

Periodicals that Filled the Silences: The Case of New Woman on Stage and the New Reviews

Premkumar K.P.

Research Scholar

Department of English, University of Calicut, Kerala, India

In the context of contemporary forms of alternative media, Chris Atton stresses:

...the alternative press's responses [to the social construction of mass media news] as demonstrated not simply by critiques of those media but by their own construction of news, based on alternative values and frameworks . . . alternative media provide information about and interpretations of the world which we might not otherwise see and information about the world that we simply will not find anywhere else.(Atton, 10)

One needs no allusion or reference to argue that the role of women in theatre has been minimal as in most other discourses. There is not much difference in her role as spectator, actor, playwright or back stage artist. While this being the fact, the documentation in the histories of the very few women who could 'trespass' into this domain of male domination has been more pathetic. While major

histories written by men virtually omitted the case of women, many celebrated women historians were reluctant to include those women theatre activists who do not satisfy their standards of 'femininity'.

By the last decades of the Victorian era, a shift in social attitudes regarding gender relations was happening in England and elsewhere. This was marked by a constant move away from the accepted pattern of male supremacy and female dependence towards the new pattern of gender equality.

The Woman Question, raised by Mary Wollstonecraft was taken up later by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna. Frances Trollope and Elizabeth Gaskell urged upper-class women to become active in the public sphere. In fiction, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot censured the patriarchal instruments which resulted in the social marginalisation of women.

The campaign started to generate positive effects gradually. The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, the act of 1891 that denied men conjugal rights to their wives' bodies without their consent and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 are specific cases. In the 1880s and 1890s, the Woman Question became a vital issue in British newspapers and periodicals. Female activists, writers, artists and educators expressed their polemical views on the condition of women and began to take the issue to the streets.

The term 'New Woman' was coined by British feminist writer and activist Madame Sarah Grand in 1894. The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting. Sally Ledger summarises:

The New Woman was a very fin-de-siècle phenomenon. Contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism, she was part of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880s and 1890s. (Ledger. 31)

At the same time, The New Woman was a tempting object of ridicule in the male dominant press and periodicals.

In these 'representations' appeared in mainstream press, she was young, middle-class and single on principle. She eschewed the fripperies of fashion in favour of more masculine dress and severe coiffure. Educated than her predecessors, independent of father or husband, she was a fan of Ibsen and Shaw. She was employed either as a journalist or teacher. She used to smoke, ride a bicycle, used bold 'men's language' and travelled unescorted. She attended all-female clubs or societies where ideas and sexes mixed freely. She sought freedom from, and equality with, men. In these ventures, the new woman was prepared to turn the conventions and accepted notions of femininity upside down. In theatre, she was very much present in the plays of Sydney Grundy, George Bernard Shaw, Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, Harley Granville Barker and others. She is a composite product of the accelerating woman's movement, a forerunner to the suffragette.

The ideological and aesthetic dimensions of the image of the new woman in the discourses of the times were suggested by Lyn Pykett:

The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating or self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline.

(Richardson and Willis, p. xii)

While this is the general case, it is interesting to note the creative and supportive gestures towards the cause of women's theatre shown by the British periodicals of the early twentieth century. At a time when rapid changes were happening in women's liberation movement,

mainstream press was actually making fun of the new woman. The contributions of these pro women periodicals draw significance in this context.

The ripples of this phenomenon were first felt in fiction. This anticipated various discourses of a new womanhood in the twentieth century and theatre happens to be shaken by this new wave, a bit later. The novelists who took impulse from this new wave often expressed their dissatisfaction with the position of women in society. These works of fiction served as a springboard for a debate on gender issues which remained a taboo till then.

Playwrighting requires mastering to some degree a male-dominated, public production machinery, something that relatively few women have been able to do over the long history of the form. This is clear from the number of extant plays by women as there is of novels. Still, theatre remained a more potential field for women as pointed out by Gayle Austin:

Despite these difficulties, there are advantages for the feminist critical project of studying plays. Plays allow the reader and audience to visualize, to fill in blanks and gaps. They provide the frameworks for productions that can bring out many of the issues feminism finds pressing. They combine verbal and nonverbal elements simultaneously, so that questions of language and visual representation can be addressed at the same time, through the medium of an actual body. They contribute a unique field of examples of women's representation. (Goodman & Gay. 136)

The theatre was a problematic domain for modern women. Even while offering women a career as performers, writers and even managers since Restoration, it was not considered a respectable place for them. On the other hand, it offered them a degree of independence while the structure remained male-dominated. It placed its women on public view, in positions of physical and emotional intimacy with men. The status of the actress was again complicated by the 'charges' of association with the New Woman

derided by the main stream society for her sexual self-determination.

