

The Unheard Stories of Sophocles's Jocasta and Manto's Women: Addressing Social Taboos through Experimental Adaptations in Bangladeshi Theater

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Abstract

In the post-liberation period of Bangladesh, women-centered plays in theater were few. The silence of women's voices led major theater groups to create, translate, or adapt women-centered plays in the post-liberation era, especially in the '80s. The adaptations of the '90s became more vocal as they aimed to reach out and bring more opulent foreign texts to the local audience, not blindly following them but serving to increase the self-confidence of the theater in representing women. One of the major theater groups of Bangladesh, Nagorik Nattya Sampraday, began dedicating their productions to the cause by putting women at the center. In the two recent productions of this theater group, *Andhakare Methane* and *Naamgottroheen – Manto'r Meyera*, inspired by *Oedipus Rex* and three short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto, taboo topics like incest and prostitution are addressed. This paper will focus on how these taboos are handled in the two adapted plays. It will also examine how, during the crises, the female characters respond and emerge as strong individuals actively resisting the patriarchal ideologies. To understand the taboo relations in terms of feminism and its relevance in our society, we have taken into consideration Friedman's ideas on locational feminism, Edward Said's Travel Theory, and Alcoff's criticism of feminist theory.

Theater is a strong means for migrating ideas across borders. During migration, ideas in the form of adaptations reach a particular society and culture. Writers of adaptations migrate these ideas in a relative storyline relevant to the culture in their own individual ways.

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During the process of adaptation, a text may or may not be directly conceptualized. According to Gerard Genette, it is a text in the “second degree, created and received in relation to a prior text” (qtd. in Hutcheon 6). An adaptation may be experimental to the extent of creating/re-creating characters that may not be perceived in the same way as in the original text. But the connection remains as movement of ideas from one place to another is a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity (Said 159-160). Ideas are adapted to the new condition according to relevance, preference, and need. As theater is a medium for popularizing ideas in society, it can bring social issues across the border. Writers of adaptations in Bangladesh are also bringing texts across the border to popularize foreign texts and issues relevant to the society. There are several plays which are using the stage to dramatize the female experience. Women are the central characters and seek to represent women’s conditions with a more authentic expression of the female psyche. As Jane Moss says, the women-centered plays are important “in that they replace traditional female dramatic types (femmes fortes, tragic heroines, ingénues, adulterous wives, maids) with truer models and communicate women’s fears and desires in women’s own vocabulary” (Moss 548-549). She further says that most of the activity in women-based theater is the reflection of a developing consciousness about women by theater professionals. The initial observation of theater history shows the absence of women-centered plays. The silence of women’s voices in Bangladesh led major theater groups to create, translate, or adapt women-centered plays in the post-liberation time, especially in the ’80s. The adaptations of the ’90s became more vocal as they aimed to reach out and bring more opulent foreign texts to the local audience, not blindly following them but serving to increase the self-confidence of the theater in representing women. In today’s society, religion and gender have created a conflict, and theater can play a role in making people aware of this crisis as well as mitigate it (Ahmed 68-85).

Among the well-received women-centered plays, the work done by Nagorik Nattya Sampraday is worth mentioning. The recent two productions of this group, *Andhakare Methane* (presented by Agontuk Repertory consisting of Aranyak Nattyadall, Prachyanat, Theater, Center for Asian Theater, and Nagorik Nattya Sampraday) and *Naamgottroheen – Manto’r Meyera*, especially, have created quite a stir among the theater-loving audience. If we look at the history of this theater group’s work, the majority of the adapted works have been focused on male characters. New productions of Nagorik at the turn of the twenty-first century seem to be more female oriented. When female-centered plays are few, taboo issues like incest and prostitution are rarely discussed. Generally, prostitution and incest are topics that are only whispered about in our society and the people involved are also considered as outcasts. As a result, they become voiceless in societal issues. In *Andhakare Methane* and *Naamgottroheen – Manto’r Meyera*, we find these voiceless people being heard as they brave ostracism and taboo. For this paper, we will focus on how these taboos are handled in the two adapted plays mentioned above. While

analyzing them, we will also see how, in the process of handling their crisis, the female characters become vocal, demand their place, and emerge as strong individuals actively resisting the patriarchal ideologies. The obvious exploration of locational effect on the rights of women, the social acceptance of the problem, the transcultural interaction of the adapted text with the audience also becomes a prime factor of the study.

