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Imaging Women: Resisting Boundaries of Gender in Women's Theatre in India

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Caught in the gyres of cultural politics, woman in the realm of theatre is the "gendered subaltern," (Ashcroft 8) produced in the social discourse by and for men but mercilessly castigated from the domain of cultural production. Regarded as 'docile bodies', women on stage are repressed, silenced and exposed to satisfy male erotic desires. In this context, Michelene Wandor's proposition is quite noteworthy:

For a woman writer to take on this role of authoritative voice means that in some implicit way she is combating the dominant image of women in theatre -- . . . this image is hedged in by the invisible, servicing female on the one hand, and by the visible, glamorous, or sexually desirable female on the other. Of course, there is always the exception – the 'serious' actress, or the occasional important woman playwright, but these exceptions also serve to reinforce the rule (126-127).

Exploitation of women led to the suppression of female experiences. In India conventional theatrical production has indulged in the public display of submissive femininity that upholds the ideologies of hegemonic masculinity. Women have been marginalized from the theatrical scenario as their experiences are not considered to be an integral part of socio-political struggles. In the Foreword to *Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980s: Selected Papers* (1985), Irish M. Zavala asserts: "Women are still regarded as 'invisible signs of visibility'; seen as commodities, as signs produced in social discourse by and for men, and excluded from the universe of cultural production and discourse itself" (3). Ironically enough, with shows of deference, patriarchal theatre considers women beneficial for the art of acting because of 'the imitating qualities' inherent in women since childhood. They love to play with dolls, thereby imitating the roles of mother, wife and daughter with utmost excitement and willingness. Thus, in the theatrical domain their voices are mimicry—they utter those words dictated by men and perform sex roles assigned to them by patriarchy. Being man-made signs women perpetuate the 'naturalness' of male domination. Tutun Mukherjee says:

Drama and theatre are two such cultural products in which the bias of gender generics and sexual difference are in evidence as social and psychic reality. Placing the forms within the discourse of 'gender as genre' reveals the way sex-gender system operates in the art and practice of drama and theatre and controls their cultural production (4).

Theatre like other cultural activities reflects the superiority of masculine intellectuality in artistic domains. But women's theatrical performance at the present time has extended the possibility of dynamic polysemy by incorporating audience interaction with subversive stage representation.

Indian women playwrights like Saoli Mitra, Sohag Sen, Usha Ganguli, Poile Sengupta have re-radicalized the conventional norms of theatre to subvert dominant culture. It is a revolutionary experience for them as they are in step with a great movement creating histories themselves. They have explored Indian folk forms to re-tell the stories of the great epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in their own voices. Bhishma Sahani's *Madhavi* depicts the myth of Madhavi from a woman's point of view. It shows the commodification of women through the rituals of marriage and family life. Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, so said Shakuni* shows the process of castigation of women when they express their desires or pose a threat to the patriarchal social structure. Usha Ganguli's *Mukti* (Freedom) reveals the pseudo freedom that a woman like Draupadi has achieved in the society. They felt the requirement of a potential public sphere within which the experiences of women could be focused distinctly, opening up new areas of concern. With the view that the 'cultural is political', women playwrights show how meanings are constructed and legitimized through the social relations of domination and subordination in theatre, a symbolic space.

II

Saoli Mitra, a contemporary woman playwright, director and actor of Bengal has dared to question the conventional interpretations of epics, the emblem of a nation's cultural heritage. Mitra says: "we can suggest that there is a quest for truth and wisdom in the literature that reflects the magic quality of an epic, which resonates for people even today" (xiv). Her plays *Nathaboti Anathaboth* translated as *Five Lords, Yet None A Protector (Five Lords)* and *Katha Amritasaman* translated as *Timeless Tales(TT)* offer a subversive reading of the *Mahabharata* from a woman's point of view. She has been awarded Ibsen Award from Oslo in January 2006. In these plays the traditional is represented as the timeless, inclusive of the modern, while the modern is represented as a transitional phase which disguises the permanent essence and values of timeless tradition. Deconstruction of the assumptions underlying the epical stories of women like Draupadi, Kunti, Satyawati, Gandhari and others points out that the master narratives directly transmit cultural values that in fact repress the voices of women. Mitra has been influenced by Irvati Karve's *Yuganta* which provides a feminist interpretation of the epic. Norman Bowra states that *Yuganta* "studies the humanity of the Mahabharata's great figures seen through her eyes, the Mahabharata ...becomes a record of a complex humanity and a mirror to all the faces that we ourselves wear" (qtd. in Mitra ix). The epics retain contemporaneity by encouraging human beings to delve deeper into the complexities of human civilization. The metanarratives being quite incredulous to Mitra, she employs disruptive mininarratives in her plays through interweaving discourses and plurality of voices.

