

## Review Paper on the works of Dina Mehta, Caryl Churchill and Marsha Norman

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**Abstract:** *The history of English literature witnessed that there is a vast difference between the condition, status, perception, understanding and the psyche of the traditional woman and the woman in the twentieth century. This article analyses and examines the experiences and subjectivities of the women characters portrayed in the contemporary select plays, as they journey in quest of the self. The main purpose of this paper is to find out the major themes and aspects of the works of the three playwrights from three different parts of the world, i.e. Dina Mehta from India, Caryl Churchill from Britain and Marsha Norman from America. The paper also highlights the research work carried out on these selected playwrights. This study helps the readers and future researchers to further explore the different approaches of the writing of these playwrights.*

**Key Words:** *Quest of the Self, Feminism, Post modernism, Gender Equality*

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### I. Introduction

Throughout the centuries, many writers have contributed through their pen, but a few among them were concerned about the woman till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The writers portrayed the woman in their own way. Victorian period witnessed the series of changes in social, political and economic sphere of life. People used new technologies and innovations to make their life smooth and easy. There was unending debate over the role of women. The writers presented women as innocent, feeble, helpless and household commodities through their texts. The women were largely ignored by the people in all the major sector of life, i.e. social, political, educational, defense, foreign policy, trade, economics, laws, etc. Very few opportunities of education were provided to the women that resulted in their illiteracy. Women didn't have their own identity; they could not make any decision; they had no economic independence as they were totally dependent on their men and their existence was merged with their male counterpart. Women couldn't stand for their rights; if they tried, the male dominated society exiled them from the communities. It was expected that they should sit at home and take care of their household activities and look after the children. In D. H. Lawrence words-

...she became his slave, he was her lord. She was...the slave, she kissed his feet, she had thought it an honour to touch his body, to unfasten his boots. For two years she had gone on as his slave, crouching at his feet, embracing his knees...she was there for him just to keep him in condition ...she was to him one of the baser or material conditions necessary for his welfare in persecuting his ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Quest of self is one of the most important characteristics of human beings as every human strives for identity, self realization, distinctiveness, uniqueness, specialty, recognition, and existence. The journey to the self describes the women who pushed off the boundaries and the limitations in which they caught from several centuries. The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed changes in almost every aspect of the day-today lives of women, from the household to the communal. The writers changed the social structure of the women, the depiction of feminine images and theme were increased. They presented the women characters with new aspects which were never before portrayed. Betty Frieden stated in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)-

... for a woman as for man, the need for self fulfillment, autonomy, self realization, independence, individuality, self actualization is as important as sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted.<sup>2</sup>

### II. Dina Mehta

Dina Mehta is one of the India's versatile and accomplished writers in English belonging to the Parsi community. She is an Indian businesswoman, broker, investor, financial adviser, Chartered Accountant and

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<sup>1</sup> The Rainbow (1915), D. H. Lawrence portrays Lydia Lensky, the girl-wife of the Polish physician: (p. 238-39).

<sup>2</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 1963, p.282.

social activist born on February 18, 1961. Mehta has completed her Masters in Management Studies from Mumbai. Dina Mehta is a talented Indian writer in English who has to her credit two novels, *And Some Take a Lover* (1992) and *Mila in Love* (2003), two books of short stories, *The Other Woman* and *Other Stories* (1981) and *Miss Menon Did Not Believe in Magic and Other Stories* (1994) and several prizewinning plays like *Brides Are Not for Burning* (1979), *The Myth Makers*, *Tiger, Tiger* (1978), *Getting Away With Murder* (1989), and *A Sister Like You* (1996). In her plays, she stages real life incidents to bring to the limelight some social issues such as the evil of dowry, female feticide, child abuse, rape, subjugation of women, and so on. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The Independent*, *The Deccan Herald*, *Kaiser-Hind* and *London Magazine*. Her scripts have been broadcasted on Doordarshan and All India Radio. She was the fiction editor at *The Illustrated Weekly of India* from 1976 to 1982 and worked as a Senior Editor at *Parsiana* and *Voyage*.

