

STAGING SUBJUGATION: AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S VOICES AND RESISTANCE IN POILE SENGUPTA'S MANGALAM

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Abstract

This study delves into Poile Sengupta's play *Mangalam*, a pivotal work that examines the intricacies of women's subjugation within the Indian societal framework, employing drama as a potent medium for discourse. Through a comprehensive analysis of the play, this paper highlights the recurrent themes of patriarchal dominance, sexual violence, and the marginalization of women across various strata of society. Sengupta's adept use of dramatic elements to portray the visceral realities of female exploitation and resistance offers a window into the lived experiences of women ensnared in the web of societal norms and male-dominated power structures. By situating the play within the broader context of Indian English drama and feminist literature, the study uncovers the nuanced ways in which Sengupta voices the silent struggles and the undying spirit of resistance among women. In doing so, it not only celebrates Sengupta's contribution to Indian theatre but also reaffirms the significance of drama as a vehicle for social critique and change. Through *Mangalam*, Sengupta extends an invitation to reconsider the narratives surrounding female agency, empowerment, and liberation, thereby contributing to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality and women's rights in contemporary society.

Keywords: Poile Sengupta, *Mangalam*, Women's Subjugation, Indian English Drama, Patriarchal Dominance, Sexual Violence, Feminist Literature, Resistance and Empowerment, Gender Equality

Introduction

Drama, as a literary form, is a powerful tool for concretizing intangible human emotions and ideas. Its practical advantages include being built with clear structure and being stage-performable. It makes the described emotions and events (on the pages) seem real. Drama has been around for just as long as the written word. There has been a huge shift in the way plays are written from the time of ancient Greece to the current day. At first, its main purpose in production was to provide amusement. Over time, it evolved into a crucial channel through which modern concerns might be articulated in service of certain ends.

Drama provides comments on many facets of human experience. Love, hate, family issues, politics, societal problems, history, nationalism, racial conflicts, the fight against slavery, the empowerment of women and the liberation of humans are all common topics in popular literature.

The rich history, traditions, and customs of India are well-known across the globe. Playwrights in India's thriving English-language theatre scene have tackled a wide range of

sociopolitical and culturally significant topics. Incest, child abuse, violence, the morphing nature of love, marriage, and the family are just some of the diverse and daring topics that have emerged on Indian stages in recent years. Playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, C.T. Khanolkar, Badal Sirkar, and Mohan Rakesh used cutting-edge techniques and ideas in their work. At the same time, women authors have established a legacy in Indian English theatre. For budding female writers, it has become a powerful forum. Mahashwetadevi, Usha Ganguly, Dina Mehta, Tripurari Sharma, Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta, and Mallika Sarabhai are just a few of the numerous female dramatists who have made significant contributions to the evolution of Indian English Drama. Women playwrights have documented the historical presence of women in cultural practises. They have decided to take a gendered approach to addressing long-ignored, under-represented topics. They give voice to many of the social and political debates that plague the so-called contemporary nation by sharing their experiences in their own tongue. They show how males in a patriarchal society justify violence against women by using custom and ritual. Playwrights often take on the role of spokesman for their community while performing for an audience. It may be used as a catalyst for change and societal criticism. A playwright may tap into the audience's emotions in this manner. Playwrights in India are using this gender prejudice in the politics of exploitation to draw the attention of the general public.

Poile Sengupta, whose real name is Ambika Gopalkrishnan, entered the world in 1948. She is a well-known Indian dramatist who writes in English. Concurrently, she writes in various forms, including novels, short tales, and poetry. She attended the National School of Drama and is now a seasoned performer in cinema and on stage. She is well-versed in the country's social and cultural challenges since she is a college professor and educational consultant. She writes mostly on topics affecting women. She speaks out against many assaults on women. She draws attention to societal problems such as female feticide, rape, incest, child abuse, and the enslavement of women through dramatising actual events.

A number of plays, including “*Mangalam* (1993), *Inner Laws* (1994), *Keats was a Tuber* (1996), *lipha*(2001), *Samara's Song* (2007), *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* (2001), *A Pretty Business* (1998), *Collages* (1995), etc.,” are credited to Poile Sengupta. Her plays mostly take place in Indian settings. The subject of women's marginalisation is, at base, a major concern of her plays. Both *Thus Spoke Shoorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni* and *Mangalam* illustrate harassment of women by males in societies dominated by men, a problem that has persisted from ancient times to the present. There is still discrimination against women.

