in encouraging other influential women to patronize theatre. Queen Anne was known to have performed in several Masques along with an active involvement in production of the court masques.

Women across social classes were also dramatists, translators, shareholders, employees in theatres and most importantly they were audiences in performances, making their presence in a theatre gradually acceptable as actresses as well.

Another important milestone reached in the participation of women in theatre was as managers and other responsibilities like running acting schools. The first woman to manage a theatre company was from Germany where she became the manager of the first German court theatre. Mrs Velthen was the wife of the company owner and after his death, she became the owner and manager of the company. Frederica Caroline Neuber also called Neuberin started an acting school as well by the name of Leipsic school of acting and built up an excellent repertory of plays. Her company faced stiff competition from the more popular forms like burlesque but she succeeded in creating a body of theatre with good quality productions.

Another woman from the German theatre who needs to be mentioned for her achievements as an actor at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is Antoinette Sophie Schroeder. Sophie Schroeder struck a balance between the realist approach of Hamburg School of acting and the idealist poetic approach of the Weimer School. She set a bar for the later generations to match or cross.

Women were a part of the Masque and there was no objection too that. Participating in Masques was not a taboo for women in the 16th Century mainly because it was more of a social activity and women wore masks. But when it came to

professional theatre, women were certainly not to be a part of the stage. The first time people saw women on the stage was in performances of a French theatre company patronized by the queen of King Charles II, Henrietta Maria. But with the growing influence of the Puritans in society, the company was thoroughly condemned and had to return to France.

The actresses were enigmatic figures for the people. Their presence in theatre was a novelty by itself but there was more to the women in theatre than that. They were required to be trained in reading, writing, social skills, singing, dancing, along with possessing attractive appearance. And since they were regularly entertaining the royal and other noble families, they were also interacting socially with elite. The first known performance where a woman enacted a lead role was Desdemona in *The Moor of Venice* in 1660 by Margaret Hughes. Later many women started appearing on stage, the more remarkable being Nell Gwynne, Anne Laceygirdle, Elizabeth Barry, Anne Oldfield. Sarah Siddie was one of the earliest actresses who gave respectability to the profession and made a mark solely by way of their talent and hard work. She was very famous for her roles of tragedians. Sarah Bernhardt was another remarkable actress who won international fame for her work. Apart from acting, Bernhardt was also a writer and wrote several plays and poetry. She has a star dedicated to her name in the Hollywood walk of fame.

By this time women were well established as actors in theatre as well as in films. The other journey that women had to undertake was as dramatists. After the first foray into writing plays with Hrosvitha, there was a long wait and a gap of centuries where no development could happen and women did not find acceptance in theatre as dramatists. It was only by the middle of the seventeenth century that we come to the first woman dramatist, Aphra Behn. She was a key restoration dramatist with several very successful plays like *The Rover* and *The Forc'd Marriage*. She wrote several novels and poetry in the later part of her life so much as for the fact that she was one of the earliest women, possibly the first, to have become a professional writer and earned a living

through her writings. Her life and achievements were brought into focus through the works of Bloomsbury group writers like Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. Though there were several women who wrote masques and translated plays like Jane Lumely, Mary Herbert, Margret Cavendish and Elizabeth Egerton, Behn was the one to win acclaim and credibility as a dramatist. She was followed by several women who wrote dramas and had successful run as dramatists and included Susannah Centlivre, Sophia Lee, Elizabeth Inchbald, Joanna Baillie.

Elizabeth Cary who wrote *Tragedy of Mariam* (1602,1613) was writing at the height of the popularity of theatre in England but there is very little recognition given to her work even in period specific studies though she was a very successful writer. Margret Cavendish the writer of *The Bell in Campo*(1662) and *Convent of Pleasure*(1668) was the other remarkable writer whose plays were very successful but who fails to find a mention among the greats of her age.

When we move into the Eighteenth century there are quite a few women who are writing plays and the record of their works is found. Mary Pix who wrote *The Spanish Wives*(1696) worked with Delariviere Manley and Catherine Trotter. As a group of women writers they did remarkable work and also faced a lot of social stigma for their presence in a territory marked for men. Hannah Cowley who wrote *The Belle's Strategem* (1780) was another notable dramatist along with being a poet with a formidable reputation.

By the beginning of the nineteenth the feminist voices had started gaining strength. Following Behn's footsteps, a number of other women started writing plays and some of them became successful. These literary figures included Delariver Manley (1670-1724), Mary Pix (1666-1709), Susannah Centlivre (c.1667-1723), Frances Sheridan (1724-1766), Elizabeth Griffith (1727-1793), Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821), Harriet Lee (1757-1851), Joanna Bailie (1762-1851) and Hannah Cowley (1743-1809).

