

Sexual/Textual Politics in Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*

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Abstract - Feminist theatre challenges the patriarchal hegemonic cultural discourses of representation and establishes of the perspectives and experiences of women which had been marginalized for ages and ages. The contemporary women playwrights try to redefine traditional way of looking female body and sexuality. The blows on a woman's body is the main issue that is discussed in Poile Sengupta's first full length play *Mangalam*. The violence faced by women characters in this play, is not merely physical, more often mental and emotional. She dramatizes serious social issues such as rape, incest, molestation, gender discrimination, domestic violence and many more into the light. She expresses the plight of rape victim, both in a traditional orthodox family and in a modern urban family. The present paper entitled as "Sexual / Textual Politics in Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*" is a journey through the mind of women characters in the play. This paper discusses the victimization and objectification of female and attempts to revise and re-read the feminine psyche. The paper scrutinizes the textual representation of the female body as the passive recipient of the gender inscriptions with a view to challenge the notorious patriarchal ideology inscribed in it.

Index Terms - Gender exploitation, Incest, Male domination, Rape, Sexual harassment.

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."

- Simon de Beauvoir (The Second Sex)

Femininity can be considered as a culturally constructed, consist of attributes, behaviors and subject positions that generally associated with women. It is socially constructed and continuously produced. Women became an object of exploitations of patriarchal society. They experience violence from the hands of the male dominated society. Violence against the women is 'universal' in scope, although varied in form, according to geographical and cultural context.

Women face such oppressions and exploitations in every part world. And this is similar in case of Indian women also. Most of the male dominated society sees women as an object meant for their sexual pleasure

and treat her as an inferior being. The violence against women is multi – faceted. It is not merely physical, more often mental and emotional. The aftereffect of such violence on a woman's psyche is highly complicated one, which is difficult to understand and to overcome.

Several poets, novelists and dramatists have written about the painful plight of violence that a woman has to face throughout her life. And drama as a literary genre offers a commentary on the various aspects of life. Dramatists have taken up many socially and politically relevant issues regarding cultural analysis. They introduced bold and socially relevant theme on the stage craft such as incest, child abuse, rape, violence, changing form of love, marriages, family, etc.

Indian English theatre gave rise to the tradition of women playwrights. Many women dramatists like Mahasweta Devi, Usha Ganguly, Dina Mehta, Tripurari Sharma, Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta and Mallika Sarabhai have contributed seriously to the development of Indian English drama. These women dramatists have registered the involvement of feminine into cultural practices. They depicts the crimes that committed against women in the name of tradition and culture in a male dominated society.

Drama became a powerful weapon for social critique and reform. Using drama as a tool, these dramatists capture the conscience of people. The main aim of these dramatists is to catch the attention of people towards the gender biased exploitations. They present themselves as a spokesperson for the society. They tried to show how an Indian woman's orientation towards her sexuality can be used to define an alternative ethos of expression, without shying away from her sexuality, as is often considered to be the mindset of Indian women.

Poile Sengupta, the pen name of Ambika Gopalakrishnan, a Malayali born English writer. She is well known as a playwright and writer for children.

She primarily focuses on the issues of women and raises her voice as a protest against crimes against women.

As a playwright, her first full length play is *Mangalam* (1993), which won the award for the most socially relevant theme in The Hindu – Madras Players Playscripts Competition in 1993. *Mangalam*, a mirror to pressing social issues – exploitation of women. It is a finely structured play of Poile Sengupta that looks at the types of exploitation of which women are subjected to – whether in a conservative – rural or modern – urban household. Throughout this play, she has depicted harassment of women in male dominated society from ancient age till today. Yet the scenario is not changed. Women are still suffering. The play covers the women centered issues like rape, domestic violence, betrayal, molestations, incest, gender discrimination, male domination etc.

The play *Mangalam* deals with two contrasting milieus. The crux of the play deals with the politics within two different families from two different ways of life, from the women’s perspective. It deals with serrated relationships behind ostensibly normal households, whether it be a small town or in a modern cosmopolitan family both in South India. She used Shakespearean play within a play technique.

This play is a mirror to an Indian especially South – Indian women. The main theme of the play is the treatment of violence against women in patriarchal society and in family. The play *Mangalam* is divided into two acts. The first act takes place in a traditional Brahmin family. The second act is in a modern urban family. The women in both conditions face same problems.

