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Semiotic Encryption of Women, Violence and Hysteria in Indian Women Dramaturgy

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Abstract

The juxtaposing depiction of women, violence and hysteria as semiotic elements in women-centric play-texts attempts to translate the theatrical meanings because of its demonstrable approach to unearth the textual meanings and its relational politics of representation. From semiological aspect, the interplay of women, violence and hysteria generates a kind of semiotic femaleness in order to prognosticate the feminist route of cultural politics imbedded in the narratives of female composed drama. The present paper intends to analyze the semiotic transformation of Indian women dramaturgy in the plays of Padmanabhan, Mehta and Sengupta. Each of their plays tries to interpret new meanings hidden under the semiotic signs used by these playwrights and also attempt to project the gender politics visualized in the realm of feminist theatre.

[**Keywords:** feminist theatre, semiotics, politics of representation, gest, violence against women.]

In harvesting the performance discourse of gyno-centric play-texts, the presentation of women, violence and hysteria juxtaposingly through the translation of semiotic signs draws scholarly attention because of its demonstrable approach to unearth the textual meanings and its relational politics of representation. From semiological aspect, the interplay of women, violence and hysteria generates a kind of semiotic femaleness in order to prognosticate the feminist route of cultural politics imbedded in the narratives of female composed drama. Women, violence and hysteria as individual dramatic element try to construct a semiotic uniformity for analyzing the performative value of WOMAN as semiotic sign. If we attempt to scrutinize (i) *woman* as emblematic ideology, (ii) *violence* as her suffering or suppression, (iii) *hysteria* as the dramatic/ stagable outburst of her prolonged repressed voice within a single frame, then we can get a causal relation behind delving out the feminist theatrical aesthetics of semiotics. This relational performance strategy of female dramaturgy traces interlink with the trio while investigating the female body and sexual politics in terms of theatrical language. Hence, by bracketing off these heterogeneous dramatic elements trio together, we can perceive the texts of feminist theatre as network of meanings.

While discussing the presence of women, presentation of violence and hysteria as semiotic objects of performance, then staging of semiotization through female performer's physical attributes along with her mimetic and

representational power itself turns into an entire set of signs due to its dynamism. Actually, women-centric plays intend to put this analogous combination of women, violence and hysteria on stage in order to decode the social position of women in cultural domain. The body and voice of actor being the fundamental theatrical icon must have the capability to convey some social gestures for sensitizing social response against the atrocity encountered by women. In this respect, Indian women dramaturgy attempts to portray of how the victimized female characters caused by violence and subsequent violence, are presented as semiotic signs under the wrapping of apparel and make-up.

In women drama, both theatre semiotics and feminist semiotic theory functions jointly to focus on the meaning of play-text. Theatre semiotics is predominantly the study of signs that human put on stage for others to interpret. Theatre semiotician Elaine Aston points out that the potentiality of semiotics lies in its approach of how drama and theatre are made in manifesting the inner meaning before audience. By understanding of semiotics or study of science, meaning of performance/ play-text can be both exchanged and generated. Every aspect of theatrical performance is a signifier and the signified is the inner meaning or message conveyed by the collective unconscious of audience. While theatre semioticians stresses on stage related elements, feminist theory focuses on cultural encoding of sign as the foundation of communication. The galvanization of theatrical and feminist studies of semiotics has been adopted by female playwrights of postmodern era which can be called feminist theatrical semiotics that explores the semiology of women drama to chart the interplay of culture and society.

In formulating the semiotic/semiological effect/application on feminist drama, Brecht's performance theory has much relevance today as it theorizes the fundamentality of gender and sexual difference. In terms of signs system, Brechtian theatre put the audience in a specific position to understand the social and changeable world. Therefore, theatre involves into a politics of sign, i.e. in Brechtian terminology called as 'gestus'. While Barthes defines 'gestus' as 'the external material expression of the social conflicts to which it bears witness' (Fortier, 29), Pavis defines it as 'an intentional signal emitted by the actor ... in order to indicate the character's social attitude and way of behaving in order to indicate 'the relation among people'. (Fortier, 30). The Brechtian theorizations of the social gesture, epic structure and alienation effect provides the means to reveal the material relations as the basis of social reality, to foreground and examine ideologically determined beliefs and unconscious habitual perceptions and to make visible those signs inscribed on the body which distinguish social behavior in relation to class, gender and history. For feminists, Brechtian techniques offer a way to examine the material conditions of gender behavior and their interaction with other socio-political factors. (Keyssar, 35-36). Brecht's gestural technique, the method for creating a central gesture or 'gest' usually employs by the feminists to reveal the relation between sexes.