According to Susan Stanford Friedman, feminism is not something to be homogenized, controlled by certain ideas and theories. She strongly believes in development of a multicultural, international, and transnational feminism. As Friedman further notes, “The borders between sites of feminism surely exist, but just as surely they are and must be transgressed” (244-245). They change with cultural formations, conditions, and alliances. Neither of the plays in discussion here are adapted from feminist plays. Rather the adaptation writers have selected characters like Vivien, Sultana, or Neeti who are commonly found in Western and Eastern societies to focus on conditions associated with feminist ideas. We find names or locations changing, but the crisis or condition remains very similar. Hence the texts travel, as a result of which feminism gains fluidity, spreads, and ultimately sustains. Singular feminism assumes locational epistemology, based on the changing historical and geographical specifications that produce different theories, agendas, and political practices. Locational feminism also requires a kind of geopolitical literacy based on understanding of gender systems in different times and places; that means interlocking dimensions of global cultures in which locals know about the global and the global are informed about the local. The adaptation writers select characters from foreign dramas/plays/short stories and adapt them to create an understanding of the desired area or issue in the local context. The adapted texts reflect the locational study as well as social literacy, and in this case, the understanding of the gender system of Bangladesh. The fluidity of feminism makes us identify with foreign characters like *Jocasta* as *Vivien* in Bangladesh, and *Manto*'s female characters reflect the female experiences of our country.

Locational feminism also encourages travel of feminism across borders, adapting itself to new positions, rising not as an indigenous form but rather developing itself out of “transcultural interaction” with others (Friedman 245). Feminism migrancy, as Said says, “necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas” (qtd. in Friedman 226). Friedman further emphasizes that feminism needs to be understood in a global context. It means internationalizing feminism that affiliates women with victimization which Friedman says mutes women's agency, ignores cultural conceptualization, and suppresses understanding of gender's interaction with other constituents of identity. Commitment to rights of women should not be founded on uniform gender oppression that decontextualizes the condition of women in various locations (245-46). The global contextualization of

feminism is favored by Spivak in her criticism of the First World and Third World binaries on internationalization of feminism. She suggested that we should “anthropologize the West, and study the various cultural systems of Africa, Asia, Asia-Pacific, and the Americas as if peopled by historical agents” (qtd. by Friedman 247). So, geopolitical locational feminism travels and, in thinking, avoids impositions of its set of cultural implications on others, and produces a somewhat localized concept of feminism. It is to be noted that, while traveling, the differences are modified through its interaction with multidirectional exchanges just like in *Andhakare Methane* where the Greek patriarchal ideas are not imposed on the local theater and modern European concepts are exercised instead. In the case of *Naamgottroheen – Manto'r Meyera*, however, the social customs and religious practices are from the unpartitioned India. The localized Urdu and Greek customs travel to Bangladesh but the interaction between audience and performers is not affected.

Now the vital question that arises is what is a woman? According to Alcoff, if we are undecided about the category, we cannot say that feminism is immune to deconstruction. If that happens, women are vulnerable to invisibility which, in turn would jeopardize gender politics (352-354). Unlike Jocasta, Vivien is more completely portrayed in the adapted play, her crisis more focused, and the play more centered on what takes place in her life. The other characters like Lawrence (the lover), Edward (the son turned husband) are developed as characters to complement her. So the woman Vivien is more focused on here, and more strongly felt in contrast to Jocasta. Though Vivien is still vulnerable to male forces, she is not invisible. Similarly, in *Naamgottroheen*, the female characters Sultana, Neeti, and Sugandhi are visible, strongly battling for their rights, and are not susceptible to the patriarchal society. Rather, the characters lash out at the male characters like Khuda Bakhsh, Shankar, and Madho.