The first act locates a traditional setting in a typical orthodox Brahmin family. The first act consists of three scenes, which revolve around ‘Mangalam’, the central character. She is an object of hatred and violence in the hands of her husband Dorai throughout her life. She was the victim of a rape by her brother – in – law Periappa. And due to this, she became pregnant before her marriage. Mangalam suffers throughout her life for the sin she has never committed.

The second act focuses a similar issue takes place in a modern sophisticated urban family. In this act, the play centers on Sumati. She too was a victim, at first, from the hands of her fiancé and then by her father’s friend Nari. Poile Sengupta tried to convey the fact that

however the society has modernized in terms of living standards and education, the mindset of this patriarchal society has yet to change.

In the first act, Mangalam, the central character is a symbol of motherhood. She has died. Only her reference to the time of her life when she was alive is provided. Dorai, Mangalam’s husband is a typical patriarch. He is indirectly the reason for her death. Sriram, Mani, Usha, Chitra, Kannan were their children.

In scene one itself, the domestic violence and dowry related issues discusses. Usha, Dorai’s daughter is a victim of such issues. Because of continuous torture and suppression that she faced in her husband’s house, she left his house. Her parents tried to fulfill their demands by selling ornaments and utensils in their house. Yet, the money minded in – laws demands for dowry is still growing. Usha wished to get marry a college lecturer. But her father denied it and fixed her marriage with a rich man. No one bothered about her feelings and emotions. Usha suffered a lot. As this is from her neighbor Kamala:

KAMALA: So? The pain is the same. Anyway, now they are making life miserable for Usha, in spite of sacks and sacks of gifts that go to that house from here. I don’t know why they got the girl married so quickly. She was only in college... (p 106)

The difference in a man’s treatment to his wife and sister is also depicted clearly through the character Mani, Dorai’s son. Revathy, Mani’s wife finds his partiality and his inclination towards his sister Chitra. He points out that women waste too much of their time indulging in pretty issues and brings out that he always points out her and not her sister – in – law:

REVATHY: Yes, that’s what you say when it comes to your wife. But what about your sister. Then everything changes. Ayyo! poor girl. (p 95)

From this, Poile Sengupta is not indicating the jealousy of Revathy, but her wishes to get the same attention from her husband.

Similarly Poile Sengupta discusses about the dreams that parents have about their children from the conversations between Dorai and Thangam, Mangalam’s sister. And through this Poile Sengupta raises a serious issue.

DORAI: My wife wanted Chitra to go for higher studies. I will see my Daughter becomes an IAS officer.

THANGAM: And what happened when my sister wanted to study?

And when Usha got that scholarship? Did you allow them

To study?... (p 100)

Thangam, Mangalam's sister sees marriage as not a joining of two souls, but as a binding rope that is suffocation a woman. She comes to the house and makes a scathing remark on Dorai. Thus she says:

THANGAM: he has been like this since the day he tied the thali

around the poor Girl's neck!

Thali, it was like a rope.

She compares thali to a rope which symbolically represents the story of a woman's sufferings, her slavery, loss of freedom, and the loss of identity from the moment she gets married. Mangalam was always afraid of her husband as it can be seen through Thankam's words:

THANKAM: she was afraid of you. My poor sister, she was afraid

of you. Don't I know it? You are a raakshasan. A

Kaliyuga Raakshasan. (p 99)

Even Thankam was unsuccessful in her marital relationship. It was Periappa who raped her sister. Yet Thankam has to live with him and the reason behind this is she is a woman. She suffers a lot to adjust with him. He had illicit relationship with many other ladies. She adjusted and lives with him for her children.

Chitra, Dorai's daughter elopes with the boy whom she chooses to marry. So he burst to Kannan when he asks for his school fees. According to him, the girls who have love affairs are equal to whores. He says:

DORAI: "Your mother is dead and your whore sister has eloped and

you come here for fees." (p109)

According to Dorai's view he feels that he was cheated. Dorai was a son of a poor priest. And he gets trapped by the monetary attractions of Mangalam's father, a wealthy man. He cheated him by hiding Mangalam's pre – marital pregnancy.