However, semiotic performance theory examines the relationship between the signifiers and the signified in an attempt to understand how a given phenomenon creates meaning for its viewer and how that viewer participates in the creation of meaning. (Scott, 82). Feminist theatre theory primarily concerned with the sign Woman which is imprinted with ideology of the dominant culture, the normative values and belief of the culture control the connotations of the sign and prescribes its resonances with cultural biases. The cultural construct of 'woman' produced by dominant patriarchal ideology as an object has to be looked at by male who is assumed to be the subject of dramatic action and the female object of his gaze. The corporeal presence of a woman on stage in theatre makes biological and sexual phenomena cannot be denied by the viewer. The feminist approach to semiotics attempts to deconstruct the sign Woman in order to distinguish biology from culture and experience from ideology, bringing into question the entire notion of how one knows what the sign Woman means.

Women as a Semiotic Sign:

The presentation of Woman as sign onstage brings forth the issue of male gaze. The sign Woman constructed by and for male gaze. Both from the realm of production and reception, the female body onstage have been encoded with culturally determined components of male sexual desire. Indian women dramaturgy projects either female body or woman as sign in drama to interpret various angles of theatre semiotics. Padmanabhan, Mehta and Sengupta create the sign Woman and then put it onstage, rather than put before male visuality to scrutinize the voyeuristic pleasure.

Padmanabhan depicts a trailer of gang rape onstage intentionally to record the dehumanized reactions of male in *Lights Out*. The play dramatizes the urban apathy for rape and a total reluctance of involving in such uncivilized incident. The spectacle of mutilated female body along with brutality of gang rape on stage characterizes psycho-semiotics of the male gaze. Feminist film critic Cora Kaplan asserts that the sign Woman is constructed by and for the male gaze. The projection of dramatic text is 'scripted' by the female body. The twitching female body – its agonized movements on public display for male consumption denotes the hierarchical male theatrical supremacy within capitalist patriarchy. The action of mutilated female body on stage symbolizes the 'speaking the body' too. Woman on stage never presents the subject position rather she is invested with those qualities which the masculine gazer desires to construct as 'other'. The reception of audience about the woman on stage is almost same as male gaze: she appears before them as a site of gratifying desire as well as transforms into a kind of cultural courtesan. The description of "Three men, holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his – organ - into her!" (39) denotes not only sexual victimization of woman, but also highlights the psycho-somatic pleasure of seeing by male duo. The ongoing pornographic scene, may not be

considered or appeared as dehumanized sense of obscenity to them, rather, it acts as a voyeuristic pleasure to their optic system. Their desire for watching 'domesticated porn' from and within household provides a double meaning of happiness to them. Psychologically, there is a causal interlink between pornography and violent sexual aggression of men. The visualization of porn plays a vital role in institutionalizing a subhuman, victimized, second class status for women. In addition to this, their planning for taking the live snap of gang rape and its monetary advantage shows their malignity towards the commodification of female sexuality. Hence, the sadomasochistic pleasure of 'seeing' the sexuality brings a jouissance to them.

Again, by placing the two binary oppositions of female presence – Leela's hysterical behavior on one hand and Freida's silence on the other hand, Padmanabhan tries to create a concatenation of contrast, comparison and contradiction at a time. While the former attempts to voice forth the ugliness of victimization, the later confines her in a tight-lipped situation. May be, the dramatist endeavors to decode some socio-cultural semiotic meanings through the physical placement of her dramatic personality on stage. While, Leela, as a representative of upper middle class background, always strolls in front of the stage, Freida her domestic help never appears on the front stage. It is, as if, Padmanabhan restricts her actional zone within kitchen. Freida's static confinement particularizes dramatic/ theatrical marginalization. Being a marginalized one, playwright deliberately puts her on a border line. Thus Freida's physical movement, muteness has close affinity with her physical placement on stage which mingles the theatrical semiosis with gest. The spatial and non-functional gest of Freida somehow merges with her silence which not only de-voices the suppression of women but also decodes the gender location of class.

