

Marginalised in Matrimony: A Critical Reading of Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*

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Abstract

Poile Sengupta's debut play *Mangalam* (1993) explores the marginalised position of women within matrimonial/familial/patriarchal networks. The focal point is the institution of marriage and how it keeps women oppressed. This paper explores the various performative techniques employed in the play, which work as feminist tools to come up with a performance which is deeply conscious of its distinctively feminist identity and expression. It is contended that patriarchal institutions of society, such as marriage and family, work as enablers in perpetuating violence and marginalisation and breaking away from these institutions stigmatises the image of a woman. The paper follows descriptive research, largely based on textual analysis from various secondary sources and uses feminist theories to contextualise it. The paper also incorporates theories from theatre studies to study the performative aspects of the play.

Keywords: Feminist theatre, Indian drama in English, *Mangalam*, marginalisation, matrimony, play-within-a-play, voice-over

Introduction

The rise of women dramatists and women's issues on the Indian stage occurred parallel to the rise of feminism in India and reached its peak during the decade of 1990s. Singh (2019) commenting on the role of women dramatists in Indian drama writing in English states:

To do theatre for these modern dramatists like Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta and Poile Sengupta has been to protest against violence, injustice, and ignorance, to assert values that help survive on the

terrestrial plane and concomitantly to transcend to higher levels of being. (p. 153)

Writing in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, (25 April 1992) Agnes called the decade of the 1980s the 'golden period for women' in India as a slew of laws were enacted to protect women against violence. However, she also admitted that most of these laws remained ineffective as social attitudes had not changed. Much more than legislation would be required to bring about effective change and this is where women speaking up about women's issues, through whatever means available to them, became important. In this, as we know, art, literature, theatre played a key role. However, as Dharwadker (2019) points out:

Unlike the autonomy and comforting privacy of print, the public, performative, collaborative and materially demanding medium of theatre seems to place women at a distinct disadvantage, especially in India, where the vast majority of them are still circumscribed within the domestic sphere. (p. xcii)

Hence, the act of choosing the genre of performance is in itself an ambitious choice, looking at the highly gendered theatrical space. Poile Sengupta, in writing and producing her own plays, takes up the role of a cultural producer of the feminist experience within the domestic space. Sengupta's plays, particularly *Mangalam*, her debut play, can be easily categorised as being "woman-conscious" in essence. According to Curb (1985), "the term 'woman-conscious' encompasses all drama by and about women that is characterised by multiple interior reflections of women's lives and perceptions" (p. 302).

Mangalam, performed for the first time in 1993, centres around domestic violence and sexual abuse. In this, the institution of family and marriage play a key role as the oppression of women, domestic violence and sexual abuse are enabled by the very men of their family. The play, thus, also interrogates the idea of the family as a safe space. In the Preface (2010) to *Mangalam*, Sengupta categorically states that "Even while our rapid economic growth offers financial independence to an increasing number of women, domestic violence and sexual abuse of the girl child persist in Indian society" (p. 21). In *Mangalam* Sengupta suggests that even in the modernised world, the Indian marriage remains an unequal space, where women continue to face discrimination and exploitation and that the family is no defence against it, in fact the structure of the family is such that discrimination and abuse are built into it.

Social scientists Tharu and Niranjana (1994) writing about dowry deaths at almost the same time as Sengupta was writing the play state:

Women's groups who investigated 'dowry deaths' demonstrated how the designation of the family as private domain restricted women's access to protection against domestic violence. They exposed the collusion of the law, police, medical system and the family in classifying these deaths as suicides. (p. 94)

Mangalam revolves around two different families in the two acts of the play. The family in Act I is an orthodox, middle class Tamil Brahmin family where the women are confined by strong patriarchal restrictions. The dead eponymous character, Mangalam, and her daughter, Usha, were sexually abused when young and have had to pay a price for it. These women are financially dependent on their husbands which is the primary reason for their inability to break away from the cycle of abuse. But in Act II the women are better educated and financially independent and can resist both sexual pressure and patriarchy better. At the end of the play, however, everyone comes together as if to click a family photograph, metaphorically depicting how, despite having the means to leave abusive relationships, women are bound to stay together because of the larger force of the family and to maintain its ideal image.

