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BA English Honours | Semester III | Calicut University

Drama: Exploring the Literary and Performative Elements

Course Code: ENG3CJ201 • Module 3 Notes

MODULE III: WOMEN AND THEATRE

1. Feminist Dramaturgy: Reclaiming the Stage and Subverting the Male Gaze

The intersection of feminism and theatre represents one of the most radical, invigorating interventions in modern cultural history. For centuries, institutional theatre across global cultures was an aggressively patriarchal apparatus: female characters were written by male playwrights, directed by male impresarios, evaluated by male critics, and—in ancient Greece, Elizabethan England, and classical Japanese Kabuki—physically performed by cross-dressed boys and men. Female characters were routinely polarized into male-projected archetypes: the virginal, passive victim (Ophelia, Desdemona) or the demonic, monstrous transgressor (Medea, Lady Macbeth).

Feminist theatre directly dismantles this hegemony. Drawing upon Laura Mulvey's critique of the "male gaze," Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre*, and Hélène Cixous's call for *écriture féminine* (writing the body), women playwrights re-center female interiority, bodily autonomy, and lived experience. Feminist drama shatters the traditional linear Aristotelian plot (which feminist theorists critique as inherently phallocentric, driving toward singular climactic conquest), replacing it with circular, episodic, collaborative, and non-linear narrative structures. This module analyzes three transformative feminist plays from India, the African diaspora, and West Asia that expose how women's bodies become the primary battlegrounds of war, domestic silence, and political oppression.

2. Gender Discrimination in Theatrical Language and Historical Representation

Language is not a neutral medium; it is saturated with patriarchal ideology. Theatrical dialogue historically encoded gender hierarchies through asymmetric conversational dynamics: male characters commanded authoritative public declarative speech, while female characters were confined to emotional lamentation, hesitation, interruptions, and deferential silence. Feminist dramatists subvert this linguistic oppression by inventing new dramatic idioms: staging expressive silences, utilizing poetic fragments, reclaiming taboo words, and exposing how polite domestic discourse masks systemic female terror.

3. Middle-Class Complicity and Voyeurism: Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

Manjula Padmanabhan (born 1953), an acclaimed Indian playwright, author, and cartoonist, achieved international renown by winning the Onassis International Cultural Competition for her futuristic dystopian play *Harvest* (1997). Her chilling domestic drama *Lights Out* (1984) is inspired by a horrifying real-life incident in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, where an impoverished woman was gang-raped night after night in an open lot beneath the windows of an upscale middle-class apartment building while the neighbors watched and did nothing.

The play unfolds entirely within the comfortable, air-conditioned living room of an upper-middle-class couple, Bhasker and Leela. Night after night, blood-curdling screams of a woman being brutally assaulted drift through their open window. Leela is profoundly traumatized, nauseated, and terrified by the cries; she pleads with her husband to call the police or intervene. However, Bhasker trivializes her horror, closing the curtains and rationalizing inaction. They are joined by their middle-class friends, Mohan and Surinder, who gather at the window to observe the ongoing gang-rape with morbid, voyeuristic fascination.

Padmanabhan's satire is devastating and forensic. The male characters engage in absurd, pseudo-intellectual debates: Mohan theorizes that it might be a religious ritual, an ethnic custom, or a domestic dispute where outside intervention would be legally inappropriate! When Leela insists on dialing the emergency police helpline, the men physically restrain her, arguing that calling the police will drag their respectable names into courtrooms and diminish their property values. Padmanabhan turns the theatrical mirror directly onto the audience, exposing the grotesque cowardice, voyeuristic sadism, and moral bankruptcy of the educated Indian bourgeoisie who insulate themselves from systemic gender violence behind curtained windows.

4. The Weaponization of the Female Body: Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*

Lynn Nottage made history as the first female playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice. Her monumental 2009 Pulitzer-winning play *Ruined* is a searing, deeply compassionate masterpiece set in the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo. Inspired by Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and informed by extensive field interviews Nottage conducted with Congolese women in refugee camps, the play investigates how systematic sexual violence and genital mutilation are deployed as deliberate military weapons in contemporary resource wars.

The play is set in a small mining town brothel and bar run by Mama Nadi, a fierce, pragmatic matriarch who navigates a precarious neutrality between government soldiers and rebel militias fighting for control of lucrative coltan and gold mines. Mama Nadi provides sanctuary to young women who have been "ruined"—a colloquial euphemism for surviving horrific gang rape and genital mutilation that leaves them permanently physically damaged and socially ostracized as damaged goods by their own families and villages.

Through characters like Sophie, an educated young woman who sings hauntingly while suffering chronic physical agony, and Salima, whose baby was brutally murdered before she was abducted into the jungle as a sex slave, Nottage bears witness to unspeakable human atrocity without indulging in gratuitous trauma porn. The women are not portrayed as passive victims; they exhibit extraordinary courage, sisterhood, and resilience. Nottage directly connects the brutalization of African women's bodies to the global consumer economy: the coltan fueling the warlords' bullets is the exact mineral used inside the smartphones and laptops of the Western world. *Ruined* is a devastating cry for global accountability and an anthem of feminine survival.