Padmanabhan's another semiotic application by depicting three different sound effects: heart rending cry for help of the rape victim lady, Leela's hysterical outburst and Freida's constant reticence generates a series of antithetical verbal/ non-verbal gest which tries to configure the reality of barbarism. Crying is an oral gesture through which the raped lady wants to verbalize her inner turmoil and physical agony, while Leela's hysteria is a strong performative gest through which she likes to ventilate her suppressed emotional pangs of ignorance. Freida's silence indicates a kind of saturation and subsequent acceptance for survival. This three gradual diminishing of resonance modulations denote the fathom of violence against women. The bizarre sounds of screaming intermittently - screams emanating from a woman in the construction site – who is raped and brutalized every night in the midst of arch lights signaling to a gender oppressive society.

Padmanabhan's another play *Harvest* projects the Woman as sign from quite different angle. Due to its futuristic setting, the playwright designs the character of Ginni as electronic simulacra through the onscreen contact module. She is recasting as a decoy by Virgil to cajole the male donors of third world. Padmanabhan's presentation of Ginni as a blonde and white skinned woman and

her sudden flickering from the polygonal contact module for continuing the panoptic vigilance upon its sellers proves the fact that the feminine presence has vital importance for consumeristic pleasure. Apparently angel like ad-looking of Ginni has been exhibited for male seduction or to arouse male sexual desire. The male gaze of Jeetu has already been trapped and manipulated by it and even is ready to do anything for her. Thus the superimposed computerized beauty Ginni acts as a social gest to estimate value of female corporeality. The theatrical projection of Ginni as fame fatal in terms of sign Woman signifies that the sexual or biological events cannot be denied from male viewer. The polygonal contact module serves as a watch tower. The panoptic vision of it turns the inside of the Prakash household into a prison.

In Mehta's play *Getting away with Murder*, the portrait of sign Woman in the poster of sweet: "a female clutching a tray of sweets to her awesome bosom and saying, 'Chum Chum'? to this phallic male who answers with a leer, 'Yum Yum!' (69) again denotes the female commodification for male viewer. The semiotic signification of it brings forth the issue of commodity fetishism.

Costume as a Semiotic Sign:

In Sengupta's plays the concept of sign Woman follows the postmodern patterns by using costume and make-up of ladies cast. Costume may denote iconically the mode of dress own by the dramatic figure but, at the same time, stand indexically for his/ her social position or profession. Significance of drama-costume from a semiological perspective in post-modern era unfastens new areas of discussion. Barthes being influenced by Saussure's concept of semiology, applied his linguistic model to fashion, costume, clothing and by delineating the 'vestimentary code' brought to light the signifying correlation between clothing and the world at large. Theatre semiotics have been explored by modern thinkers like Umberto Eco, Tadeusz Kowzan and Keir Elam, yet the theatrical costume as a sign has not been widely discussed. Possible subjects for a semiotic investigation may include language, tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, props, décor, lightening, music and sound effects.

Costume history, as an academic discipline, provides an opportunity for a study of signs within the world of performing arts, since costumes play an essential role in the creation and transmission of meaning. A costume is both a signification (by means of its materiality) and a signified (functioning as a semiotic element within a sign system). Thus, theatrical costume is a sign of a material thing. As artifact, costume represents fixed element within the semiotic system of a dramatic performance. Costumes are not subject to temporal constraints and are visually accessible even after the performance. The physique or materiality of costume does not usually change during the performance signify and modify by lightening, movements, narrative etc. 'Costume signs' helps audience to understand a specific character and its purpose of acting.

Rohnie Mirkin suggests that an awareness of the costumed body as a unified, functioning entity, embedded in social life can open new ways for studying cultural phenomena, but this reading of the costumed body as a part of the semiotic enterprise has already been explored by Foucault in his history of sexuality. Following Elam's differentiation between cultural codes (vestimentary and cosmetic codes) and dramatic subcodes, we may suggest that defining costume as an active sign when it is worn by a performer and allows an interaction between wearers of costume on stage, it creates a symbolic liaison between members of the same group. A costume on a person can be classified as an active sign, while a costume as an artifact is passive. A costume on a character is identical and therefore constantly in a motion at any point of stage.