Some texts are undecided about their approach to feminism. If the text is undecided about its approach, then it cannot be useful to feminists who look for their accusations of misogyny to be validated in the texts. This thesis of “undecidability” (Alcoff 353) is another version of the antifeminist argument that believes that this perception of feminism is limited and what “we take to be misogyny is in reality helpful rather than hurtful to the cause of the women” (Alcoff 354). Pantho Shahriar, the adaptation writer and director of *Andhakare Methane*, has consciously focused on the taboo of incest to make the audience think about it. For him, gender is not the prime focus. Rather ethical issues are raised to challenge the audience’s traditional perception of women. Being a male writer, he gives a neutral perspective of Jocasta’s psychological turmoil that began at a very tender age and made her strong. Creating a woman character and showing her struggle by addressing incest, the director has thrown a challenge at the audience, thus opening up the text for debate. According to the director, Vivien’s character is portrayed to give a voice to the silent Jocasta who suffers alone off-stage only to end her suffering

by committing suicide. He further added that the issue of contextualization was not considered important for the universality of the perception of every society about the incest taboo.

The two selected plays for discussion are experimental adaptations. The inner aspects of the lives of women, which are hidden from the public eye most of the time, are explored more vividly by the playwrights Pantho Shahriar and Usha Ganguly. In the adaptations, these playwrights have selected women characters from the writings of Sophocles and Manto respectively to focus on the relevance of the social taboos faced by Bangladeshi women to explore the position of the marginalized women.

The first play of focus here is an adaptation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. Sophocles created a larger-than-life character in Oedipus to show how strong the human spirit can be in the face of all odds and challenges given by fate or the gods. *Oedipus Rex* was first performed in 429 BC and concentrates on the male characters like Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias only. In contrast to this, the female character, Jocasta, seems to be left with her sufferings and devastated life, never really being developed into a full character. The adaptation writer of *Andhokare Methane*, Pantha Shahriar, has taken this opportunity to build fully developed characters out of the neglected female characters to tell a new story and to address a contemporary taboo of his own society which may not have been feasible by simply conceptualizing the situation. Thus the character Vivien rises as a new well-developed character who resembles Jocasta only slightly.

From the very beginning, Vivien, the central female character in *Andhokare Methane*, has been shown as a woman searching for her identity in society. As the adaptation writer does not clearly proclaim the text to be feminist in outlook, it leaves the option for the deconstruction of the woman character. Vivien is exhausted by the way the male characters in the form of her father, lover, and son-husband, impose decisions on her life. She declares that she has been mesmerized by the way life has treated her, thus leaving her confused as to whether fate is chasing her or it is she who is chasing her fate like Oedipus. Although *Andhokare Methane* has been inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the adapted play is more focused on the struggle of a human being with an over-arching fate from the perspective of a woman character. The adapted play is set in an imaginary place which resembles a European country in an early industrialized period. The place itself is a symbol of imprisonment as it puts the life of the characters always in danger of dying inside the coal mines.



Photo 1: Vivien in *Andhakare Methane* (Photo credit: Agontuk Repertory)

Vivien is seen here to be in a contradictory position facing odds and challenges put forth by her father who represents patriarchal society. He does not believe in the freedom of choice of a woman and thinks that she should abandon her illicit child. In spite of Vivien's repeated implorations, her father forces her to give up the child fearing that this illicit child will not be accepted by society. Later on, by a twist of fate, the same child becomes her husband and demands something which Vivien has been trying to avoid. Edward, the son-husband, wants a child from her to make their relationship fruitful. For Vivien, any discussion about a "child" reminds her of the "real child" she had to sacrifice because of the taboo surrounding illegitimacy. Interestingly, it is seen from her life that she has been dominated by the male characters around her. In her life, "methane" is not the deadly gas and the mine is not a prison for her; rather, the mine-restaurant she works at is the prison wherein lies the tools for her impending destruction.

According to Rosalind Coward, the relationship to patriarchal authority, for women especially, is bound to be hazardous (174). Men can exercise power and authority only if women's equality is denied. This is the case with Vivien as her search for "autonomy" ends in realizing that she has been betrayed and subjugated by all the males, especially Lawrence. She demands to be recognized as a human being. In Vivien's case, we notice that though she does not raise her voice verbally against society, she shows her disdain and decides to emancipate her troubled mind in one sense by setting fire to the interior of the mine after entering it.