5. The Labyrinth of Memory and Emigration: Naghmeh Samini's *Home*

Naghmeh Samini, one of Iran's most distinguished contemporary female dramatists and screenwriters (known for the hit series *Shahrzad*), explores the fraught intersections of female subjectivity, political authoritarianism, and physical displacement. Her acclaimed play *Home* (*Khaneh*) utilizes magical realism, domestic memory, and non-linear chronology to investigate what happens when the domestic home ceases to be a sanctuary and becomes a haunted space of exile.

The drama focuses on an Iranian family whose members are torn between the suffocating political and social realities of contemporary post-revolutionary Iran and the agonizing alienation of emigration to the West. The female characters in *Home* are caught between two forms of erasure: the authoritarian patriarchal state that regulates their clothing, speech, and public presence, and the disorienting foreign diaspora that reduces them to rootless immigrants. Samini employs poetic language, fractured timelines, and shifting domestic architecture where walls dissolve into memory. The play illustrates that for women living under patriarchal and geopolitical violence, "home" is not a physical brick-and-mortar building, but an elusive, precarious interior space that must be continually defended through memory and voice.

Advanced Theatrical Hermeneutics, Dramatic Theory & Performative Semiotics

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1. Core Theatrical Paradigms and Hermeneutic Debates

Critical inquiry into Feminist Theatre, Gender Violence, and Geopolitical Trauma reveals fundamental dialectical tensions across dramatic history:

- **Dramatic Text versus Performance Text (The Page-Stage Divide):** Classical literary criticism treated the playwright's written script (the dramatic text) as the supreme, authoritative repository of aesthetic meaning. In contrast, performance theorists like Richard Schechner and Hans-Thies Lehmann demonstrate that the *performance text*—encompassing scenography, lighting cues, vocal cadence, physical gestures, blocking, and audience spatial relationship—constitutes an autonomous semiotic system that frequently subverts, deconstructs, or exceeds the written dialogue.
- **Cathartic Absorption versus Epic Alienation:** The Aristotelian dramatic tradition prioritized dramatic illusion, emotional mimesis, and tragic *catharsis* (the purgation of pity and fear), encouraging audiences to accept fatalistic suffering passively. Bertolt Brecht radically overturned this with *Epic Theatre*, deploying the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or defamiliarization effect) to dismantle emotional complacency, reminding audiences that social conditions are man-made historical constructs that can be changed through collective political action.
- **Feminist and Decolonial Dramaturgy:** Traditional dramatic canons historically codified patriarchal and eurocentric perspectives, marginalizing female agency and subaltern oral performance traditions. Feminist dramatists (e.g., Caryl Churchill, Manjula Padmanabhan, Lynn Nottage) dismantle the voyeuristic male gaze and expose domestic gender violence, while decolonial African and Indian playwrights (e.g., Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mahesh Dattani) reclaim indigenous languages, folk rituals, and subaltern voices from colonial suppression.

2. Comparative Matrix: Classical, Modernist, and Post-Dramatic Theatre

A structured comparative assessment delineates dramatic architecture across theatrical epochs in Drama: Exploring the Literary and Performative Elements:

Theatrical Dimension	Classical Aristotelian Drama	Modernist / Epic Theatre	Contemporary Post-Dramatic Theatre
Dramatic Structure	Linear 5-act pyramid; strict unity of time, place, and action.	Episodic montage; narrative interruptions, songs, and didactic projection placards.	Non-linear, fragmented, deconstructed; paratactic collage of sound, body, and space.
Spectator Relationship	Passive emotional empathy leading to spiritual catharsis.	Critical, analytical observer provoked into socio-political consciousness.	Active co-creator, sensory participant, immersive witness in shared space.

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Role of Language	Supreme vehicle of poetic thought, characterization, and plot.	Dialectical argument, social critique, and defamiliarized gestures (*Gestus*).	De-hierarchized; language functions as acoustic sound, texture, or visual graphic alongside bodies.

3. Glossary of Essential Dramatic and Theatrical Terms

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Mise-en-Scène	French Theatrical Theory	The totality of visual and spatial staging—sets, costumes, lighting, blocking, and props—arranged within the performance space.
Post-Dramatic Theatre	Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999)	A theatrical paradigm that dismantles the primacy of the dramatic text, emphasizing sensory presence, physical performativity, and non-representational aesthetics.
Gestus	Brechtian Theatre	A physical gesture, vocal tone, or bodily tableau that embodies and reveals the underlying social and political attitudes of a character.
Liminality	Victor Turner / Schechner	The transitional, threshold state during ritual or theatrical performance where ordinary social rules are suspended and new identities can be forged.

4. Pedagogical and Analytical Roadmap for Dramatic Criticism

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- **Phase 1: Textual & Scenographic Deconstruction:** Meticulously analyzing dialogue, stage directions, spatial geography, and visual iconography embedded within the play-text.
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theatrical provocations.

- **Phase 4: Theoretical & Intertextual Synthesis:** Connecting the dramatic performance with contemporary feminist critique, post-colonial identity struggles, and the democratization of digital performance spaces.

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