In her sequel plays *Alipha* and *Thus Spake Soorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*, Sengupta introduces the costume as a social sign. By referring the dramatic costume as a theatrical *gestus*, Barthes describes it as 'a precise vestimentary code' that interprets a particular social role. The costume is not the real identity of a character, rather it's his/her doing role which s/he agrees to adopt. "The costume is a kind of writing and has the ambiguity of writing, which is an instrument in the service of a purpose which transcends it: but if the writing is either too rich, too beautiful or too ugly, it can no longer be read and fails in its function." (Fortier, 31). Gestic costume is therefore more like an index than an iconic which has the purport to look like reality than to point to it. In the beginning of stage direction, Sengupta deliberately stresses on the costume, make-up kit and mirror to display that dressing materials signifies lot to study the drama. Even the female cast of the drama WOMAN "dressed in contemporary travelling clothes." (Sengupta, 245) focuses on her modern outlook. With the development of the play, audience can notice that the WOMAN's average womanish looking is not so impressive for her co-traveler that resists him to talk with her. After that, her shifting into "the WOMAN dresses herself in a bright scarf which she winds round her neck leaving the ends hanging.. She accentuates her eyes and mouth with make-up, wears long earrings, a nose stud and a long glittering chain that swings as she moves. She changes her handbag to a more sophisticated slim bag and wears shoes with heels." (Sengupta, 257) shows the gradual process of attractiveness. Her changing from average to ultra modern 'uber sexy' looking denotes the socio-economic improvement which creates a magnetic appeal to her co-passenger MAN who is now totally paying attention to her. Thus her exhibitionism of attire acts as a social *gest* to aver that sign WOMAN has been put for male attraction. In *Alipha*, the dress code of WOMAN and MAN highlights the age and time coverage of narratives. The initial narrative of woman as a girl reflects through her childish gaits and actions, her fantasy about the epical characters ram and Ravana, her excitement about new school and frock. The teenage part of her replicates through wearing of long skirt or salwar kameez, while the grown up period of the woman "who is now dressed in a white sari" (225). Thus the gradual elevation from

girlhood to teenage to a lady mirrors by the sartorial alteration. Therefore apparel as a dramatic *gest* particularizes the social role of sign woman.

Hence, both Padmanabhan and Sengupta project their women rather construct their women from the point of view of cultural consumerist of dress code.

Staging Violence through Textual Performance:

Indian women dramaturgy applies the Brechtian techniques of 'gest' and 'alienation effect' to chart the gender relation with theatrical performance. And in this respect, the projection of violence on stage seems to be a common thematic issue of Indian women plays. Gender violence and mutilation of female body performing onstage requires extra skill of playwrights as most of Indian feminist plays centralize on this agenda for sensitizing the mass against it. So, while the Brechtian hypotheses paves way for analyzing gender enactment, another European stalwart of drama Antonin Artaud brings freshness and innovation in presenting the violence onstage through his path-breaking concept Theatre of Cruelty. The very idea therefore has been employed by Indian women dramatists for examining the language of violence in theatrical performance. Again, Indian dramaturgy being inherited from oriental heritage has been habituated with scared and ritualistic mode of theatre. In this regard, the Artaudian notion 'theatre of cruelty' acts as an implement for stageability of violence in Indian women drama.

The performative/ textual version of violence in tandem with cruelty in Indian women drama usually recasting in form of rape, witchery, multi-dimensional physical abuse that needs concrete visual expressions for spectatorial response. Artaudian theory introduces a stage dialect primarily based on gestures and sounds. For him, gesture is a kind of signal through which performer can communicate as well as entail the audience into the core of violent feelings. The inclusions of screaming, controlled sounds, eerie atmosphere, twitching body movements, half-spoken words, silence etc. create fervor for projecting the cruelty of violence. The presence of onstage visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, gestures along with meanings, physiognomies becomes signs in order to clarify the performative objectives within theatrical space. Though Artaud avoids the written plays but Indian dramatists like Padmanabhan, Mehta and Sengupta explore his theatrical idea and insert into their own in completely new way. The Artaudian vocabulary of violence in performance turns words into incarnation with the orientalist makeover practiced by the dramatist trio.

The Artaudian approach to feminist theatre gives a special recognition of using the body and nudity on stage. In terms of theatrical cruelty and its subsequent violence, the body on stage has become an image of overwhelming repression through gestures and movements. Staging the violence-thrashed female body as a more ambiguous, troubling sexualized object, Indian women playwrights

want to show how patriarchal assumption about women can be challenged in respect of Artaudian theatrical format.