A very important person who emerged in this phase and had a very long term impact on the

direction of theatre was Lillian Byllis. She inherited Royal Victoria Hall and Coffee Tavern from her aunt and renamed it The Old Vic in 1912. After initial attempts to get only musical organized at the place, she was compelled to stage plays there and these were mostly Shakespeare plays. Her contribution to nurturing English opera is landmark and so is her enthusiasm for Shakespeare's plays where a lot of the stars of films and theatre were nurtured. Her enthusiasm for staging plays with a high quality changed the way theatre was perceived or the expectations people could have from a theatrical production. The Old Vic became an institution that nurtured generations of theatre in terms of writing as well as productions.

In the Nineteenth century, a dramatic form emerged where the presence of women on the stage was not unwelcome. In fact it was the high point of the play. These were the Victorian burlesques which were parodies of classic plays and stories with a lot of parodies of popular songs, lots of music, double meaning dialogues and slapstick bawdy comedy. By the middle of the Nineteenth Century, the burlesque was a very popular form there as well. Although women performing in these plays were never looked upon with a lot of respect but it did help in breaking the taboo of the presence of women on the stage.

In the beginning of the twentieth Century, the Suffrage movement was very prominent in Britain where women were fighting for their political and legal rights. Plays written specifically for the movement were an attraction for the meetings and most often formed the closing note of the meetings. A remarkable play at this was Christopher St. John's *The First Actress* based on the life of Margret Hughes

At almost the same time women were breaking new grounds in America as a part of the Harlem Renaissance – a period of intense creative activities by African-American writers, visual artists and musicians. Regima M. Anderson played a pivotal role in the movement. She was a playwright and one of the founder members of the Harlem Experimental Theatre. Georgia Douglas Johnson was an important part of this movement in several ways. She hosted Salon parties on Saturdays where freewheeling discussions were held by some of the most

prominent figures associated with the movement. She was also a dramatist and several of her plays were well received. Marita Bonner, better known for her play *Purple Flower* is also an important part of the Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) becoming an extremely successful author and widely praised for her novels. Her first play, *Color Struck* was published in 1925 and her best known play, *Mule Bone* (1930) was in collaboration with Langston Hughes.

Among the early American dramatists was Mercy Otis Warren whose plays were never staged. She wrote mainly political satires and emerged as a radical writer who inspired a lot of women to take up writing drama. A dramatist who was inspired by Warren but wrote lighter satires was Susanna Rowson. She was a dramatist who also started acting in her plays. The most remarkable play by Rowson is *Slaves in Algiers* (1794)

In the first half of the 20th century, numerous women dramatists published their plays. Zona Gale (1874-1938) wrote a total of seven plays but also wrote short stories, novels and poetry. Her best play, *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920) was an adaptation of an earlier novel and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1921. One of the most influential playwrights of the time was Susan Glaspell (1876-1948). Glaspell won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1930 for her play *Alison's House*. Another central figure in American drama was Lillian Hellman (1905-1984). Her best known plays are the *Children's Hour* (1934), *The Little Foxes* (1939) and *Toys in the Attic* (1960). Anna Cora Mowatt was an actress who started writing plays and later turned to writing novels very successfully. She belonged to a "respectable" family and took to the stage for financial constraints. Her autobiography *Autobiography of an Actress* is an important account of the place and struggle of women in her times.

By the beginning of the 20th Century, women were firmly in place in theatre. Innes(1992) cites By giving giving the title 'Present tense - feminist theatre' to his book on the development of theatre in the twentieth Century, he indicates towards the emergence of women dramatists as a potentially energising force, given their political drive and desire

to experiment. This sets them apart and signals a new departure from the patterns and categories of playwriting.(Aston, 1994). But there was a lot to be desired in recognizing the capabilities and contribution of women to theatre. Brecht was a big influence on theatre and gave a new direction and a new language to theatre. But there was lot left to be desired when it came to finding women with creative freedom. Women stage directors were hard to come by and directors found it difficult to work with freedom. The mid twentieth century was an important phase when dramatists like Gertrude Stein and director Joan Littlewood created new spaces for women in theatre.

The plays of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) are deeply influenced by Modernism. Stein was an influential figure in drama and literary life in the United States. She used obscure language and shifted grammar in a way that suited her.

Joan Littlewood was deeply influenced by the theatre of Brecht. She established the Theatre Workshop with her husband Gerry Raffles, and some other friends which operated out of Stratford till it went to Theatre Royal in 1953. It won international reputation for its productions including Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*. Littlewood combined slapstick humour with serious satire to set a new style in improvised theatre. Dramatists like Ann Jellicoe at the Royal Court and Shelagh Delaney at Theatre Workshop were important writers in Britain and Susan Glaspell won a lot of respect as a dramatist but the following years did not find a generation of dramatists inspired by their success. It was only in the Eighties that we find Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, Beth Henley, Marsha Norman and Wendy Wasserstein inspiring a generation of young women to take up careers as dramatists.