## **2.1 Themes in Dina Mehta's plays-**

*Myth Maker* is her first full length play representing the Hindi film industry and the early rumblings of communalism in Mumbai. It has a social theme which deals with the violent Maharashtrian agitation in Bombay against the people who have come from other states and settled there.

*Brides Are Not for Burning* (1979) deals the issues of the body blows like sexual discriminations, sexual abuses and bride burning in Indian male patriarchal society. It presents extended feministic agenda with the contemporary post-colonial issues concerned with the existence of woman in India.

*Tiger Tiger* (1978) is a play by her on Tipu Sultan. *Sister Like You* (1996) is a play by Dina Mehta on the presence of domestic violence in India. *When One Plus One Makes Nine* deals with the theme of family planning.

*Getting Away With Murder* (1989) deals with various issues like child abuses, rape, female feticide, gender discrimination and blind superstitious belief are the hindrances in the development of human development. This play portrays the self dependent modern women who think independently, tries to rise her own self esteem and fight against the system.

## **2.2 Research Work Carried Out On Dina Mehta**

### **2.2.1 Women And Protest: A Study Of Select Plays Of Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan And Dina Mehta**

This study of the selected writers highlights the various ways of the protest of the female characters in the contemporary Indian circumstances. All the playwrights have demonstrated the protest of the woman protagonist against the existing situations and factors responsible for their marginalities through their plays. Mahasweta Devi, Manjula Padmanabhan and Dina Mehta have deconstructed the female image with the tool of protest. The study shows that how our Indian tradition of gender discrimination spoils the lives of many women in the society. The protest of the characters shows their struggle against society and technological slavery of modernism. In fact, imposed internal as well as external pressure combines together for the realization of the protest.

### **2.2.2 Performing Violence: Representation Of Women And Violence In The Plays Of Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan And Dina Mehta**

In this study, the researcher has pointed out the causes of violence against the females in the society especially hegemonic presence of the male dominated structure. The violence is created to control the women in all the spheres like education, business, law, family, religion etc. to generate women's dependant of their counterparts. This study also highlights that not only the women writers are demonstrating the problems of women in the society, but also male playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, equally highlight the women's issues and the violence against them. The study also highlights the difference between the male and female playwrights' observations of violence in the society.

## **III. Caryl Churchill**

Caryl Churchill is a British playwright, born in London in the family of a fashion model and a political cartoonist in 1938. She was brought up in England and Canada. She completed her school in Canada and returned to England to complete her graduation from the prestigious Oxford University. She started writing short stories in her early age. She has also written many plays in her college life and her four earliest plays, *Downstairs* (1958), *You've No Need to be Frightened*, *Having a Wonderful Time* (1960), and *Easy Death* (1962) were performed at Oxford by student groups. Some television and radio plays were also composed by her. Caryl Churchill is considered as one of the greatest playwrights alive. She was widely popularized by her use of non-naturalistic techniques in her plays. She employed Bertolt Brecht's modernist dramatic and theatrical techniques of Epic theatre to explored sexuality, gender politics, oppressions and feminist themes in

her plays. She produced her first professional play 'Owner' in 1972 for London's Royal Court Theatre. On gaining popularity, she was associated with many theatre companies. While working with such companies she produced many great plays like Vinegar Tom, Cloud 9, Top Girls, Serious Money, The Striker, Far Away, A Number, Love and Information and many more.

### **3.1 Themes in Caryl Churchill's plays**

The critical analysis of the plays of Caryl Churchill finds various themes in her major plays:

Owners (1972), first full length play by Caryl Churchill. She highlights a miserable representation of capitalist society in the play. Obsession with the power is the main theme of the play.

Objections to Sex and Violence (1975), Caryl Churchill initiated themes of sexual suppression and womanliness.

Vinegar Tom (1976), Caryl Churchill has explored issues in her works mainly related to the position of women in male-dominated societies. Oppression of women is the main highlight of the play.

Cloud Nine (1978) Churchill analyses the oppressive nature of the violence, The quest of identity, The haunting of the present by the past, sexual politics, gender-roles and repressive patriarchal ideology and their interconnectedness.

In Top Girls (1982) Churchill deals with various themes like Women and Career, Struggle and Sacrifice, Aggression and Female Relationships, Women and Feminism, Language and Identity, Surrealism, Public vs. Private Life, Oppression and Empowerment, Thatcherite England and Feminist Politics.