Artaud maintains that theatrical cruelty “signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.” Cruelty is a conceptual fanaticism through which a heightened material presence on the stage is consumed in the fire of theatrical performance as it signals its metaphysical message to the audience. In conventional theatre material presence, i.e. the body on stage and any violence it may perpetrate or withstand, is veiled by meaning. In the theatre of Artaud material presence vaporizes in meaning. For performative violence to remain theatrical there must be some sort of distance between the audience and the spectacle. For the violence to retain its materiality to avoid sinking into discursive space and becoming an image of itself, it must move in some way to rupture the frame within which it is viewed. (Graver, 49)

As Artaud’s theatrical language is laced with images of pain and cruelty, so, Indian women dramaturgy attempts to reconstruct it at presenting the savagery of women violence. Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* creates the uncanny atmosphere at Leela-Bhaskar’s apartment by using the dimlight of candle along with the non-stopping screaming from outside. The phobia due to bizarre sound of gang rape, Leela feels is inexpressible: “I carry it around all day. Sometimes it’s like a shawl, it wraps itself around my shoulders and I start to shiver” (5). The imagery of shawl shows an indication of how appalling the tension may be. The fear wraps the innermost mind of Leela and she is struggling to free herself from this clogged situation. Just like a shawl we use to warm ourselves to protect from chilled weather, but fear chilled in her marrow, so there is no point of coziness. Padmanabhan’s dramatic setting promotes a situational imagery to portray her protagonist’s mental turmoil. Leela’s claustrophobia has merged with room’s light-and-shade. By availing the imageries of shawl and candle light together, dramatist tries to bring a feeling of uncanny to the audience. Again, the visualization of pain and cruelty of the victimized lady reminds the cause for putting the violence-thrashed body onstage for waving the agony of her towards audience. The gestural oscillation of a coercive sexualized female body onstage displays the fact of how patriarchal society engraving the pleasure of pain upon it.

Again Mohan’s looking for any sort of unusual objects like carved stones or figurines or ritual objects like relics, status, idols etc. around the spot along with “all the descriptions, the screaming, the wild abandon, the exhibitionism, yes, even the nakedness -” indicates the oriental practice of exorcism that creates a mystified aura within the theatrical space. Bhaskar’s opinion “illiterate people believe that when a demon possesses a woman, it is always via the – uh – lower orifice - ” (37) establishes the idea of exorcism more prominently. The issues of exorcism and demoniality along with its brutality in the Oriental context of theatre practice encapsulate the Artaudian approach to feminist drama. Padmanabhan very subtly applies the concept of theatrical cruelty to envisage the psycho-somatic agony of victim lady.

Mehta's both plays *Getting Away with Murder* and *Brides Are Not for Burning* (hence these are abbreviated as *GAWM* and *BANFB* respectively) somehow assimilate the theoretical and performative aspects of theatrical cruelty to display the Artaudian reflection on the technical discussion of Indian women dramaturgy. In her earlier play *BANFB*, Mehta projects the death scene at the end of Act II, scene 4. "The death of her sister by burning may be enacted, with visual effects, behind a scrim." (83) The dramatist includes the horrification of death by blazing that provokes Malini to scream loudly. Mehta wants to arouse the audience against dowry death by envisioning the cruelty of conflagration. Another play *GAWM* highlights the volume of savagery caused by witchery and female foeticide. Gopal, Sonali's brother and Malu's fiancé, a free-lancer photographer works on recent upsurge crime of witch burning in the remote areas of Bihar. His snaps on the montage on his wall displaying through slides fabricates the authentic stories of women like Indumati, Dulkha Devi, Minzari who are usually accused in names of witchery and sentenced to death by burning alive or beating. Though apparently these women happened to be victimized due to entrenched superstition but in reality, it's the foul plan of their relatives to usurp their lands. The allegation of witchery is nothing but a lame excuse for these widow and deserted women for coveting their lands. Mehta projects the cruelty of witchery through slide-show which is simultaneously narrated by Gopal. It shows the dread humiliation of these ladies who are either smeared with muck and then chased by the agitated mob who beat her ruthlessly until death and eventually throw her into river. Another common way of torment used by villagers for Dulkha Devi of Tharwari arouses awe feelings: "she was stripped naked within sight of police station, her face blackened, head shaved, forced to run around the village while the men beat her with burning brands and sticks till she died." (80). The close-up of witchery followed by Gopal's live experience adds extra visual effects within theatrical space. Artaud turns on visual imagery or gesture to decode the vocabulary of cruelty. Mehta arranges the same decoration to focus on the brutality of witchery and subsequently it makes double effects: it successfully draws spectatorial concentration towards atrocity against women. Mehta as a dramatist proves her acumen by using the minimal stage prop like a projector for discussing such vital agenda of contemporary Indian feminism. Like Artaud, she just moves from one slide to another to hold the audience attention and engross them into the harsh cruelty of life without uttering single words. Her transformation of words into signs via photograph reflects the Artaudian impact.