By the time we come to the Seventies, the feminist movement has led to radical awareness about the need of mainstreaming the marginalized half of the world. In theatre the movement was reflected in the form of the development of the feminist theatre.

The feminist theatre could be seen as a mix of the feminist critical theory applied to theatre and

also theatre as a laboratory for the Feminist ideas. Aston cites Goodman to define feminist theatre as "feminist theatre is 'informed by' a number of disciplines, including, for example, women's studies, media studies or politics, at the same time as it is marginalised 'even within otherwise "liberal" institutions'". Women were not just a part of the play whose primary subject need not be woman and certainly no influence on the projected vision of the writer. By the time we come to the Eighties, the feminist approach is very well defined with a lot of variations. Playwrights like Simone Benmussa(*The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*), Helen Cixous(*Portrait of Dora*), Caryl Churchill(*Top Girls*), Adrienne Kennedy(*Funnyhouse of a Negro*) and Maria Irene Fornes(*Fefu and Her Friends*) concentrated on the marginalization faced by women. They redefine the way theatre looked upon itself and deconstructed the way stories were told to bring out a narrative about women embedded in the grand narratives borne from the a man's imagination even when they were stories about women.

In the 1970s, several shows created and performed by blacks were mainstream successes. Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), a series of poetic dance monologues in support of black women, set the standard for much feminist theatre. Maria Irene Fornes' *The Successful Life of 3*, Susan Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* are remarkable examples of feminist theatre.

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* brought her into limelight and established her as a leading voice in not just feminist theatre but also as a leading British dramatist of the previous century. Her works have called attention to the way theatre represented women.

Wendy Wasserstein is one of the most commercially successful dramatists of the American theatre. Her *Heidi Chronicles* deals with the life of Heidi as from high school through her growing up, and her experiences with feminist movement and moving on from there to finding an identity beyond in a light-hearted humorous tone. Though some scholars were critical of the liberal approach of her plays but it is generally accepted that they did carry

the awareness about the issues and experiences of women to a broader public.

Some other notable dramatists from both sides writing feminist theatre include Emily Mann, Zelda Fichandler, Joe Anne Akalitis, Megan Terry, Beth Henley, Yvonne Brewster, Thea Sharrock and Katie Mitchell.

Among the major Australian playwrights are Venessa Bates, Joanna Murrey-Smith, Lally Katz while among the directors, Cate Blanchett has earned a worldwide reputation through her productions in association with the Melbourne Theatre Company. Patricia Cornelius is a playwright, novelist, dramaturge and founding member of Melbourne Workers Theatre and Van Badham is a renowned theatre activist and critic. Among the major dramatists of the feminist theatre are Alma De Groen (*Vocations*), Dorothy Hewett (*The Chapel Perilous*), Noëlle Janaczewska (*Historia*), Eva Johnson (*Murras*), Jenney Kemp (*Remember*), Tes Lyssiotis (*Forty Lounge Café*), Suzanne Spinner (*Running Up a Dress*). Over the last three decades, they have explored ideas like racism, rape, mother-daughter relationship, man-woman relationship, ethnicity in their plays. They have explored the ideas from the perspective of women and their experiences as distinct from the responses elicited by a predominantly patriarchal system.

The Canadian women playwrights are as diverse as the multicultural multiethnic Canadian society. Canada has an active theatre scene with quite a lot of participation of women. Women are present in departments like costume designing, assistant directors, administrators though their participation as actors, dramatists and directors – the limelight people is still only in about a third of the total productions.

Sharon Pollock has greatly contributed to establishing the identity of Canadian theatre through her works as well as her views about theatre. She set up Garry Theatre as a place where plays are staged and people can walk in for watching even without purchasing a ticket.

Joan MacLeod explores the racial and social issues in her plays which are mainly political. One of

her most remarkable plays is *The Hope Slide* is a monologue about the struggle of an actress to live a life on her own terms unfettered by the social constraints. Djanet Sears, Marie Clements, and Judith Thompson are some other remarkable dramatists from Canada.

Tracy Power's plays *Miss Shakespeare* and *J Ceaser* with their all female cast exploring the new paradigms of storytelling show the strengthening voice of the women in Canadian theatre and in the theatre across the world.

Conclusion

To conclude, the women might have come a long way in making a mark in theatre but there are vast gaps and areas where a lot of ground needs to be covered. Playwright David Edgar signals 'the explosion of new women's theatre' in the 1980s, and theatre critic Benedict Nightingale, endorsing Edgar's view, cites women's drama as the 'most positive aspect' of the 1980s, an otherwise 'barren decade for new drama' (Aston, 1995). The hope comes in the form of an observation by a noted theatre critic about Britain which could be equally applied to the general feeling about theatre that while it seems that no exciting new talent seems to be emerging in the male playwrights but theatre is abuzz with fresh ideas and explorations by a host of extremely talented women.

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