The forces of patriarchal society make Vivien silently endure her trauma. At the beginning of *Andhakare Methane*, Vivien is seen serving all the customers, running

here and there in the process. The voices of the customers become so clamorous that at one point we see Vivien stop running as if a sudden darkness engulfed her. She feels as though she has lost her identity; then she enters into her private silent world. As Olsen says, only a few are born “into the privileged class” whereas others are born with “bound feet ... powerlessness ... fear of aging” (78). Vivien is such a female, born with these limitations. Here the voices are mostly male and it is clear that her life is dominated by these voices. This abstract “male voice” assumes a shape once she meets Lawrence and Vivien is tempted to respond to his request to drink a glass of beer together. Before Lawrence’s appearance, Vivien was not even conscious of being a woman. Ultimately Vivien succumbs to the charm of Lawrence and eventually, a child is born who becomes Vivien’s responsibility only as Lawrence disappears after that evening. It is the female who carries the burden of an illegitimate child and it is again her powerless in front of the society as she battles for the legitimacy of her child. The “bound feet” or the fear of the taboo makes Vivien give up her child to avoid the social stigma of an unmarried mother. Fear of society, which may accuse her of loneliness, forces her to marry the son-husband Edward whose identity she is totally oblivious of. In search of fulfillment, Vivien finds herself trapped by the memory of that one afternoon she spent with Lawrence. For her, fulfillment as a woman means getting a male life partner and becoming a mother. In a conversation with an imaginary character who is possibly her own self, she admits that it was her only wish to become a mother. Though the choice was hers, she never imagined that the stranger was taking advantage of her situation, thus putting her in a crisis where she had no choice but to estrange herself from the child. The silence of Vivien is noticeable here. She bears the burden of the decisions imposed on her by the male characters which ultimately makes her impassive.



Photo 2: From extreme left Edward, Vivien, and Lawrence (Photo credit: Agontuk Repertory)

Apart from all the ordeals she faces, Vivien stands as a strong character in different terms. First, her resilient nature is quite visible from the beginning as we see her running the restaurant all by herself and dealing with all the customers very efficiently. Second, her resistance to temptation by Lawrence is also very clear when she refuses to sit and drink with a stranger. Though she is lonely, she stays true to her strong personality for some moments. Third, she consciously decides to marry another stranger though later the husband is revealed to be her lost son. Fourth, her decision to take revenge on Lawrence is a daring act for a woman. Eventually, she makes her son-husband Edward kill Lawrence who is actually Edward's biological father, thus rebelling against the tyranny of the lover. All these actions of Vivien's show how free she is within her inner self. She also shows courage and honesty by admitting to Edward that she once loved Lawrence. When Lawrence tells Edward out of anger that Vivien gave birth to his child, Edward does not believe it; but Vivien firmly announces that she did indeed do so. Lastly, when she finds out that Edward is her lost child, she remains silent. This silence is perhaps her last attempt to come to terms with her fate. Her other self tries to interpret the consequences by identifying the situation as "fate" or "her sin" but this only prompts Vivien to do what she has done before. Unlike Oedipus, in this play, it is Vivien, a woman, who meets her downfall because of her search for the truth. However, she, unlike Oedipus, cannot torment herself by piercing her eyes. Instead, she decides to end her life by setting fire to the inside of the mine and thus committing suicide. The theme of incest is thus very aptly used in the play to shed light on the condition of women in society and to show how, in spite of the odds, a woman can still find her own individuality as Vivien does.

The second play for discussion comprises three short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto—"Kaali Shalvar," "The License," and "Hatak"—adapted into a single play by Usha Ganguly. Manto, a short story writer in Urdu, rips away the mask of society's goodness and brings forth the animalism that exists there. He shows in the stories how society makes women choose taboo professions and sell their bodies to earn a living. Manto calls these women living corpses and suggests that society should bear their burden instead of the women themselves. His commitment to truth and his passion for challenging all in the face to establish the truth makes him impartial and unselfconscious. As Daruwalla says, "Manto reveled in whatever shocked him, be it obscenity or sudden violence, or the dramatic and brutal manner with which he unmasked hypocrisy" (117-118). Manto believed that literature can provide solutions to social ills while describing the problem realistically. This is evident in the way he speaks of women and prostitutes with insight into their psychology, thus creating real people and not giving sermons (Bredi 120).