A Number (2002) Caryl Churchill addresses the subject of human cloning and identity. The play focuses on the identity and notions of "self".

### **3.2 Research Work Carried Out On Caryl Churchill**

#### **3.2.1 The Semiotics Of Churchill's Theatre by Suranjana Bhadra 2010**

This study concentrates on the technique of using the elements of theatre as a sign by Caryl Churchill. The research shows the importance of the emergence of feminist theatre in Britain. The operation of sexual politics through ideology by the use of untraditional methods were analyzed by the researcher. The participation of the audience to subvert the weightage of male dominated society was highlighted, cross gender and cross racial casting were analyzed by the researcher in this study.

#### **3.2.2 A Study of Caryl Churchill's Selected Plays with Reference to Feminism and Postmodernism by Shiva Yeganehfar 2014**

In this study, the researcher has selected the four major plays of Caryl Churchill and analyzed them from feminist and postmodern point of view. The researcher examined the Top Girls, Traps, Cloud Nine, and A Mouthful of Birds and tried to diminish the importance of male dominated society. The main focus of the researcher was in the style of Caryl Churchill to break the foundation of the conventional existing ideologies. The researcher has divided his study in two parts. First, he examined the Top Girl and Trap in postmodern point of view and Cloud Nine and A Mouthful of Birds in feminist point of view. The study highlights how Caryl Churchill's writing challenges the realism and different established notion like gender discrimination and capitalism. The research shows how Caryl Churchill has used the various postmodern concepts such as parody, irony, strange loops, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and many experimental strategies to diminish the dominant ideologies. The study also shows how the male dominated society influence the thoughts, notions, beliefs, perception and psyche of the female population of the society.

#### **3.2.3 Gender Politics In The Select Plays Of Caryl Churchill And Vijay Tendulkar: A Comparative Study by Najaat Ahmed Ahmed Al Raajihy 2016**

This study of the researcher endeavors to examine the selected work of Vijay Tendulkar and Caryl Churchill in the light of gender politics. The study concentrated on Sakhram Binder, Silence! The Court is in Session, Kamala, Kanyadaan by Tendulkar and Owners, Vinegar Tom, Cloud Nine and Top Girls by Churchill. The research shows the struggle, the pain and inner conflict of a woman for her own identity. The characters of Churchill are promising, but they are discouraged by male dominated society. At the beginning they look self dependent, but finally they surrendered before old traditions. The journey of the women characters was started from nowhere and ends with nowhere. The research shows the comparative study of both the writers on the basis of their concepts of Marriage and Society, Woman and Religion and Socialization in the Family. The basic goal of the research is to find out how the gender is constructed and the role of gender to create inequalities between man and woman in the society.

#### IV. Marsha Norman

Marsha Norman is one of the successful practitioners of playwriting in contemporary American theatre. She was born on September 21, 1947, in Louisville, Kentucky. Her mother was so religious, she didn't allow her to watch movies and television; she even restricted her to go outside to play with the children that result she became solitary. Marsha has given all credits to her loneliness to become a writer. She watched many plays at her childhood that created the spark about the playwriting. She started working for newspaper and television; she also taught the young children in the mental hospital that has the biggest influence on her writing. Marsha Norman's most popular and broadly recognized writing appeared in the *Louisville Times* starting in 1976 in "The Jelly Bean Journal," a weekend children's supplement which she created for the newspaper. In 1977, Jon Jory a director motivated Marsha Norman to produce a play on serious and painful subject, at the beginning she refuse to do so because she didn't have any role model, but later she found the way by remembering the days she spent in hospital and what resulted was *Getting Out*. The play was voted the best new play produced in regional theatre and bagged many awards. She earned the real popularity as a dramatist when she was granted by the American Theater Critics Association award and later earned a Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for her drama 'night Mother'. She was also awarded by Tony Award for her experimental book and the musical 'The Secret Garden' which was actually an adaptation of a novel 'The Secret Garden' by Frances Hodgson Burnett. She has seven full length plays, five one act plays and a novel on her credit. She is a native of Kentucky and currently lives in New York.