Since Act I is a play within a play, the actual play begins from Act II as the characters in Act II reflect upon the characters in Act I. The device of a play-within-a-play is not merely a theatrical device but is used as a meta-narrative for the universal commonality of women's marginalisation. Sengupta dramatises the cruelty of gendered violence in Act I, and the immediate realisation that it was a play-within-a-play in Act II, allows the audience to distance itself from the action of the play and instead of having a cathartic experience makes them think critically. Sengupta's final message through the play, that women across all sections of the society are exploited and marginalised, materialises when the audience realises that both the acts are performed by the same actors and in the process the boundaries between fiction and 'reality', modern and traditional, are blurred, highlighting the harsh reality of women's oppression.

In Act I, in a conversation between the couple Revathy and Mani, there is a glimpse of the humiliation that women have to endure at the hands of their respective families. On Revathy's complaint that Mani's mother has given much to his sister as dowry, Mani defends his mother: "If she wanted to give things to her daughter, she had every right to. She

used to tell me that she never wanted Usha to be humiliated like she used to be in her husband's house" (p. 24). Ironically, even as Mani defends his mother's efforts to ensure a peaceful life for his sister, he is oblivious of his own wife's marginalised situation and cannot prevent the humiliation meted out to her due to the lack of the material resources she brought.

Thangam, Mangalam's elder sister appears on the stage, wailing and mourning the death of Mangalam and denouncing the home as a "house of mourning" (p. 26). She openly blames her brother-in-law and the patriarch of the family, Dorai, for Mangalam's death, "As if I don't remember what happened the last time I was here. I should have taken my poor sister away from you even then. If I had done that, she would still be alive today, the poor girl" (p. 28). It is apparent that only Thangam and Dorai know about the real cause of Mangalam's death. Thangam is the foil to Dorai as she constantly taunts and attacks him. The house that Dorai and Mangalam live in, is in fact part of the dowry that she had brought with her. But there is little credit that she gets for it from her husband and it is Dorai who asserts his authority over the house.

Dorai is angry at the prospect of a widow taking decisions: "I will not allow a shaven head to fix my child's marriage. That woman will leave my house immediately" (p. 32). Dorai's malicious insults point to the larger marginalisation that women face in a society which gives little respect to widows. Thangam is the eldest woman in the house but her wish to arrange Chitra's marriage is unacceptable to Dorai because she is a widow. This androcentrism is the root cause of the marginalisation which forces women to think, act and live within the confines of a male-centric world.

It is significant to note that this is an orthodox Brahmin family which values caste pride, highlighted through decisions regarding marriages and manners. For an auspicious occasion like a wedding, it would be blasphemous for Dorai to allow a widow to arrange his daughter's marriage. Sengupta highlights this aspect which is integral to the power dynamics in the Indian context. By going beyond class hierarchies and focusing on Indian issues like caste, Indian feminism took a key shift, moving away from Western notions of feminism and making their approach intersectional.

The setbacks that women have to face in getting education is also touched upon by Sengupta. Thangam points out how Dorai was always against

Mangalam and Usha's education, who despite being better educated, had still to submit to their husbands' wills. There is a general conception in a patriarchal society that women, if educated, will cease to obey the men-folk, revolt against the androcentric society and will then demand a more equitable distribution of rights and resources. And a patriarchal set up can never tolerate this.

None of the other characters seems to be moved by the death of Mangalam. Dorai greets the people coming in to commiserate with great enthusiasm. The stage directions make amply clear Sengupta's critique of the cultural mannerisms and hypocrisies of middle class societies: "As she [Revathi] offers the coffee around, starting with the men, there is the usual declining and accepting, the expression of condolences and the cultivation of an air of gloom even while enjoying the coffee" (p. 37). In an ironic and satiric tone, Sengupta depicts how the death of Mangalam seems to hold little significance in the house.

One of the ways in which men control women is through the use of gendered abuses, which is not only targeted mostly against the female sex, but also plays a significant role in marginalising them. Dorai, in a fit of rage, abuses his children in the following manner: "My children are all fools. My sons are fools and my daughters are prostitutes" (p. 48). Dorai will simply call his sons "fools", whereas in the case of his daughters he refers to them condescendingly as "prostitutes". Chitra's elopement earns her the title of a "whore", thereby associating any transgression by the female sex with abusively crude sexuality as a means to demeaning them.