Mehta maintains another brief horrific spectacle regarding Sonali's female foeticide. During her first pregnancy when she came to know about the sex of her embryo through amniocentesis, she did a forceful foeticide to her unborn foetus. Her encounter with that painful memory "I remember – the terror of passivity ... and I see her twisted face – twitching thighs ... as they drag me out of her with forceps – a slimy, piteous mess" – (64) stirs us like chill in marrow. Again, in delirium, she talks like "nothing to tell. Happened fast. All in rush. Pain. Blood.

Then it – or what-you-might-call She. I flushed It or She away ...” (75) expresses her sadistic pleasure after eliminating the embryo ‘She’ from womb. The gore situation due to unscientific abortion brings forth the unbearable pain of Sonali. But, it’s the credit of Mehta to present such kind of ferocity only through two dialogues of Sonali. While staging the violence like female foeticide again reminds the Artaudian economy of words to express the innermost pangs of bestiality.

Semiotization/ Politicization of Hysteria:

The psycho-sexual barbarity against women portrayed by Indian women dramatists eventually flags out a major thrust of feminist drama: the projection of hysteria on stage. Usually, female dramatists have the proclivity to depict their females through this disease as it not only serves as a dramatic strategy to ventilate the suppressed feelings or melancholia of them but to propagate the clinical grand finale of the severity of violence against them. In this regard, hysteria along with trauma and melancholia stands as a cornerstone discussion in feminist theatre scholarship. The puzzling juxtaposition of hysteria, trauma and violence endeavors to justify the core principle of women dramaturgy that not only makes for cultural amusement but it legitimizes to roil the emotional equilibrium of human mind regarding the sociological concerns of women. Hence, the interaction of hysteria as a psychoanalytical discourse as well as a theatrical performance with that of semiotics invites an argument of gender performativity. So we may say that the Waldian term ‘performative malady’ is aptly applicable for performing the hysteria onstage.

Hysteria, being most strongly identified with feminism exists on a kind of continuum. Clinical observations of hysteria claim an intense sexual association with it and in this regard, the incident of unwanted rape and its aftermath ultimately culminates into hysteria. Due to its frequent linkup with female sexuality, hysterical gestures also assume as erotic. The cultivation of multilayered atrocities against women attempts to highlight the ongoing feminist debate about the criminality or assaultive nature of rape in terms of Foucauldian power/knowledge criteria. Though the act of rape is the most heinous crime against women but its aftermath seems more critical to overcome that sometimes culminate into hysterical outburst for them. The unbridled trauma affects them mentally, physically and emotionally. The recurring psycho-somatic trauma of rape usually exasperates the victim from time to time and hence gradually turns into a hysterical subjectivity. The trouble of self-distrust, masochism, depression due to sexual victimization imposes a sense of social skepticism upon the victim lady that may be called as a ‘second rape’. Scholar like Laura Hegenhold chiefly explores of how does rape ‘hysterize’ women.

Clinical history, however, archives hysteria as the ‘daughter’s disease’ which may be a mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options. The feminization of hysteria traces the maze of feminism,

gender study, semiotics, discourse theory and psychoanalysis with that of medical science. The etymological links up between 'hysteria' and 'herstory' in feminist scholarship happens so frequently that it bolsters the feminine attitude of hysteria. Hysteria takes its gendered etymological roots from the Greek origin '*hystera*' that denotes womb. The fact that hysteria apparently favored a female disposition corresponded with the conflation of hysteria with the signifiers of both femaleness (sex) and femininity (gender) to such a degree that the terms female, femininity and hysteria actually became inter-exchangeable. (Preez, 47).

Feminist understanding of hysteria presents it "as a specifically feminine protolanguage, communicating through the body message that cannot be verbalized. ...a specifically feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy." (Showalter). Hysteria has always been constructed as a "woman's disease" pregnant with characteristics of mutability. Biologically all women are more or less hysterical and they carry the seeds of it. It is a kind of temperament that rudimentarily constitutes the womanish nature. The hysterical seizure has been regarded as an acting out of female sexual experience, a spasm of hyper-femininity, mimicking during both childbirth and female orgasm. Generally representing of women as hysterical heroines from male point view either ignores or detours the inner feelings of loss, pangs, anguish of their torments. But now, intervention of women historians amplify that hysteria is caused by women's oppressive social roles which originates from male dominance. From feminist perspective, hysteria in women offers new dimension which decrypts physical symptoms, psychotherapeutic exchanges and literary texts as the presentations of conflict over the meaning of femininity in a particular historical context. Juliet Mitchell configures the hysteria as 'the daughter's disease' consists of a syndrome of physical and linguistic protest against the social and symbolic laws of the Father. Again, Lacanian feminist critics views hysteria as a women's language of body or pre-oedipal semiotics. Therefore, politicizing the hysteria, one can deploy the power or powerlessness of feminist narratives.