Epics are the representations of a nation's culture. In India the *Mahabharata* has inspired the life and culture of India thoroughly.

The *Mahabharata* is not merely a great narrative poem; it is our *itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge of our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, economy—in short our history in all its detail and density" (Bharucha 97).

The *Mahabharata* is the source of wisdom and religiosity that has been glorified through ages. Having the same belief, the Western philosopher, Joseph Campbell asserts:

Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. The story of human suffering, striving, living—and youth coming to knowledge of itself, what it has to go through (qtd. in Mitra xiv).

The stories of the epics have gained a sense of timelessness. They have established the codes of values and morality in the society. Kashiram Das, the first translator of the *Mahabharata* into Bengali, compares the stories of the ‘epics’ to ‘amrita’ or divine nectar and the listener or the reader are considered to be ever blessed. In (*TT*) the chorus sings:

The Mahabharata tale is like amrita, divine
We seek to find that truth, that sign,
And through this quest we are blessed.
At Vyasdev’s feet we pay our respects,
Yes, we pay our respects (Mitra 97).

Such a divine epic lays the foundation of a nation’s culture, history and knowledge.

In spite of such profundity of knowledge it can be asserted that epics and myths validate the notion of female subjectivity. Simone de Beauvoire in the *Second Sex* (1949) asserts: “few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of women: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse” (qtd.in Singh 164). Myth legitimizes subjugation and exploitation of women as objects of desire. The mythical women like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti are models of perfection and pativrata. They religiously served the role of an all-sacrificing, devoted wife. Husband was for women a divine incarnation, a god gained through the ritual of marriage. Thus epics gain the status of a patriarchal genre. While re-working on mythical representations of women, Mitra crosses the cultural borders of signification to mirror the possibilities of subversive meanings. Her deconstructive strategy is manifest in her assertion:

The words of the Mahabharata
Are ineffable, like amrita,
In every age there unfold
New meanings from the old (6)

In her plays new meanings unfold that defamiliarize the conventional patriarchal assumptions. Interested especially in the character of Draupadi, Mitra confers her humanity, individuality and a potent voice—all that have been denied to her in the epic. Draupadi’s strong will power, brilliant intellectuality and pride mark her as a dignified woman different from other women like Sita, who expressed softer feminine qualities. The stage offers Draupadi a space to disclose her desires, her sufferings, her intellectuality and protest. She is indeed as Vyasdev says: “Nathaboti Anathoboth”—a woman having five husbands still a widow. Her story has been re-created as the story of a woman deprived of love, motherhood and honour. While relating the mythical Draupadi to the present time the narrator in *Five Lords* says: “It brought to mind the story of a queen. A queen—yet not a queen. An empress—yet not an empress. Mistress of a kingdom. Yet

a queen without a kingdom. The tale of a hapless woman who had everything yet nothing” (Mitra 1). Throughout her life she had to undergo humiliation and deprivation. While speaking of the ideal women in the epics, Mahasweta Devi in “The Wet Nurse” says that these women become “true example[s] of Indian womanhood...ideals which defy intelligence and rational explanation, which involve sacrifice and dedication...and have been kept alive in the popular Indian psyche through the ages, beginning with Sati-Savitri-Sita right down to Nirupa Roy and Chand Usmani in our times” (qtd. in Yarrow 45). Thus the concept of Indian womanhood has been constructed and desired. It is a trope to silence and repress women within the roles of motherhood and housewifery.