Viv Gardner opines that a serious attempt to raise the status of theatre and to create a legitimate and respectable stage began with the second half of the nineteenth century. As per census records, the number of women who entered theatre either as actresses or playwrights was on increase since the last decades of the nineteenth century. Many of them chose theatre as an independent career like journalism or teaching. Some turned radical by the frustrations of playing roles that were far from the reality they lived and even contrary to their personal politics. 'The irony was that this 'unconventional' world was the purveyor of some of the most conventional – not to say reactionary – attitudes towards women in the period.' (Gardner.17)

The age old practice of disregarding the changes happening in favour of women can be seen operational in the first decades of the twentieth century as well. With the formation of the suffragette Women's Social and Political Union in 1903 followed by the Actress Franchise League in 1908, many young women writers entered into playwrighting. Actresses too came out to fully utilize this opportunity. Julie Holledge, the actress director in the British alternative theatre movement, shares her own experience which makes clear how minimal was the information that was out regarding the changes happening. In the introduction to her work on Edwardian theatre, Holledge writes:

When I began researching this book, I anticipated writing about the indirect influence of actresses active in the women's rights movement on the playwrights of the time . . . Having begun my research believing that there were no women playwrights writing between 1900 and 1920, I subsequently discovered over 400. (Holledge, 2-3)

A brief look into the women's periodicals from *English Woman's Journal* which began in 1858 to *Time and Tide* started in 1920

will reveal that a major space was allotted for the commentary and reviews of leading Modern male dramatists held high among the 'new women' of the times.

Slieve Mc Gowan wrote about *A Doll's House* in *The Vote* in 1911:

There is no need to describe the *motif* of the play, since every reader of THE VOTE has doubtless more than an acquaintance with such a splendid piece of feminist propaganda as 'A Doll's House'. . . True, the reverberation of the door as Nora slams it behind her sounds dismal enough to those who do not read it aright. It is Woman saying good-bye to her illusions—the illusions that seem so fair, that in reality are so ugly.

(McGowan, 1911, p. 254)

In her 1914 article, "The Feminist Movement in Drama," written for the American suffrage paper, *The Woman Voter*, Mary Shaw makes even stronger claims about the value and impact of Ibsen's work:

Ibsen's clarion call to women in this play is,—'Release yourselves from the tyrannous duties imposed on you from without' . . . Revolutionary! Well, I should say it was! Even to-day, thirty years after A DOLL'S HOUSE was written . . . Ibsen's four 'woman plays,' so-called—A DOLL'S HOUSE, GHOSTS, HEDDA GABLER and ROSMERSHOLM—thrash out the whole woman question .

(Shaw, M. 1914 p. 13)

Reviewing *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, Francis Fenwick Williams celebrates Bernard Shaw's consummate ability to uphold the cause of women:

[H]ere, in the twentieth century, we find the most brilliant of our playwrights choosing, as heroine of his most delightful play, a woman who would have been in other ages a most unqualified 'old maid'. . . Lady Cicely [is] . . . not so much

an exception as a type—a type of true womanhood in its modern form.

(Williams F. F.19)

In a suitably titled article *What is Wrong with the Stage?* published in a journal with not that suitable a name, *The Catholic Suffragist*, Christopher St. John wrote in 1918:

What is wrong with the theatre is that it is for the most part no longer an expression of an art, taken seriously by those behind the curtain or before it, but a commercial amusement, too often in some of its forms made the vehicle of exploiting young girls for gain. (St. John, 67)

There are two parts to the solution she recommends for improving the quality and seriousness of theatre available—namely, state funding and more involvement by women:

What is needed is the organisation and endowment of the better elements in it [theatre]. If we had one of two State-aided theatres in London where the main object was not to make a huge profit but to give plays which were true manifestations of the dramatic spirit, there would still no doubt be more or less objectionable entertainments, run by private enterprise, but they would take their proper place and would not swamp the whole stage. . . .

There is already on foot a scheme for establishing a Woman's Repertory Theatre after the war, a woman's theatre in the sense that it is to employ women's labour in departments in which only men have hitherto been used. (68)

Penny Farfan undelines the need to account for feminist practices in the theatre in the twentieth century to understand how women “develop[ed] alternatives to mainstream theatre practice and to the patriarchal avantgarde.” (Farfan 39) This attention to feminist discourse in the theatre stresses the often ignored aspect of cultural reception in earlier periods. Maggie Humm makes a case for the

contribution of women's journalism to cinema writing where she notes that mainstream film histories ignore the work of women modernists as film theorists and practitioners. The same press will naturally ignore the wider body of theatre activities happened in these years (Humm 158). The "feminine" interpretations of the new cinema of the 1920s and 1930s are evident in the context of theatre before the turn of the century. If we look solely for this evidence of reception in the same places where we search for modernist or more generally literary sources, we will not find it—except perhaps in *The Freewoman* and *Time and Tide*.