Hysteria, being a familiar mannerism in women's theatre, functions as a universalizing container for the repressed, silenced histories of female sufferings. The body of the hysteric is a repository trauma that represents the symptoms of what Elaine Showalter has termed as 'female malady'. The iconographic maneuvering of a corporeal language of female sufferings affords the visual translation of gender oppression. While the corporeal iconography of hysteria translates or speaks, there lies a risk of unveiling the wrongs or harms done to women. In this regard, we may say that depicting hysteria in women-centric plays intends to recreate the spectacularized and fetishized object of curiosity. Thus performing hysteria encourages rebellious behavior for breaking out of the male rules and regulations governing the socio-cultural space.

Addressing the status of hysteria, trauma and melancholia as powerful tropes in contemporary dramatic genre, female playwrights intend to highlight their extensive presence within theatrical space that might be helpful to

correspondence between dramatists' aesthetic concerns and established theoretical framework. The 'Madwoman' syndrome of women drama usually dramatizes through the hysteria. While performing the hysteria of females in women-made plays, the female dramaturges intentionally shifts her space from attic to living room in order to visualize her trauma and outburst. They dare to drag her from attic to living room for transforming her oppression, suppression into a kind of stageability. This prioritization attempts a step further towards liberation of women. Her hysterical voice functions as an agency of her pejorative claims before patriarchy. The leitmotifs of hysteria, trauma in women theatrical terminology not merely posits as conceptual or analytical category but it launches them as 'performative maladies'.

By adopting hysteria as an analytical implement for their plays Indian feminist dramatists endeavor to decode the agony of this silent suffering before audience. While trying to express the female tales of repression, playwrights apply the hysteria as a device to ventilate their bottled up feelings. Their language of repression, suppression and oppression transcribe the knowledge of sufferings. The rhetoric of hysteria as a performative strategy embodies the split between the languages of written/ spoken text and that of the speaking body of dramatic persona, in order to translate the public staging of a private trauma of a feminine subject. Both for dramatist and performer, hysteria functions as a dual performance strategy of vocal speech and silent expressive gestures to set the political awareness and to communicate with audience in terms of feminist performance theory. Padmanabhan and Mehta exemplify the hysteria in two different ways to convey their respective message to audience.

The play *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan dramatizes the visualization of a gang rape which ultimately destroys two lives – the lady who is raped and Leela who witnesses it. Right from the beginning, the protagonist Leela appears as a neurotic one. The juxtaposing sound of help and brutalized ecstasy makes a sense of unnatural frightening feeling in her mind. She becomes so squeezed in tension throughout the day. The phobia she feels is inexpressible: "I carry it around all day. Sometimes it's like a shawl, it wraps itself around my shoulders and I start to shiver". (5) The imagery of shawl shows an indication of how appalling the tension may be. The fear wraps the innermost mind of Leela and she is struggling to free herself from this clogged situation. Just like a shawl we use to warm ourselves to protect from the chilled weather, but fear chilled her in marrow, there is no question of coziness. Leela's constant nagging over Bhaskar's overlooking mentality culminates into hysterization for her. The helpless and hapless condition of the raped lady is the reflective outcome through Leela's delirium. The pain and torment of molestation which the raped lady gets bodily, Leela, the psycho victim of this, takes it mentally and emotionally. But her torture is so subtle, that it is hard to recognize. She remains speechless for sometimes, only sobbing is audible.

