

GENDER ROLE AND FEMINIST CONCERNS IN POILE SENGUPTA'S PLAY *MANGALAM***Dr. Sandhya Tiwari**

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Abstract:

Gender is the most discussed issue in feminism and postmodern literary world with wide and varied implications. Gender is not defined biologically; thus, it should not be limited to one's biological aspects or perceptions. It is a cultural creation and the notions concerning femininity or masculinity serve to maintain gendered identities. It represents socially acquired and acceptable forms of being either male or female. It defines our clothing pattern, habits, likes, choices, career, education, business, desires, etc. This stereotypical notion of gender is common across the cultures and societies throughout the world. Gender occupies a predominant position in Indian society. It is heart-rending to mention that education could not eradicate the social evils and they still cause havoc in some or the other form. Poile Sengupta through her plays successfully exposes the differences of these issues either in mythical, preindustrial, undeveloped and globalised ages. This article is aimed at identifying the dynamics of gender role and feminist concerns in Poile Sengupta's play *Mangalam*.

Keywords: Gender Identity; Feminist Concerns; Feminism; Feminist Plays; Poile Sengupta; *Mangalam*

Poile Sengupta is one of the most prominent playwrights of India. *Mangalam* is her first full length play that was written in 1993 and produced in 1994. Other plays written by her include *Inner Laws*, (1994), *A Pretty Business* (1995), *Keats was a Tuber* (1996), *Collages* (1998), *Samara's Song* (1999) and *Alipha and Shoorpanakha and Shakuni* (2001) - two companion pieces which opened the Explocity theatre festival in Bangalore in the year 2001. Since ages, plays have often been interpreted as more than merely entertainment. Playwrights, through the act of composing plays, can write plays that mirror culture by reflecting a given culture's values, mores, and lifestyles and are in essence critiques of society. Playwrights can also create plays that reflect how they interpret their own culture; having been raised in a given time period, playwrights write as a product of a given set of societal rules. Yet the line, if it even exists, between strictly mirroring culture or producing work as a product of a culture is thin and blurred at best.

Mangalam won a special award for its social relevance at "The Hindu-Madras Players play scripts Competition" in 1993. It finds place in *Body Blows*, an anthology of plays by three women playwrights from India published by Seagull Books, Kolkata.

A methodical and careful investigation will be helpful to comprehend the intricacies involving these social evils and the potential ways of amelioration. Poile Sengupta in her plays remarkably uses the political drives of human relations, emotions and events. The texts of plays indicate the different functions they served at different times.

Feminist studies around the world gave immense importance to the concerns revolving around women from all dimensions and perspectives. One such important dimension that is of special significance is a women's place in domestic sphere. Studies have explored the influence of the power exerted in the private space in a woman's life. The concept of family seems to have an inherent pattern that has been devised to retain women and their sexuality under control. The patriarchal system adds to the intensity by entrusting the authority in the male member of the family. The most common method of

exerting this superiority is physical abuse of women. Mostly the culprits are members from the family and close-knit social circle. If family, one of the most respected social structures, inflicts atrocities, it is very difficult to question it. If, the very space that is one's personal becomes an extension of the patriarchal pattern's control by exerting pressure ranging from mild to extreme abuse then the plight of women is utmost miserable. Domestic abuse of this nature though rampant goes unpunished as many families have indoctrinated 'such tolerance' as a desirable virtue. Domestic violence is quietly tolerated and even justified by majority of women every day. In this article, a comprehensive critical analysis of Poile Sengupta's play *Mangalam* is taken up to discuss the depiction of feminist concerns.

. The play *Mangalam* (1993) deals with ragged relationship behind seemingly usual households. It deals with the metropolitan life of Chennai and the play opens after the death of a woman character Mangalam. It deals with the metropolitan life of Chennai and the play opens after the death of a woman character Mangalam. In the present play Revathi, Thanagam, Usha, Vaithi, these women and their lives confined by gender dominance and politics. The politics of human relationships is the result of changing cultural dimensions of the world. The words of the character Dorai reflect the dominating self-control aspects.