Poile Sengupta creates a stereotypical Indian lady, destined for subjugation, in her first full-length drama, *Mangalam*. The drama expands beyond a stereotypically feminist aim to examine the broader context in which men unleash cruelty and violence on women. She uses Shakespeare's play-within-a-play structure to highlight a synthesis of theatrical repertory and literary portrayal of women's challenges. *Mangalam* got the first prize in the 1993 Hindu-Madras Player's Playscripts Competition for its insightful commentary on modern life. Here she zeroes down on the issue of female victimisation. The purpose of *Mangalam* is to learn

about the struggles women face and how they cope with societal hostility and extremes. The scene often returns to the topic of violence against women in patriarchal society and the family unit. Poile Sengupta adds to its success in her theatrical universe. Among the numerous traumatic experiences she has had include being a victim of rape, incest, molestation, gender discrimination, male domination, and domestic abuse.

Poile Sengupta plays the title role, a woman named *Mangalam* who has been the target of her husband's anger and cruelty her whole life. Since she was carrying another man's kid outside of wedlock, in his eyes, she was a sinner. Her brother-in-law Pariappa was the unfortunate offender. Every day, *Mangalam* was shamed by her husband, who didn't hold back in his attempts to humiliate her. *Mangalam* is tormented by the guilt she feels for a sin she has never committed. Poile Sengupta writes from the perspective of a woman who has been raped.

The drama consists of two parts, or acts. In the first act, we see a middle-class, religiously devout Bramhin family. The second act shifts emphasis to similarly pervasive problems in the so-called contemporary world. The striking dissimilarity between these two actions forces the reader to consider the possibility that, despite the improvements in technology, medicine, and infrastructure, mentality has not kept pace with the rest of society's progress towards progress. Characters are given dual roles as players and spectators, a method known as play within a play, which is utilised to increase the story's emotional and intellectual effect. The play's audience and readers have a front-row seat to the characters' inner turmoil and their long-kept secrets.

Mangalam, the play's protagonist, is the focus of the first act's three acts. Even though she is no longer physically present, she is still very much present in the memories of those who knew her during her lifetime. This story is about how *Mangalam* is sexually enslaved and manipulated by her captors. She epitomises the Indian female experience.

The first act takes place in a typical Bramhin family home. Motherhood is represented by the mangalm. A short time ago, she passed away. Her spouse Dorai represents the traditional male role. He raised Sriram, Mani, Usha, Chitra, and Kannan as a parent. Indirectly, he is to blame for her death. Our oldest son, Sriram, is now residing in the United States.

Dorai's daughter Usha also goes back to live with her dad. She finally had the courage to leave her husband after he subjected her to years of abuse and denial. Domestic violence and dowry victims both represent cruel forms of violence in the context of India's political and social climate. Dowry refers to the monetary and/or material assets given by the bride's family to the groom's family upon the couple's marriage. However, Usha's in-laws are quite materialistic, and they have been increasingly demanding dowry from her. At the play's outset, it's made quite evident that her parents are attempting to meet their demands by selling household items. Usha's father did not approve of her marriage plans with a professor. To maintain the honour of the family, he arranged her marriage to a wealthy guy. It didn't matter how she felt. Her own family didn't accept her, and neither did her in-laws. Her in-laws' avarice causes them to mistreat her. According to Kamla, Usha's next-door neighbour,

“they are making life miserable for Usha, despite the sacks upon sacks of

gifts that go to that house from here. (106”).

The second son, Mani, is now settled in the same home with his wife, Revathy. Chitra, the eldest daughter, has eloped with a male she prefers.

Thangam, *Mangalam's* sister, suspects Dorai of being complicit in her brother's murder. She is unafraid to hold Dorai responsible for the death of *Mangalam*. Thangam is worried about masculine dominance. Despite the fact that her husband raped her sister, she is still obligated to stay in the marriage. She feels compelled to remain with her husband despite his unreliability because of their marriage vows. On the contrary, as her husband's wife, she owes him her undying devotion. In the second act, Thangam also feels the effects of her husband's affair with another woman. Their children are the reason she stays with him. In a patriarchal culture, women are constantly put down and so pushed to the margins.