DORAI: ... her family bought me to keep their name, her father

bought me to keep his self respect, for his daughter's self-

respect. (p 110)

Mangalam kept it as a secret from her husband till her death. She has never said the name of the person whose baby she was carrying. When Dorai came to know about her pre – marital pregnancy, he punishes her a lot. And later Thankam accuses him:

THANKAM: ... you stayed with her so that you could punish her

every minute of her life. You mocked her and taunted her, I have seen marks of your hands on her body,

your

nail marks. (p 121)

Dorai confesses his crime. But he thinks that Mangalam herself is responsible for his deeds. He says:

DORAI: ... she wouldn't tell me, firstly I asked her softly and then I

beat her, she stayed quiet, she wouldn't cry out of pain...

(p 121)

At the climax of first act, they identify the truth behind Mangalam's dreadful incident that she hides from everyone. When Mani goes in search of Chitra, he comes to know the answer of his mother's pre – marital pregnancy. Thankam's intoxicated husband Periappa raped Mangalam at a tender age as "she was just a valid flower..." (p 124). This happens when Thankam had gone to temple for ten minutes.

The performance of chorus is a very important factor in the play. The words uttered by the chorus summarize the way a woman exists in our society and how much a man understands her. From the presence of these chorus, the playwright talks about marriage, and difference in perspectives of male and female who are tied together through a thali relation.

FEMALE VOICE: Women die many kinds of deaths: men don't

know this.

For them, when a woman cooks and arranges flowers in her hair and makes place in the bed, she is alive.

But women can smile, she can pin flowers in her hair

She arranges a red dot on her forehead and makes place in the bead

Because her husband is alive she may be dead.

Poile Sengupta mainly focuses the female psyche in this play. The heroine is a rape victim and she carries out the grief throughout her life. Woman's body has

treated always as an object. Mangalam's father never thinks about daughter's mentality. He always bothered in safeguarding the dignity of his family. When husband know the truth, he too sees her merely as an object to discharge his frustrations. She was innocent in this and repaid her life for the sin of other. She is just a puppet in the hand of male dominated society which includes her husband.

In the second act, Poile Sengupta introduces the life of a woman from the modern sophisticated urban family. The problem is same as that happened to Mangalam. In this act, Sumati was the victim of the abuse, adultery and exploitation by those who are close to her family. At first, she faces from the hands of her fiancé when she goes out with him. At climax, we can see her father's friend Nari molests her.

The second act begins with the discussion between the siblings Sumati and Suresh about the play that they seen in the last night. Suresh is a flirt and disrespects women. Sumati recounts her childhood experiences. She was always neglected and more concern was always getting to her brother Suresh. She was expected to behave like grown up ones in her childhood. She has only one question to ask to her mother that itself is the best example that reveals her grief.

SUMATI: ...have you ever asked me how it was for me at school... apart from my marks, that is? What I thought of my friends, my teachers, whom I loved most? I even don't remember you singing me to sleep. You brought me up efficiently, correctly but without soul. (p131)

Sumati gets jealous to her mother, as she got a perfect partner that is her father. As the age of eighteen, her father married her mother and provided financial security to her. But the reality is harsh. Her mother suffered badly in her married life. She had to adjust a lot with Sreeni, her father. Sreeni too had illicit relationship with other women.

Sumati's parents fixed her marriage with a boy from a rich family and get engaged. Before her marriage when she goes out with her fiancé, but he treated her violently and left scars on her. She asserts: "*A woman who allows herself to be soft, who relinquishes her weapons... well she gets chewed up, doesn't she? I know it is a terrible expression, but then it's a terrible state to be in...*" (p 148) Later her father's friend, Nari, who is a fatherly figure for her misbehaved with her. In the final scene of the act, Nari appears on the

stage and notices well grown Sumati. For him, she is now a blossomed flower. At the end, from the back stage, we can hear Sumati's voice that makes us clear that she was molested by Nari.

SUMATI: Uncle...no...no...Appa, Appa... (p 150)

The play comes to end with a poem:

*As for the woman, the God said
Let them be strong rooted, like trees*

The end of the world together,

And there will be storms

And the winds will blow very strong

But the woman will stay like trees,

They will hold the world together. (p 151)

Poile Sengupta succeeds in demonstrating the harsh reality of the issues that is faced by a woman in her life. She represents the domination of patriarchal society on the stage. She mainly intended to highlight the nature of female subjugation. She raises her voice against the sexual harassment faced by woman in her life. We can see a wide difference between the traditional and modern that is improved life styles, better education, advanced technologies; yet the mindset of man towards woman is not changed. The patriarchal society gave no value for a woman. For them, woman is made up of two words Woo + Man which mean woman is born for wooing man. A woman is never free in her life.

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