Since times immemorial, women are victims of violence. It remained an unfortunate companion for scores of women from all sections of the society. Irrespective of class, caste or society, violence was the ultimate means used to subdue women. This violence was of different types and various forms causing physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual abuse of a woman. It is used as an instrument of suppression to control their minds and free will of women. In this regard, it is very worthwhile to quote Kalpana,

“Violence, whether domestic, or in any other form, is not merely a criminal act of physical force perpetrated against women. It covers the entire gamut of exploitation, discrimination, maintaining unequal economic and social structures and creation of an atmosphere of terror and threat, all of which are supported and mandated by the socio-economic context of power relations” (Kannabiran 197).

Patriarchy is malicious, though widely accepted, even revered ideology; it needs to be critiqued. Most of the times, it is their own family members who use violence as a means to restrict and limit the freedom and command women. In this situation the celebrated safe heaven “family” becomes the very reason and place of oppression and exploitation for the women. There are several literary works which have taken the theme of domestic violence as their central idea. One such literary gems is Poile Sengupta's drama *Mangalam*. It is one of the earliest dramas written by her in 1993. It was highly acknowledged and it also received a special prize for its social relevance in the Hindu Madras Players Play script Competition, 1993. According to Poile Sengupta, the dramatist,

“... (the) play is about family politics, seen through the perspective of women. The play deals with serrated relationships behind ostensibly normal households, whether in small town in Southern India of the 1960s, or in a modern cosmopolitan family It is about vulnerabilities of women across all strata of society, and in varied households, and the tenderness and spirit that is so often brutally suppressed” (Sengupta 01)

It appears that violence and patriarchy are intrinsically connected. Patriarchy makes use of various means to subjugate, subordinate and suppress women and violence is one of the major tools used in this process of subordination. It can come in many forms, ranging from actual physical abuse to subtle, not-so-visible psychological one. Whatever might be the form it takes, it inflicts irreparable harm to the psyche and self-image of a woman. It renders her ineffective, sub-human and helpless. Poile Sengupta

has invested wonderful and worthwhile effort through this play to expose varied forms of violence against women. 'Mangalam' is a two-act play. The dramatist has used the technique of play within the play to generate discussion and present her point of views through the characters. She has demonstrated the timelessness of violence against women through this technique. To quote Sengupta,

“It (the device) is used as a means to lend perspective to an issue. But in 'Mangalam' I have used the same actors in both 'plays' as an indication that nothing really changes, the sameness of it all, to me, is deeply disturbing”
(Sengupta 01).

The play takes its title from the name of the central character. Though the central character is not present physically in the Act, but the drama and the action throughout the first act revolve around her. The first act presents the failed marriage of Mangalam and Dorai. There is absence of any kind of mutual affection, communication or understanding between them as they were married off for practical reason. They think of themselves as victims, putting the blame on each other, and that constantly end up in bitter arguments and fights. Dorai, being husband has an upper hand owing to the patriarchal societal structure. He harasses Mangalam to such an extreme end that she embraces death, unable to bear the torture.

As the play proceeds, one can understand that Mangalam is the victim and her suffering is heart wrenching. Society as well as her husband is to be blamed for she is in social and familial clutches but she is helpless. One critical incidence- one heinous drunken act- rape by her drunken brother-in-law changes the course of her life forever. To hide the sexual abuse, she is married off to Dorai, who hails from a economically humble background. Dorai comes to know of her lost virginity due to her pregnancy. Though she herself is a victim, Dorai starts ill-treating and abusing her as he assumes he was cheated by her and her family members. Dorai acts on impulse, branding her as characterless for the rest of their life and inflicts pain and punishment in every possible way to avenge the betrayal by her and her father. She is humiliated, taunted, abuse physically and emotionally throughout her life by her husband who fails to understand her miserable plight and helplessness in whatever has happened. He interprets her silence as betrayal. Mangalam accepts to suffer in silence, because she thinks that if she speaks out her family would be at stake in society. Truth once out would shake the family's honour. She blames her fate for whatever has happened and considers herself as born unlucky. This troubled past impacts her present too. Mangalam never could seek help and the 'dirty secret', the painful past, stops her from looking for help. This silent suffering and keeping under the wraps the injustice and inflicted pain to protect one's family honour is the very nature of domestic violence. Mangalam's life becomes a series of never-ending assaults on her mind and body. She gets relieved from the traumatic existence by committing suicide.