##### 4.1 Themes in Marsha Norman's plays

In Merry Christmas(1979) Norman deals with a family who adjusted with their mother's sudden deafness when she is released from the hospital for Christmas.

*Getting Out* (1980) presents the identity crisis, and its theme of split, which is highlighted on a split stage that alternates between and present versions of the same person. The play questions the legal system, whether it analyzes the psychological ordeal of a captive, or whether the paroled woman can settle into a normal life or not.

*Third and Oak: The Laundromat* (1980) highlights the system of marriage in which men and women oppress each other. Conversation between a widow and a lady with bad experience of marriage was demonstrating the real condition of society

In *Circus Valentine* [Unpublished] (1983) Norman unfolds the harsh reality of the American society. Loneliness and struggle for existence of small families was demonstrated by the writer.

*Night, Mother* (1983) by Norman discusses the question of how a suicide can be justified or not. *night, Mother* deals with female identity and feminine autonomy focuses on the mother – daughter relationship.

*The Hold up* (1987) is based on tales told to Norman by her grandfather. It is about the last of the Old West Outlaws. The play shows the importance of time and decision in life. It presents the story of a person who believes in self and utilizes the time properly to solve the problems of life through various tactics.

In *Traveler in the Dark* (1988) Norman presents a story of a mother, for whom her family is everything. She struggles alone against the most difficult situation and finds the solutions. She fights with the outside world to make her family united.

*The Secret Garden* (1991), based on a novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, tells the story of Mary, an orphan, who comes to live with her uncle. It is a story of a secret garden which reduced the sever sorrow of life.

*Trudy Blues* (1995) Norman's semi-autobiographical creation is about Ginger, a writer experiencing a health crisis. The play seems to question whether Time or Death is the solution through the dilemma of life.

*Sarah and Abraham* (1998) is an attempt to look at serious matters with humor. The play is about the eternal condition of women, overshadowed by their men, losing their rights and identities in marriage, and being penalized for motherhood. The play tries to question the institution of marriage; whether materialism destroys marriage or it is an important ingredient of marriage.

In *D.Boone* (1998) a cleaning woman, disillusioned in love, seeks romance and adventure with a mythic hero. Leaving her dustpan and several men behind, the woman pursues her historic fantasy by fighting Indians and British alongside Daniel Boone - but she finds herself pursued by her most unlikely lover. The play travels the time warp of love to put a human face on heroics then and now.

##### 4.2 Research Work Carried Out On Marsha Norman

###### 4.2.1 Feminist Concerns In Marsha Norman's Plays: A Critical Study by Hetal J. Mehta 2010

In this study, the researcher has selected the major plays of Marsha Norman and analyzed them by feminist point of view. The study focuses on the women characters and their psychological journey . The study analyses the various aspects of female experiences in Marsha Normans plays such as domestic violence, rape,

pregnancy, abortion, motherhood, being single, the bonding between women, the mother-daughter relationship, forming a sisterhood and lesbianism. The study also illustrates the modern man's dilemma of aimlessness, meaninglessness, futility and desperation in life.

#### 4.2.2. Beyond intuition: analyzing Marsha Norman's *night, Mother* with concordance data and empirical methods by Maria Lee Bernardy 1996

In this study, the researcher highlights the use of empirical methods to analyses the dialogue of night mother. The research highlights the differences between generally accepted, intuitive approaches and the more controversial empirical approaches. The researcher demonstrates the issues raised by Marsha Norman in her plays. The feminist content, psychoanalytical journey was tested through new terminologies.

### V. Conclusion

Thus we can say that the objective of this paper is to find out the scope, themes and nature of the plays written by Dina Mehta, Caryl Churchill and Marsha Norman and the research have been carried out by the researchers through their study. Many more aspects and perspectives are yet to find out in the works of Dina Mehta, Caryl Churchill and Marsha Norman like quest of identity, self realization of female characters, *New Woman*, a psychoanalytic study of the female characters, *She Tragedies*, etc. The present paper motivates the researcher to take self realization of female characters in the plays of Dina Mehta, Caryl Churchill and Marsha Norman for the further study which was not discussed yet by any researcher.

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