The dependence of 'the new woman' was very much upon pro feminist periodicals. Women social reformers and activists of Victorian and Edwardian period produced and distributed a wide range of newspapers and periodicals as part of their campaigns. The last decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries saw the development of progressive journals that covered a broad political spectrum as well as a wide variety of issues, ranging from work, education, and law and in particular, the suffrage movement which provided much impetus for the women's theatre to evolve on its own later.

These print media in particular were crucial to creating an understanding of the scope and activities of a women's public sphere at the turn of the twentieth century and they were instrumental in shaping opinion and mobilizing large- and small-scale activist networks and reform campaigns. They provide a window into what Kate Flint terms the "reading communities" that women formed in these years.(Flint 42-43)

Though these print media have gained considerable attention, they remain conspicuously absent in narratives of British press history. The case is quite similar to what happened in the histories and 'herstories' of theatre. Many feminist historians and literary studies scholars have done their best to recover and analyse these media, but the tendency to focus on the ways in which these periodicals

spoke for women has obscured how actively they sought to address readers including men.

From the founding of the *English Woman's Journal* in 1858 to *Time and Tide* in 1920, feminist periodicals provided venues in which women could explore and debate as editors and writers – with the freedom afforded an independent press – a wide range of issues pertaining to political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of contemporary life, in order to influence public opinion.

The late-nineteenth-century periodicals offer commentaries on topics such as the treatment of women in drama by Shakespeare and Ibsen, as well as reviews of productions at major London theatres. But after 1909, with the proliferation of suffrage newspapers and feminist reviews, there begins to emerge a more extensive body of theatre criticism, particularly in journals which devoted regular sections to theatre or had regular contributors who were also active in the theatre: for example, Christopher St. John, Cicely Hamilton, and Elizabeth Robins, to name a few.

The coverage in the pro feminist periodicals of the time falls into three main categories. Primarily there are commentaries that do not disturb the value judgments of the male dominant main stream press. There are umpteen reviews of the work of leading modern male dramatists whose work was highly regarded within the women's movement, namely Ibsen and Shaw. Secondly, they carry reviews and coverage of women playwrights and developments in the production of theatre by women such as Cicely Hamilton, Elizabeth Robins, and Githa Sowerby. This included mainly the celebrated or accepted women playwrights of the period. Finally, there are cases of more generic commentary on the "modern drama" or theatre of the day, sometimes occasioned by particular productions, but also including discussions of genres, modes of productions, audiences, and even the economics of theatre.

Another fact to be considered in this context is that the critics who contributed to the feminist press were by no means always women,

nor were these developments relevant only to women. An illustrative case is that of Anthony L. Ellis who addresses the topic of "Woman in the Modern Drama". His language, his identification of Ibsen as the "modern master" signalling the "modern period," and his interest in realism are the relevant here. He argues that "the history of the Drama has been practically the history of woman," and traces representations of women in plays back to the Renaissance, a task undertaken by the feminist historians as the first among the three dimensional attempt a regaining women's space in theatre viz. exploring the canon.

The early feminist press did comprehensive coverage of plays by women playwrights.

For instance, in a brief review of Gertrude Vaughan's "The Woman With the Pack," A. Meyers notes:

It has been contended by the eclectic that pure propaganda is outside the realms of Art (writ with a capital 'A.') For these few, Yeats is the apostle, and Bernard Shaw anathema. 'The Woman with the Pack' is tangible proof of the fallacy of the contention. It has charm and imagination and thrills with an emotion that is vivid because it is sincere . . . Miss Vaughan has pictured in dramatic form the struggle between the old world and the new, and in the delineation of the brooding spirit of woman she has shown herself a disciple not unworthy of Yeats, whom those, yclept the elect, immortalise as the poet of the present and the future. (Meyers 230)

The gendered elements of reception are articulated in even clearer terms

in a review of Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son*:

None of the critics, so far, seem to have grasped more than one side of the play. The woman's side has passed without notice. I do not profess to understand the playwright's inmost thought; but I do understand what it is that her

glowing art depicts. Straight from the heart of life she picks the truth, and we stand aghast as she reveals it.(CNB 227)

It can be safely found that while documented histories, literature anthologies and even apparent feminist studies were a bit careful in occluding or a bit careless in including documentation of women's deliberate 'trespassing' into the male bastion of theatre, the journalists and columnists of the first decades of the twentieth century were showing a responsibility which helped a lot in establishing the women's theatre movement that flourished in England and the US in the 1960s.

Mary Eagleton's observations on Margaret Thatcher seems fitting here:

... we need to be clear about the distinction between 'being' a feminist (which Margaret Thatcher clearly is not) and producing feminist effects (which Margaret Thatcher - inadvertently, unwillingly and in restricted areas has done). (Eagleton.154)

The British periodicals of the early decades of the twentieth century appear quite feminist as far as their responses towards the dynamics of the theatre of the day is concerned. Were the editors/scribes were conscious about this is none of our head ache.

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