Kishwar and Vanitha in state in their article 'Initiative Against Dowry Deaths',
“She (the woman) has been made to think of this (violence) as 'normal', 'a woman's fate', religion, films, her elders, her own and her mother's experience – tell her that if a woman is unhappy, nothing can be done about it. It must be her own fault” (John 45).

Mangalam's elder sister Thangam comes out as a strong character who is very dominating and a representative of older and orthodox generation. Thangam, being a woman of a 'traditional/conservative' temperament, wants to enforce age-old values and restrictions on other women around her.

THANGAM: Did I hear somebody call me?
Sometimes I think I'm going deaf.
Mani, I don't like this at all. Where

has Chitra gone? It is time to light the lamp and she is still not back. What is wrong with the children of today? The boy is in the room studying his school book and this girl is nowhere to be seen. Doesn't she remember that her mother ... (Mangalam - pp 34)

She is the most outspoken character who openly criticizes Dorai's treatment of her sister in extremely blatant terms. Whenever Dorai accuses Magalam and labelling her as conduct and characterless woman, Thangam is the only one who speaks in her favour. Thangam accuses Dorai of mistreating her sister. She says: "..... But what else can I expect from my brother-in-law? He has been like this since the day he tied the thali around that poor girl's neck! Thali! It was more like a rope" (Sengupta 05). While referring to 'the Thali' as a rope, she has expressed her deep resentment to the wed'lock'. This captures the feelings of a woman's experience in the institution of marriage that pushes her into a state of trauma. As Rinki Bhattacharya states, "Any traditional custom that places women in the subordinate positions within society or in the family has the potential to turn violent" (13).

Patriarchy is an octopus with eight arms - social, economic, political, financial, cultural, religious, psychological and emotional - that men use to exert influence and exercise power over women. This takes the form of 'concern' while claiming moral authority and social privilege. This also results in economic exploitation barring equality to women as some patriarchal societies are also 'patrilineal', that is only male members are entitled to inherit family property and titles. In many communities and conservative societies marriage becomes a medium of exerting control over women's sexuality as well. A forced marriage will only suppress and command a woman damaging her self-esteem and self-confidence. In majority of the cases of typical Indian societies, marriage is considered utmost important for a girl, irrespective of her class, caste, religion and ethnicity. Because of this belief system, marriage enforces a woman into an unequal position, where she is supposed to compromise on her individuality and identity. She has to adapt herself to the self-alienation without asking any questions. Her identity will be represented in relation to others - a daughter-in-law or a wife. She loses her personal space performing the role of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law and her existence becomes secondary. In case if she strives to show independence, her own opinion, it is considered rebellious and is generally looked down upon by her in-laws. Majority of women accept this practice and humiliation quietly without posing a question, because in a patriarchal societal structure such sacrifices are expected and demanded from women. Thangam words are equally apt and true when we reflect on her individual predicament. She is the woman who has to live her life mourning as a widow of a man who was an abuser, who abused no other but her own younger sister. To save her family's name and her sister's prestige, she is not able to do anything about the crime committed by her husband against her own innocent sister. She is also a victim of man's atrocity just like Mangalam. She keeps quiet as her status of a social norm for a wife compels her from asking for justice. She has to suffer in silence and tolerate all of the 'nastiness' that is dished out with the tag of 'superiority and authority' and in the name of the family prestige. A separation could have followed by loss of honour and grim prospects for her natal family with a younger sister still unmarried. This is how both the sisters' become victims of this patriarchal institution and left without no hope of justice or even the space to express their sorrows. This crime becomes a closely guarded family secret. The reason of this victimization lies in the system of marriage which renders women vulnerable to all kinds of atrocities and powerless to demand for any justice. They have to endure all the pain inflicted on them in the private space called 'home' and the family. According to Bhattacharya,

“An analysis of the power hierarchy within the conjugal home would suggest some identifiable features- a gendered division of labour, the fact that in most Indian marriages women enter as strangers into an already structured world, the creation of a permanent inequality in the relationship of the natal and conjugal homes, and overarching domestic ideologies that legislate gender status and role” (Bhattacharya 58).