One of the striking features of the play is that not only is it written in English when few dramatists in India were writing originally in English but that the debate around the choice of language, and in fact the choice of form, becomes a central concern in Act II. In his assessment of language and genre in Indian dramatic tradition, Lal (2009) insightfully comments on Indian theatre in English:

While Indians have accepted English as one more Indian tongue, nowhere except in Mumbai (and perhaps Delhi) is English theatre commercially viable; amateur groups, rather than risk untried Indian dramatists, still rely heavily on a Western repertoire to attract playgoers. (p. 25)

This has, however, changed in the last few decades when Indian drama in English gained relative strength and playwrights like Sengupta emerged

as pioneers in the field. However, even though a significant number of playwrights began to write for the theatre, few wrote in English, with the exception of Manjula Padmanabham and Mahesh Dattani among the major playwrights, which leads us to question why Sengupta chose to write in English and how her choice of language has impacted her other choices.

The emphasis of the first generation of playwrights after independence was to write in the Indian languages, such as Hindi, Bangla, Marathi, using indigenous theatre forms. In those early years, though many plays were produced in English, most were either plays by Western dramatists or were plays translated from Indian languages into English. Plays written in English by Indian playwrights were few and far between, mainly because plays written originally in Indian languages were seen as being more authentic to the Indian experience and as having a wider reach. English language theatre was seen as elitist, attracting an urban, middle class audience, which saw theatre as entertainment, a place to see and be seen. And yet, such an audience offered a brighter spotlight and a pan Indian presence. It also allowed one to deal with themes in a far more nuanced manner and raise far more complex issues.

This question, in the context of Polie Sengupta's play *Mangalam* becomes even more interesting because Sengupta takes it head on in the play, sometimes having a quiet laugh at herself, writing a play "which is like an MGR film" (p. 39). And yet, it is not just the language but the entire process of writing and producing a play that deserves a closer look. Discussing the play they had watched the night before, Sumati comments:

Sumati: Isn't it sad that with so many languages in our own land, we use English when talking to each other?

Suresh: Why should it be sad? English is also one of our languages; it's been with us for more than two centuries. . . . how can you say it's sad?

Sumati: It is. I feel it is. I feel as if I don't belong anywhere. I'm not English, because I'm brown and I eat with my fingers. I don't belong to India, because I think in English and have all sorts of ideas that are not part of the culture I was born into. . . . The play [we watched yesterday] is in English, you know but its about a small-town Tamil family. A very rooted family, upper middle class. In actual life, a family like that would not use English at all, except the father, perhaps, in his place of work. And what the writer has tried to do is

to use an un-English syntax to show that the characters are not meant to be speaking English. The things they said, the images they use, they were not English. The script sounded like a translation. (pp. 101-103)

This critique of English is, of course, embedded in the larger question about the value and impact of play writing and play production:

Suresh: everything about the play was false, the behaviour of the characters, the dialogue, the characters, the story, everything. ...You think real people actually speak that way to each other? Brother-in-law, what I know, I know. My sister was a flower, an innocent flower. (pp. 86-87)

So the question arises, are plays/film/art to be appreciated only if they approximate to 'real' life? Is a play 'just a play' and nothing more as Sumati asks. Do only aspects such as the language, plot and the acting make an impact or do we look for something deeper, something that "reached out and touched you... raked your memories and made an old scar burn alive?" (p. 92) Moreover, why are plays, particularly plays by women playwrights, seem simply as 'hobbies' and women writers as dilettantes whose work can be dismissed, wrapped up in a 'huge sweet lie' as 'a truly memorable experience, unforgettable' without giving them a second thought? Would we do the same if the dramatist had been a man? *Mangalam* forces us to take these questions seriously.

In an interesting twist, Polie places the very sophisticated, English speaking audience that comes to watch her plays at the centre of *Mangalam* for that is what the characters of Act II are. So the play is not just a straightforward narrative about women's abuse and exploitation but also about the act of seeing and performing, a play about watching a play; the impact it has on its audience as well as questions of representation: whose narrative matters and why; and who are the ones who are allowed to speak and who are the ones who are silenced. As the characters of Act I morph into the characters of Act II, Sengupta suggests that those watching a play today, if they remain uninvolved and unmoved, will turn into variations of those same characters, even if more sophisticated and polished. Today's spectators are tomorrow's actors, fighting the same demons and the same issues. It also suggests that play acting is part of everyday life, whether we see it as such or not. The men act as responsible members of society though they are far from being so. The women act as if nothing has happened though that too is not true. We, the audience, act as neutral spectators, pretending to

not exist as we sit in a proscenium theatre, watching a 'realistic' play, as if the 'lights out' wipes us out. But we are very much there, watching, absorbing, bearing witness, and in fact bringing the play into being because without an audience there would be no theatre, no drama. So also, the drama of life requires an audience even as we pretend that we are being true to ourselves and others don't matter. The audience we perform for is society. If there were no society to which we must bow, there would be no need to put up pretences, no need to hide, no need to put up a show. Also, very often we pretend to be invisible, as if we are hardly there, even as we watch what goes on around us, and then refuse to intervene, to do anything about it. We see but refuse to become witnesses. This is how abuse perpetrates itself.