Kannan starts off Scene 2 by asking for money for tuition. Dorai's thoughts about Chitra's elopement with the youngster trigger a violent explosion of his pent-up rage. He thinks females who get involved in affairs are the same as prostitutes.

“your mother is dead and your whore sister has eloped and you come here for fees, Dorai yells, demonstrating his rage.(109).”

Dorai performs a feat of fury by rehashing an old argument with his wife. *Mangalam's* father Dorai claims that a rich guy lied to him about his daughter's unwed pregnancy. The lure of money might be too much for Dorai, the son of a poor priest:

“Her family bought me to keep their name, her father bought me to keep his self-respect, for his daughter's self-respect.(110) “

However, the truth is exposed in Act Three. Dorai's malice for her leads him to torture her. His oppression of *Mangalam* is an act of revenge for her and her family. Thangam says he's guilty of staying with her just to torment her for the rest of her life. You tormented her, teased her, and left your nail marks all over her body; I know this because I was there when it happened(121). Dorai admits his guilt, but blames *Mangalam* for her husband's disappointment since she hid something from him. she wouldn't tell me, first I asked her softly and then I beat her, she stayed quiet, she wouldn't cry out of pain, she says, implying that she never revealed the identity of the father of the child she carried.(121). The solution is revealed to Mani towards the conclusion of the first act, when he goes in pursuit of Chitra. Thangam's husband was inebriated and raped their little daughter *Mangalam* while she was in the temple for 10 minutes, saying things like,

“she was just a valid, a flower...(124).”

After the death of the matriarch, *Mangalam*, the family is seen in the first act grieving. She appears throughout the play as a recollection. She had several emotional deaths before her physical death. The best way to express it is as:

“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 bed

Because her husband is alive she may be dead. (102)''

It examines the female mind in great detail. The play's protagonist suffers from rape. She has been burdened by this loss her whole life. Friends and loved ones are often the perpetrators of sexual harassment, assault, or other forms of sexual abuse, according to a recent poll. The word *Mangalam* suffers from the same problem. Thangam, her sister, usually disappears for around five minutes whenever she visits. When Thangam's husband Priappa saw *Mangalam* in full flower, he was captivated. Her brother-in-law raped her when she was quite young, and he was drunk. Like a delicate flower, she has been squished. Her own family member murders her emotionally:

''Because a woman is strong, she is not to be protected; Others violate her and she must pay for their trespass. (123)''

Domestic settings, formerly thought to be the safest for women's chastity, have instead become hotspots for sexual abuse, leaving them trapped. It's quite evident that the female body has always been seen as property. As the parent of a daughter, he is concerned more with protecting the honour of his family than with the impact of his daughter's actions. Now that her husband knows, she's fair game for all of his complaints and outbursts. Though she was totally innocent in the act, she had to repay for the sin of other. Her whole existence is a puppet in a culture dominated by men. Her husband abused her because she is no longer religious; he called her things like

''Her life is made of threads, when man knows this, her fragile secret. He's tearing everything to bits, holding on by a thread (107).''

She has been humiliated to the point that she would rather take her own life than face him again. Despite having a fever, she refuses to see a doctor.

The play's second act focuses on the contemporary metropolitan family. Still, it's the same old issue. Abuse, infidelity, and exploitation by individuals with intimate ties to the contemporary, affluent family have all been portrayed as problems plaguing this group. Nari, a friend of Sumati's father, molested her at the climax after she had been assaulted by her fiancé earlier in the story. Women of all eras and cultures are just as likely to engage in sexual misconduct. Poile Sengupta deserves praise for her excellent attempt to portray onstage everyday realities laced with violence against women.

Sumati is envious of her mother. Her mother found the ideal companion in her daughter's father. When he turned eighteen, he decided to love her for who she is. He ensured her future prosperity by providing for her financially. Yet the reality was far different. Her mother's marriage to Sreeni was a source of intense pain for her. He's seeing someone else than his girlfriend. Thangam discovers the letter in a book by a female author.