Another woman character who also is a victim of patriarchal domination is Usha, Mangalam's daughter. Violence inflicted on Usha is not physical in nature, but is of subtle and invisible kind. She too was married against her wish for financial reasons by Dorai. Usha's said affection for a lecturer who was also her teacher is looked down upon and criticized severely by Dorai. Usha has her mother's sympathy and they share a close bond. Mangalam is a confidante for her daughter where she expresses and shares everything. To Dorai this bond between the mother and the daughter becomes a cause of concern. He despises their attachment and sharing, taking it as a threat to his authority in the home. To punish Mangalam he marries off Usha into a wealthy family ignoring their wishes. Here, he is not only acting in financial interests, but is trying to prove his upper hand in the household. Usha wanted to take up further studies and Mangalam supports her, but Dorai was deliberately indifferent and ignores that. He considers Usha as the image of her mother and according to him, characterless like her. Though Mangalam is trapped in this forced marriage with Dorai, she wants to live her dreams through her daughter. She is trying to fulfil her wishes through Usha by giving her the choices she never had. When Dorai senses that Mangalam intention of giving wings to her daughter, he not only tramples the dreams of his daughter but tries to further avenge and punish Mangalam too.

Similarly, she talks about the hopes dreams and aspiration that parents have from their children, boy or girl, they want to see them coming out with flying colours, but Sengupta here gain drops a word of caution where she mouths her opinion through the conversation between Thangam And Dorai.

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

THANGAM: And what happened when my sister wanted to study ?And when Usha got that scholarship? Did you allow them to study? (p100)

Now this conversation raises two issues, firstly a woman who comes to your house after marriage is never seen as a girl with her own little hopes, dreams and aspirations, she is forced to forget and give up her own individual self, her dreams no matter howsoever capable she is to fulfil them on her own, as was the case with Mangalam. She was studious hard working and efficient and would have easily cracked the IAS exams, but she could never fulfil her dream because she was never allowed to tread this path by her husband. Secondly their daughter Usha who was an equally bright student was not allowed to pursue her dreams of qualifying the competitive exams, despite the fact that she was a scholarship holder. We see such things in our society as well where it is not the dreams or aspirations of our daughters that really matter. This is exactly what happened in Usha's case who was not allowed to make a choice to pursue her career because Dorai lurked at the marriage proposal that came from an affluent and so -called upper class section of the society. And what followed was not a bed of roses rather a never-ending tale of pain and suffering, which finally led to the crumbling down of the marriage, leaving Usha entirely lost in the maze of life. Had she been given the freedom to study and develop her career and gain independence life would have been much different for her. Thus, the playwright has successfully captured the suffering of women in various forms from the male members in a patriarchal society. What Usha experiences at her in-laws is a subtle type of severe mistreatment, when her mother-in-law allegedly strives to take away any privacy to the husband and wife. She has no independence to

fulfil her will. Her in-laws exert and demand for material possession and torture her mentally for the same. She finally has to leave her marriage and return to her natal home. V. S. Elizabeth analyses this invisible violence succinctly puts across as:

“The gender-based division of labour, the differentiated socialization process, and the roles and characteristics culturally assigned to women restrict their options and their autonomy are based on repressive and symbolic form of violence that is expressed in the limitations imposed on them in terms of employment, social participation, decision-making and power at all levels; this is what is known as invisible violence, which includes objective situations of aggression, either physical, psychological or sexual, direct or indirect” (Shiradkar 146)