Though, Leela is not the direct victim of such awful savagery, but the visual effect of gang rape acts as a great blow upon her psyche. The aftermath of rape i.e.

the trauma of rape is more horrific and painful than the rape itself. The threat of rape turns her into a paranoid one in quotidian life. The Foucauldian refusal of considering rape as a mere tool responsible for women's hysteria may be wholeheartedly acceptable for Bhaskar. His carefully carelessness attitude towards his wife enhances her suffering. The disapproval nature of Bhaskar hurts to Leela's hyper sensitive mind. By ignoring her subtle pangs, Bhaskar devalued her femininity that shakes the credibility of her own discourse and self-understanding. This very sense of ignorance, insecurity and self-distrust due to non-supportive mood of Bhaskar, makes her alienated and skeptic one and throws a psychological war to them. This condition experienced by many rape victims, is termed as 'second rape'. Leela, though not a typical, but in some different way, is the prey of this vulnerability of rape and its trauma which predominate the whole drama and becomes a destructive agent for Leela's mental tranquility.

Mehta presents more heart-rending portrait of her female lead Sonali's hysterical behavior during pregnancy. Sonali who has victimized in childhood sexual brutality for a long time, now often collapses by memorizing her retrospect. Her hysterical speaking body communicates via symptom that cannot be expressed in verbal language. Her doubly-split self wanders from a petulant 8-year old girl to a full grown married woman. From a dramatic point of view, Mehta utilizes the body of language and vocal intonation to explore and hint at the existence of her regression. Her practice of mirror-gazing demonstrates the in-between non-articulative position of a hysterical woman. Her hysterical outburst has close affinity with the Ibsenian heroine *Hedda Gabler* and Cixous's *Dora*. Through her hysteria, she wants to exonerate herself from guilt that was repressed in unconscious. Her hysterical gestures like fainting, headache, self-destructive anger and abuse denotes the psychosis which happens to sexually abusive survivors. Mehta creates a double-layered dialogue in scene III and IV for Sonali to communicate with audience in order to unveil her mental agitation. Her incoherent meaningless hysterical words are beyond read or realization but it offers an alternative picture of a woman who exceeds or subverts the bounds of patriarchal society.

The linguistic approach of hysteria discourse seems utterly relevance in studying the case of Leela and Sonali in the respective plays of Padmanabhan and Mehta as both dramatists follow the 'lost speech' mode for their hysteric girls. Their hysterical gestures are almost same as if they are searching or fighting for words to communicate with the world. Again their refusal and struggle for talking may be a kind of rejection of the patriarchal orthodoxy. Though hysteria signifies through quivering of body in performance but it's particularly a protest via unspeakable speech against social norms. Helene Cixous's minute observation "hysteria is a kind of female language that opposes the rigid structures of male discourse and thought. ... hysterics have lost speech... their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't hear because it's the body that talks and man doesn't hear the

body. The hysteric is the “woman-type in all her power...” is argumentatively applicable both for Sonali and Leela.

Again, some other stage prop or mimetic gesture use in plays simplifying the semiotic codification for audience reader. Like, a photo frame on the wall partly codifies the meaning of Sonali’s agony in hysteria. Her pointing towards a painting of uncle Narotom alias ‘the red monster’ in a wired colour somehow reminds the dark retrospective of her adolescence in which she was sexually victimized due to the filthy perversion of this oldie. At the same time Gopal’s miming of how they arranged the pseudo accident in bit of vengeance also serves as a performative psychotherapy to dig out the emotions and incidents from patient’s (here, Sonali) life in order to gain back her lost consciousness. Hence, we may truly say that performative malady i.e. hysteria onstage genuinely turns into a female mode of expression. So, the historiography of hysteria ultimately redirects from a female malady into a performative malady in terms of feminist theatre.

Wrapping Up

By wrapping up all these issues together, audience can able to get a comprehensible meaning of how women dramatists want to decode the central leitmotif of gender and politics of representation in their plays. The observation of women from three different semiotic lens projects a transparent pictograph of how the male society likes to see our women. But Padmanabhan, Mehta and Sengupta being determined to portray the real picture of women in their plays, they go reverse. So, their selection of semiotic signs like women, violence and hysteria is to some extent a feminist theatrical appraisal for conveying social meaning as well as receiving social response. They initially project their women rather construct their women from the point of view of cultural consumerist of dress-code. Next, they have been inspired by the Artaudian notion of theatrical cruelty to dramatize the female violence onstage. Their use of fragmentary dialogues, uncanny atmosphere, and least stage prop etc. translate the volume of brutality. Eventually the dramatist trio dramatizes the hysteria to articulate the acute pain and trauma of violence. The oscillation of violence- thrashed female body on stage renders the social mutilation of female folk which needs to pay attention from its grass-roots level in order to empower and ameliorate the women condition of this society. Hence, the amalgamation of women, violence and hysteria in a single diagram supposes to encrypt the multilayered theatrical meanings successfully.

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