Deconstruction of myths can be related to Roland Barthes concept of ‘myth’ as discussed in *Mythologies* (1972) and *Elements of Semiology* (1967). To Barthes myths signify the complex system of images and conventions framed by the society to perpetuate and authenticate its own meaning. Myths are symbolic of the accumulated knowledge of the society, the ideologies operating within the social framework. Myths provide interpretative archetypes for deciphering the meaning of the world where we inhabit with a view to exploring the present through the past. Barthes also calls myths ‘metalanguage’ because it is a second-order language used to interpret the first-order language. In performing a signifying function myth “hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 129). Myth distorts reality and naturalizes it, thereby transforming history into nature. To encapsulate the tragic predicament of women in myths Saoli Mitra successfully subverts myths and folklores to demystify what is said or accepted and what remains unspoken or repressed in the representations of traditional theatrical performance. In her plays myths, functioning as signifying system, operate through codes and serve the ideological function of naturalization, thereby revealing the subtext in the process of signification. The plays shatter the veil of illusion regarding the construction of traditional myths, thereby disrupting the accepted normal codes of conduct by ‘laying bare’ the underlying void, terror and vacuity in the contemporary world of women. The audience is introduced to a real world devoid of all illusions. The conventional norms of theatre are manipulated subtly for unmasking operations of ‘sexual politics’ in the process. The play examines Draupadi as a sign and a cultural construct. “Mitra has been able to locate those silent, dark crevices of history and question the degree of scrupulousness present within the contemporary society in protecting women and their rights” (Bhattacharya 5). Mitra’s experimentation through the manipulation of theatre vocabulary challenges the dominant ideologies in society. Her plays operate through a fusion of politics, satire, emotion, socialism, absurdism and myth—indeed, a unique fusion of the real and the unreal, fact and fantasy, and such other contraries, so that her theatre opens up interesting areas for intellectual exploration. The defamiliarizing stage devices challenge male hegemony in the theatrical world, thereby liberating female desires and experiences. The concept of liberty associated with theatre has been pointed out by Roland Barthes. “In Barthes’s early work, the theatrical is the domain of liberty, the place where identities are only roles and one can change roles, a zone where meaning itself may be refused” (xxix Sontag). It can be asserted that Mitra’s theatre is governed by a denotation-connotation dialectic that leads to higher level of signification. The use of poetic and subversive language offers glimpses of the barrenness and unfulfilment pervading the lives of women.

III

Both the plays, *Five Lords*, and *TT*, have been performed by a single woman performer in 'kathakatha' style (a story, a narrative). The unnamed Kathatkakurun or kathak is the young woman narrator who re-tells the story of Draupadi in her own voice. She is not playing the role of any particular character but as a narrator performs many roles while adding her own comments. The kathak's subversive comments and multiple role playing indicate the interconnections between the two worlds—the contemporary and the mythological. The result is the denaturalization of everyday reality through distortion of traditional history. She addresses the audience as 'babumashai' (Good Sirs) which shows her rural background and lack of institutional education. But she is self-assertive, intelligent and critical. Often she expresses her annoyance, agitation and empathy while narrating the tales. She sings, dances and speaks in rhymes to express herself more prominently. She is gorgeously dressed in a saree and cheap ornaments. This strategy of making a simple, rustic woman narrate the story of the great queen Draupadi connects all deprived women in a continuum. Apart from the kathak there is also the chorus. They sing and play Indian musical instruments like tabla, flute, conches and the gong to intensify the impact of the narration on the audience. Thus the stage setting, costume, music and dance show the influence of folk theatre of Bengal (Jatra). But the continuous intrusion of the narrator, through her comments alienates the audience from getting emotionally engaged with the stage performance. Such a technique unfixes the peripheries of the real and the unreal. Mitra's politics of theatricality reveals her concern over finding out new ways of expression and representation by the fusion of rhythmic language, dance music, folk tales in her latest dramatic experiments.