To add to the dramatic and poetic effect, the playwright introduces a voice-over, a disembodied voice which critically comments on the action. Act I has 5 voice-overs and when it is first heard we are told that it is a female voice while the stage directions identify it as that of the 'narrator', who speaks as the action on stage goes on silently. At the end of Act I we are told that it is the voice of Usha, that has read out "all the poems" (p. 79). It is significant that of the three women who are incessantly discussed but do not appear in Act I, Mangalam, Chitra and Usha, Usha is the only one who makes a fleeting appearance towards the end, but only to bring the curtain down on the Act. Though Usha makes a return to her father's house, most likely for good, we cannot be sure, given the hostile attitude of Dorai. Chitra escapes from the patriarchal bond, altogether we hope, choosing to speak only through the three-line letter she left at the Bank and Mangalam does not speak at all. All three are women erased, silenced, wiped out but the voice-over keeps them alive, not allowing their voices to die out.

The first two voice-overs seem to be about Mangalam, making her come alive before the audience though she has been silenced for good. And the poems construct her from inside, a woman who may "arrange flowers in her hair" (p. 37), adorn "a red dot on her forehead" (p. 38) and "make place in the bed because her husband is alive" (p. 38), but still be dead; a woman in whose mind "small is significant" because "her life is made up of threads" (p. 47). The third voice-over comments on the "house of mourning" (p. 53) in which the hypocrisies seem to be collapsing. The fourth and the fifth voice-overs underline the theme of the play: the woman's womb, which always "betrays her" (p. 63) and how a woman

“is not allowed to speak/others speak for her/and she never learns her words” (p. 76).

The focus of the dramatist is on the womb, which is emblematic of the identity of a woman. The voice believes that the womb is the safest place in the world but realises soon enough that it is not a private space even for the woman. The line between the private and the public in this case becomes blurred and the playwright shows how a woman has to forgo even her own womb in a male dominated society.

The female voice-over is significant in this play. It not only allows Sengupta to comment critically on the issues that she has raised but also gives rise to a feminist consciousness and a language which is entirely her own. Mukherjee (2005), in the much-acclaimed *Prolegomenon to Women's Theatre*, contends that “Language is a primary tool for the dramatist. The essentially masculine structure of language poses a problem of discovering and de-forming linguistic patterns for women playwrights.” (p. 12) The female voice-over is a break from the linguistic pattern and attempts a de(forming) of male-centric rhetoric. The decade of 1970s and 1980s provided a momentum to feminist theatre in India. It was the time when women's rise in theatre intersected with theatrical experimentation, as women playwrights countered male centric conventions. Mangai (2015) points out that this was the time of “emergence of a woman's language in theatre” (p. 27). The female voice-over is a theatrical tool to represent this woman's language in theatre. Hence, the female voice-over is a moment in feminist theatre in the 1990s when a woman director, actor and a playwright uses it to break a fixed tradition and charter into new feminist theatrical avenues in India.

Voicing Feminist Concerns

At the end of the her 'Preface', Sengupta again reiterates the need for women to stand up together against the oppressor, “Women must come together, then, to find support and strength amongst themselves. There must be realisation that theirs is the power, the hope, the faith, that they alone can hold the ends of the world together” (p. 22). This female solidarity that Sengupta advocates, points to the larger place and importance that rebellion as a theme plays in her works. Nothing will change till women themselves change. This is particularly evident in *Mangalam*, *Alipha*, and *Inner Laws*, some other plays by Sengupta.

Case (1988) states that: “During the 1980s, feminist theory has risen to prominence both within the feminist movement and within the context

of dominant theoretical practices" (p. 112). Sengupta is perhaps one of the earliest proponents in India of this new poetics/ theatrics in dramatic production which offered a blend of activism and theoretical practice. The stage then was opened to female subject(s). This led to Sengupta's theatre becoming a sort of "laboratory" (p. 132) as Case calls it, a laboratory of experimentation and activism:

The feminist in theatre can create the laboratory in which the single most effective mode of repression—gender—can be exposed, dismantled and removed; the same laboratory may produce the representation of a subject who is liberated from the repressions of the past and capable of signalling a new age for both women and men. (p. 132)

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