The second act opens on a tragic note, with a conversation between Sumati and her brother Suresh. They talk about the play they saw last night. Suresh is a flirt. Men like him treat women poorly. His conversations with Sumati hint to this. In a patriarchal culture, women, she says, are nothing more than objects of control. She emphasises the following:

''The way you talked about girls, about women, you don't seem to have a speck of respect for them... the moment the woman doesn't fit into the

category of being a mother or sister, she is a baggage, sexual baggage(129)”

Sumati knows firsthand that an antagonistic force is to blame for the dramatic shifts in her life since she has experienced them firsthand. A family friend of her father assaulted her. The father of the protagonists, Nari, appears in the play's last scene. He observes a mature Sumati. *Uncle..no..no...Apap, Apap... (150)* is spoken by Sumati offstage. He starts flirting with her. It alludes to the fact that she was molested by Nari.

Sumati recalls being a girl and always being second fiddle to her brother. She makes the remarkable observation that her mother is especially attentive to her younger brother. Instead, she was constantly ignored. It was required of her that she act responsibly. She is presumed to be familiar with the expectations placed on her. She experiences bias on a regular basis because of the difference between her and her brother. The fear of being victimised causes her a lot of pain. Grief is evident in the questions she is asking her mother:

“...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.” (131)”

Radha and Shekhar, two new characters, appear onstage at the same time. Radha tells Sumati about the incident. In the instance of Sumati, we see the brutal recurrence of exploitation. The heir of a wealthy family proposed to Sumati, and she accepted. Her fiance, while being part of an arranged marriage, abused her. She now bears the deep scars of this terrible event. They get chewed up, she says, because

“A woman who allows herself to be soft, who relinquishes her weapons, well, she gets chewed up. It's a horrible way to put it, but being in that condition is horrible, too. (148)”

When they went out, her fiance made advances towards sexually assaulting her. Her father's friend and surrogate father, Nari, is the second time that bad luck has followed her. It's clear from watching the play that he wants Sumati. He claims that Sumati has developed into a beautiful flower. He misbehaves with her whenever he gets the opportunity. It demonstrates that the challenges faced by a woman are universal, regardless of whether she was raised in a traditional or contemporary society. Her own life is meaningless. Woman literally means born to woo man since it is derived from the terms woo and man.

Through the character of Sumati, the playwright encourages audiences to consider the idea that women need to take responsibility for their lives. She stresses the need of considering how much one's own actions contributed to one's victimisation rather than placing blame outside. By going out and looking for work, Sumati demonstrates that it is up to each individual woman to make her own way in the world; no guy will do it for her.

A poem concludes the play.

“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.’ (151)”

In conclusion, *Mangalam* by Poile Sengupta adequately exemplifies a superb approach to theatrically representing women's issues. She was a symbol of brutal patriarchal dominance over women. Despite the obvious differences between now and the past, oppression of women is a worldwide issue that transcends borders, cultures, and educational levels.

In *Mangalam*, Poile Sengupta speaks out against sexual violence and harassment. The play portrays women as little more than a source of sexual pleasure. When a man gives in to his libido, he immediately cuts off the relationship. Drama's protagonist *Mangalam* has the same problem. Sengupta is a socially oriented author who often use theatre as a vehicle for protesting societal ills. The central plot, the characters, and the speech of her plays all provide compelling proof of her dissent. Playwright Poile Sengupta aims to demonstrate the layered nature of female servitude by saying, Duteous daughter obeys father; mother obeys duteous son. The husband has power over the obedient wife; a woman's life is never her own.

The play represents a new resistance philosophy that seeks to examine the sexual exploitation of women in both the private and public spheres. Poile Sengupta represents the underrepresented component of sexual assault in women's life while attempting to define women's theatre in opposition to male-dominated ideology. Sengupta successfully claims that the masculine mind has yet to overcome the chains of pseudomodernity despite the progress of technology, greater education, and improved lifestyle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Poile Sengupta's play *Mangalam* serves as a powerful platform for shedding light on the multifaceted aspects of women's subjugation in Indian society. Through her poignant portrayal of characters and their experiences, she unveils the harsh realities of patriarchal domination, sexual abuse, and violence against women, transcending the boundaries of time, place, and societal norms. Sengupta's intent is clear: to challenge male-dominated ideologies and to represent the often underrepresented aspects of women's lives, particularly the sexual exploitation they endure in both domestic and public spheres. Her work is a testament to her commitment as a socially conscious writer, using drama as a medium to voice dissent against the numerous societal ills that afflict women. *Mangalam* stands as a reminder that, despite advancements in technology, education, and lifestyles, the male mindset continues to grapple with the chains of pseudo-modernity, perpetuating the never-ending struggle for women's liberation and equality in an inherently biased world.

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