Mitra's *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* (1991) portrays the sufferings and humiliation inflicted upon Draupadi, a woman who forcefully asserts herself as a 'true daughter of the earth'. In the Mahabharata Draupadi is fire-altar born. In the bloom of her youth Yajnaseni (Draupadi) emerges from the sacrificial fire of the yajna performed by King Drupad to avenge the Brahmin Dronacharya. The king wanted a valiant son and the emergence of Draupadi is an addition, not desired. Her beauty has been eloquently described by Vyasdeva:

...she had the
Fragrance of blue lotus, her eyes
Were like the lotus leaves, her thighs were fair
And round, and her dense
Masses of hair were black and curly. She was
Endued with all the auspicious marks and her complexion was like emerald.
She was the charmer
Of the hearts of the five kings of men (the Pandavas) (Dutt 99).

The beauty and glamour of Draupadi has been amplified in the Swamvar Sabha organized to provide her a scope to select her husband. Here Draupadi is presented as an object of the 'male

gaze'. But she falls in love with Arjun disguised as a Brahmin. Finally Arjun becomes successful in winning her as a wife. Shockingly enough, Kunti, the mother-in-law unknowingly asks the five brothers to share whatever they brought. She becomes the common wife of the five brothers. She has no voice in expressing her desire. The narrator in *Five Lords* thus remarks: "Draupadi, the King's beloved daughter, became the property of the Pandavas!" (24). She has to spend one year with each of her husbands. Ironically enough she spent the least time with Arjun. She becomes the paradigm of pativrata whose religion is to serve her husbands. As a result of male domination Draupadi constitutes herself in relation to male desires. Patriarchal discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, namely, 'docile bodies'. "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, *Discipline* 136). The visible body behind the stylized role of the narrator explodes any conservative reading of the character in performance. As Judith Butler argues, gender identity is performative, a construction of repeated, stylized gestures. Thus gender, sex and sexuality are not discrete categories, but rather historical constructions that are enacted by a series of doings. Gender is "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 270). Mitra subverts such gender codes, showing the process how these social codes are reified, made uniform and absorbed into the dominant discourse. In the same way this technique disrupts the symbolic codes that construct the body. Her body is also docile as it had been manipulated, shaped and trained so that it obeys. Mitra's subversive reading of the epic points out that Draupadi has failed to reach heaven with her husbands at the time of Mahaprasthan (the great departure) because she loves Arjun most. As a punishment for such an unequal approach the epic denies her the divinity of reaching heaven. Yudhishtir implements the subjection of Draupadi to his own laws grounded on the injunction that her body and desires be invisible. The kathak questions whether she became a virtuous wife:

No, she probably didn't, for if she did, if she loved all the brothers equally, then—then what would have happened? Ah, then she would have gone straight to heaven. But no, she didn't. and why not? Because it was Arjun, the heroic Arjun whom Draupadi had loved and that was why at the end, at the time of *Mahaprasthan*, the great departure [covers her mouth with both hands] Oops! That only comes right at the end.

[Bites her tongue in a gesture of embarrassment and gets up from the small seat and moves forward, to the middle] (Mitra, *Five Lords* 25).

The gesture of the kathak shows the repression of facts in the epics and the prejudices of the patriarchal social set-up glorified in the epics. Draupadi's humiliation reaches the climax during the dice game episode. When Yudhishtir, the eldest Pandav lost everything to the Kauravas Yudhishtir staked Draupadi. She was dragged by her hair to the court and humiliated in front of the authority and her five helpless husbands. Kate Millett explains the functioning of patriarchy: "Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the power of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale. Classically, as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is property" (33). The norms of civilization as framed by the 'symbolic fathers' are forced upon women and the marginalized section of the society. The woman narrator in the play asserts: "Believe me, Sirs. Sometimes I feel that if I ever got the chance to go to heaven I'd ask why Yudhishtir wasn't sent to hell for all this sin! What for heaven's sake is the rule up there?" (Mitra, *Five Lords* 33) Thus, Mitra interrogates the validity of such myths that ratify the

oppression of women. In the court Duryodhan makes crude gestures and undrapes his thigh. They shouted and jeered: “Whoever serves five husbands is a public woman. She has been won at dice and she will now serve us” (Mitra, *Five Lords* 36). Finally Dushashan was instructed to outstrip Draupadi in front of the authority. Such wrongs were protested by Vidur who was the son of a slave. After losing everything when the Pandavas had to leave for the forest, it was Draupadi who accompanied them. Though the Pandavas had other wives, it was Draupadi who endured all sufferings as ‘*sahadharmini*’. But it was Arjun who neglected her. He failed to protect her in crisis or when her honour was at stake. It was Bhim who protested and protected her from the evil advances of Kichak and Jayadrath. Mitra brings into light Arjun’s lack of responsibility and dedication towards Draupadi. The kathak says:

Arjun did not lack female company during his
banishment. Ulupi, Chitrangada, Subhadra . . .
Draupadi got to hear of it, of course (Mitra, *Five Lords* 44).

The kathak further questions:

. . . . And on
that horrible day, the day of the dice game? Arjun
had remained silent. Why, he had not come
forward to protect the honour of his beloved Panchali (45).

Throughout her life Draupadi has been denied the love and companionship of Arjun, whom she desired and loved. The kathak speaks of her loneliness and unfulfilment:

Yes, Dear Sirs, it was the valiant Arjun that she
had accepted. But because Yudhishtir was the
eldest, Draupadi had to live not with the one she
had loved and wed but with Yudhishtir! (Mitra, *Five Lords* 43).

Draupadi has to play the role of a submissive wife upon whom the codes of patriarchy have been imposed. Though a mother of five sons, she has been denied the bliss of motherhood. Being in exile with her husbands, she has been compelled to stay away from her sons. Her sufferings make her eyes blaze. In distorted garments she looks like a ‘mad woman’ almost like Hecuba from whom her sons have been mercilessly snatched away. Out of anger she desires that her sons would avenge the dishonour of their mother. The kathak playing the role of Draupadi says: “Remember Krishna if all of you forget my humiliation, I shall have my five sons. They will avenge their mother” (Mitra, *Five Lords* 59). Even such a desire ends in unfulfilment. All her sons die in the war of justice. Draupadi too desired a war of justice or *Dharmayuddha* which will usher *Dharmarajya*—the rule of virtue into this world’. Ironically, such a war resulted in death and destruction. Desolation engulfed her. Her sufferings were too deep for tears. The Chorus sings:

Married to valiant lords, yet none a protector,

Such is the fate of

Drupad's darling daughter.

Unbearable pain and bitterness

Are all that life brought her.

Married to valiant lords, yet none a protector (Mitra, *Five Lords* 63).

Draupadi's suffering represents the suffering of all women. She patiently endured the agony of a corrupt and decadent age in the history of Indian civilization. Her dream of a rational, ungendered society remains unfulfilled forever.

While deconstructing the story of Draupadi, Mitra also reveals Draupadi's self-dignity and righteousness. In the court room during the dice game she speaks rationally for self defence. She strongly questions the patriarchal conventions that ostracize women. The kathak as Draupadi says: "Bhishma, Vidur, Dhritarashtra, Drona—have they no feelings? I'm the daughter-in-law of the Kuru clan. I've been dragged into this assembly before everyone, and nobody condemns it! [with a stricken cry, she says] Say something, somebody!" She even had the integrity and courage to point out the wrongs of Yudhishtir. She says: "Raja, you have taken to wearing rags. You eat only wild fruits and roots. Doesn't the hardship of your brothers cause you pain? They have to endure this only because of you? And I? [. . .] I am the wife of lords fathered by the Gods themselves! Why am I in this state? Why have I to endure this misery? [. . .] Have you no anger? No inner fire?" (Mitra, *Five Lords* 47). Thus, Draupadi's potent voice disrupts the social order. Yudhishtir, on the other hand, tries to calm her down by authenticating 'truth' through the vague ideals of morality and wisdom. Thus what is normal or 'truth' is actually constructed and determined by power structures. The knowledge produced in an episteme is disseminated through certain disciplines that silence subversive voices. Suddhabrata Sengupta speaks about the Saoli Mitra's re-enactment of the story of Draupadi:

Hers is an assault by the profane on the sacred, and one cannot but be delighted with the ease and the anarchaic wit with which she dismembers sacrality. Several canons are violated in this process, heroes become human, gods disappear or are pushed to the margin, desire not duty is celebrated as an ethical imperative – and that is refreshing, and being a woman she takes upon herself the freedom not to be willowy and graceful, but to be grotesque and comic and serious by turns (Rajan 142).