Revathy, Mangalam’s daughter-in-law, is the only character who does not have to undergo any vicious forms of violence like other female characters. Even though she generally fares well compared to other characters, the injustice and isolation she experiences in her husband’s home is discreetly picturized by the dramatist. Revathy seems to be eagerly looking for something. She stealthily listens to the conversations, silently observing and assimilating whatever is going on around her. She is always seen complaining about something or the other. She tells Mani that she is not given equal treatment as her sister-in-law Usha. She feels ignored and isolated without any kind of understanding from anybody. Bhattacharya observes:

“The politics of the household cannot be simply seen as a struggle between oppressing men and victimized women. As the household constitutes the site for struggle over resources and power, women themselves may be inserted into a hierarchy based on age, marital status, the ranking among daughters-in-law and so on. This differential access to power and resources would lead to a re-division of household labour among women, relationships of antagonism between them, and a re-entrenching of patriarchy as the more privileged of the female members function as the surrogate (and, often, violent) agents of male hegemony and control” (60)

Thangam treats Revathy as an outsider and takes pleasure in constantly criticizing her behaviour or work. Revathy’s inquisitive probing and complaining behaviour is the product of the treatment given to her in the home. The treatment given to her serves as an example of the treatment given to the daughters-in-law in traditional patriarchal households. Their labour and the money they bring with us is accepted without any problem or even demanded of them. But when it comes to accepting their place in the family, they are not considered as the part of the family, they are never accepted totally. They do not have any role in the decision-making process in the important matters concerning their home, their opinions are of no value and are never considered. Most of the time they are kept out of matters which are controversial or problematic. A woman who has left major part of her life and identity behind her will feel rejected and alienated in her new ‘family’. All the negative traits in Revathy’s behaviour are nothing but the shadows of the place that she is made to occupy in her home.

There is no connection or positive communication between Revathy and other female characters in the play. Even when there are positive relationships between women and existence of sympathetic communication, they are not able to help each other out of the misery in their lives. The patriarchal family structure compels them to be fragmented and many a times in opposition to each other. In spite of all the negative aspects in Revathy’s persona, she displays some traits which one can admire. Her relation as a daughter-in-law sets her on the other side, she has sympathy for Mangalam and is aware of

her suffering. But the nature of her relationship with Mangalam as well as Thangam overcomes the sympathy which she feels for both of them. Though Thangam has tender feelings for Mangalam, she is not able to help her because of the relation she shares with the perpetrator of the violence. She has to ignore her role as a sister to save her marriage and her family. Mangalam is powerless to help her daughter Usha to fight for her dreams because of Dorai. Gerda Lerner observes,

“The connectedness of women to familial structures made any development of female solidarity and group cohesiveness extremely problematic. Each individual woman was linked to her male kin in her family of origin through ties which implied specific obligations. Her indoctrination from early childhood on, emphasized her obligation not only to make an economic contribution to the kin and household but also to accept a marriage partner in line with family interests” (219).

In the second act the paly within the play technique is revealed when the same actors take up different characters. This act is centres around Sumati, a modern woman in her twenties. Like Mangalam in the first act meaning ‘holy’, Poile Sengupta has given a positive name to this character too ‘Sumati’ meaning conscience. She is outraged at the indecency and lack of character in her younger brother. She is an economically independent woman who has just joined a college as a lecturer. From her conversations with the other characters, it is apparent that she is sensitive towards women's suffering and comments thoughtfully on the play’s portrayal of the same. She is intelligent and has perception to look beyond the given. She seems a little subdued and emotionally detached from everybody including her mother. She is acutely aware of the differential treatment given to her brother in comparison to her. She blames her mother for her upbringing that according to her was “without soul” (Sengupta 46).