Mitra's subversive play highlights the emotional, social and psychological torture that women have to endure in their struggle for existence.

Mitra not only retells the story of Draupadi, but also the story of Satyawati, Gandhari, Kunti, Ambika, Ambalika and other women whose voices have been repressed. In *TT* Mitra reconstructs new identities of women. The kathak here calls the valiant Bhishma "the grand old patriarch" (Mitra *TT* 78) who silently watched the humiliation of women—"He heard the heart-rending wails of his clans women at the end of the Kurukshetra war. Then there's more.

For example—but no, Stop! Shame on me!” (78). The kathak’s gesture of silencing herself suggests the silencing of women throughout history. From the myth of Procne and Philomel to Draupadi women have been exploited and mercilessly silenced whenever their voices threatened patriarchy. All the pseudo-queens in the *Mahabharata* had to perform the roles of docile wives, mothers or daughters. Kunti even sacrificed her first born, Karna, to uphold the patriarchal rites of marriage. Most of the women are either sexually exploited to give birth to sons or became the object of masculine desires because of their physical charms. They have been denied love and respect from the society at different stages of their lives. Their sacrifices have been overlooked and never considered heroic. The kathak intervenes and makes the audience aware of the timeless tales of women: “Remember, so many aeons ago, Satyavati, Ambika and Ambalika were singed with suffering. Gandhari and Kunti—they had been carrying the burden of sorrow for all these years, and now it was the turn of Draupadi and the good Subhadra” (Mitra, *TT* 140). The stories of women do not end here. The narrator by her comments links the past to the present. Mitra adds an imaginary conversation with a woman spectator, Indira, at the end of the plays. The truth that emanates from it is the consciousness that human civilization should be nurtured not destroyed. Such a technique reveals the fictionality associated with the character/narrator showing her as a multiplicity of contrasting and contesting selves. Through the narrator the fictional characters acquire a living presence on stage thereby revealing the dichotomy between the fictional world of the character / role and the real existence of the actor. These strategies subvert the convention of illusion-making, thereby unfixing the boundaries of the real and the unreal. Violating the traditional norms of illusion and reality, the play introduces the audience to a realm of ‘unreal reality’. The performance on stage provides a space for the perpetual deferment of conclusive meaning.

Mitra encourages critical inspection of the audience through the process of ‘complex seeing’. By the use of innovative theatrical devices she alienates the audience from the stage performance by interrupting the emotional engagement of the audience. She focuses on the role of the audience in the theatre. Their position has to be raised from a passive observer to an active participant so that they can produce new meanings instead of accepting the conventionality through their mechanized response. The ‘poetic language’ of the theatre defamiliarizes accepted conventions thereby challenging the automatization of theatrical art. These ‘foregrounding’ techniques change the habitual response of the audience. The familiar actions are interrupted; it produces the effect of defamiliarization. Mitra fulfills what Shklovsky declares about art in his ‘Art as Technique’:

The technique of the art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important (qtd. in Selden 42).

The artfulness of theatrical devices produces the effect of defamiliarization. Mitra, by ‘laying bare’ her devices of stagecraft gives enough scope to the actors and audience to create new meanings. It prevents the audience from accepting the world of fiction as the reality. Her theatrical art is not limited to any external reality but creates an unreal world of its own. By distancing the actors from the roles they are playing, Mitra shows that the characters are not abstractions but they are the actors, living, pulsating human beings at the present time. The actor, distanced from the stage roles, masks his internal self while unmasking the roles that he plays. What remains is the reality of the stage which is as real as our dreams. Being subversive and

disruptive; these stage devices practiced by Mitra makes the play appear 'strange' to the audience and they too participate in the strange experience to explore hidden truths and create new meanings. Mitra's theatre has the power to subvert the masculine dominance in theatre and society, because it is the woman who has to create new identities and begin new histories.

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