In spite of her understanding nature, intelligence and sensitivity, she is not able to respond to Vikram’s genuine feelings for her. She poses some fundamental questions about the relationships in the patriarchal societal structure. The most disturbing question she put up is about the authenticity of love, that is the so-called romantic love in Indian culture. There are reasons for asking this question because of the mercenary nature of marriages and the familial ties. She notices lack of love, even absence of the word ‘love’ in the play. She has her own disturbing reasons for having disbelief in love as it is revealed through the action in the play. She is a victim of molestation at the hands of a very close family friend Nari, Vikram’s father. It is apparent through her behaviour and her thoughts that this violence inflicted on her at a tender age has affected her so much that she is apprehensive about any such romantic relationship between adults. Sumati criticizes her mother for not being grateful for a wonderful husband and considers herself as a victim. Her character shows that the times might have changed but the oppression of women and the values in a patriarchal society have just remained same. Sumati is not helpless like Mangalam, she is educated and independent. She has accepted the age-old way of keeping mum about the pain that she is going through when it came to molestation by a very close family friend. The values imposed by a patriarchal value system about a woman's modesty and negative portrayal of women's sexuality and fear of losing her dignity stops her from exposing Nari till her breaking point. Her one dialogue gives away her pain and tortured mental state. Sumati: I think so. A woman who allows herself to be soft, who relinquishes her weapons...well she gets chewed up, doesn't she?..... I know it's a terrible expression but then it's a terrible state to be in...”

So Thangam, Sumati’s mother, is one more significant woman character in the second act of the play. As is generally observed in a patriarchal society, she is partial towards her son. She even accepts her preference for him to Sumati. The distance Sumati feels from her mother is the main reason she was not able to open up and protest against the molestation she is subjected to from Nari. Sumati lacks the

space to tell what she feels and this absence can be directly attributed to Thangam's attitude towards her. Thangam, incidentally comes to know of her husband's affair when she discovers some letters in his diary. This is a revelation which shook her to her core. Somehow the circumstances and the time she is living in empowers her enough to let go the relationship which has betrayed her after so long a life together. Sumati is also able to give voice to her silent suffering by the end of the play. These two characters by their act of taking control of their life give a kind of hopeful conclusion at the end.

Though the timelessness of the suffering endured by women is portrayed here, the dramatist also gives some positive insinuations by creating female characters who take action against those sufferings. Thus, the basic social structure 'Family' becomes the location of oppression and discrimination for countless women victims. As it is considered as the 'private' domain which should be protected, many women don't act against it or never ask for help too. The sacredness or the sanction this structure has in the society prevents them from breaking out of it or calling it into the question. One might as well say that it is devised by subordinating the female and downplaying her interests. R. Indira explains,

“The family, be it the parental or the marital home, constructs 'ideal types' of women that are actually internalized by men and women. By upholding such traits as 'self-denial' and 'submission' to male authority as virtues that a woman must imbibe, families prepare women to not only expect male violence but also tolerate it. Women are so deliberately socialized to believe that the family is a private domain that must be kept away from the public sphere. By glorifying the notion of 'family honour', the family creates the feeling that it is the woman's prime responsibility to protect their honour even if she has to lay down her life for it” (Shirwadkar 273-4)

Patriarchy was associated with a set of notions, a patriarchal ideology that acted to explain and justify dominance as if this how things were right from the beginning of creation. Family allows patriarchy to control women's sexuality; it regulates male control over property and functions as an institution which reinforces patriarchal values. These are the reasons it becomes extremely difficult to call this structure into question. Women are socialized in a way that they themselves ingrain the patriarchal values and strive to live by them.

“Women in their day-today life understand violence against women as emanating from biological determinism..... this leads them to believe that they are naturally the have-nots, therefore they must bear their fate.....The natural and social justification and rationalization of violence against women makes it a long haul for any woman who wants to resist or fight back” (Dave 188).

These are the very reasons the women characters in the play who act as representatives of the women in society suffer many a times an unjust and undeserved violence at the hands of the males in their families. The patriarchal division amongst women ensures that they would not be able to come together and protest against it. Nevertheless, by the end of the play in the second act dramatist rekindles the lost hope that can be perceived in the way the two women protect and react against violence.

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