Usha Ganguly, the scriptwriter of the play *Naamgottroheen – Manto'r Meyera*, is an Indian theater writer and activist who focused on the condition of women in Southeast Asia. She brought this play to Bangladesh and successfully staged it with Nagorik Nattya Sampraday as their 45th production. All three characters that are

focused on in the adaptation are out of the ordinary: all three are prostitutes of different ages – Sultana in her early thirties, Neeti not even eighteen, and Sugandhi, a woman in her forties. What they have in common is a taboo profession which was not a choice for them but imposed on them for their survival.

The three short stories are represented in three parts within the play. The chorus (or, as Usha Ganguly calls them in Bangla, “Shutradhar”) connects each part by giving necessary introductory comments. It also goes on stage during the play to interpret the relevant protagonists. The play begins with “Kaali Shalvar,” where the protagonist Sultana is made a prostitute by Khuda Bakhsh, a man who continues to live on her earnings and squanders her money on fraud Pirs and Fakirs. Sultana is forced to sell everything that she has to feed herself and Khuda Bakhsh, and the only thing that she wanted in return from him was a black shalvar¹ to wear during the Muharram which he refuses to give. Throughout the whole play, we see Sultana accepting her situation quite blatantly and happily, even going to the extent of mentioning it to Khuda Bakhsh that her “dhandha” (business) was going quite well in Ambala. Sultana’s recollection of her golden days of prostitution in Ambala is quite dramatic and brutal, making the audience feel the haughtiness with which Sultana embraces her fate.



Photo 3: Khuda Bakhsh and Sultana in *Namgottroheen–Manto'r Meyera* (Photo credit: Nagorik)

¹A loose fitting pair of pants commonly worn with a long tunic by women in Southeast Asia.

It is quite obvious from the play that the playwright wished to focus on the taboo profession as an everyday affair rather than a stigmatized one. Sultana takes pride in her success and is quite eloquent around her customers. She is repeatedly exploited by the males around her, be it her customers, or Khuda Bakhsh, or Shankar who pretends to be her friend. She knows their worth, and their capability, but still believes in the dream that Shankar will give her what she longs for. She is astounded when Shankar cheats her to fulfill her dream of wearing a pair of black shalvar. Shankar, like Khuda Bakhsh, takes Sultana's last possession, the earrings given to her by her mother, with the promise of bringing her the coveted shalvar.

The second part of the play focuses on Neeti, an adolescent girl who falls in love with Abdul, a tangawala (carriage driver) and is whisked away into a dream world of love and affection. The dream does not last long and Neeti is jarred back to reality by the sudden tragic death of Abdul in police custody after he is arrested for marrying the juvenile Neeti.



Photo 4: Neeti and Abdul in Namgottroheen – Manto'r Meyera (Photo credit: Nagorik)

After Abdul's death, Neeti starts driving his carriage and people fall over themselves to ride her tanga as they make indecent proposals to her. Then one day, the City Committee tells her that she cannot drive the carriage without a new license. When asked the reason for such an absurd order, the committee does not give a suitable reply. Rather, the members pass the verdict that no woman would be given a license to drive a carriage. They even go far enough to suggest that she is a prostitute. After much crying and seeing no alternative, Neeti sells off the carriage

and applies for a license for prostitution which she gets very quickly. Neeti lives in a slimy shanty and longs to change her fate. But again, she is bound by the decision taken by the society that a woman cannot be a carriage driver and would be better off being a prostitute. Here we see that women are viewed “as a specifically female, rather than a human power” (Beer 79). Patriarchal society is informed by this view of women and, as Mary Hays points out, “men have valued women’s virtues, such as prudence, patience, wisdom, where they prove convenient” (qtd. by Beer 79). Neeti accepts her fate but when the very same society alienates her for being a prostitute, she lashes back and says that the society can have her whole flesh and body but can never take away what is hers – the soul.

The last part of the play is about Sugandhi who, like Sultana, enters into prostitution to survive in the world. The story begins by showing her as a seasoned prostitute. She knows how to bring in customers and look after them properly. Madho is one of her longstanding customers who does not pay her but rather lives on her money. The play starts with the calculation of Sugandhi’s money by Madho and her monthly expenditure. Madho emotionally exploits her and promises to give her happiness which she longs for. Sugandhi has been silent during all these exploitations, until she is humiliatingly rejected by a customer. She reacts violently and her strength allows her to throw out Madho, her worthless lover, preferring to have her dog as a companion instead. Madho is like the other aforementioned male characters, Khuda Bakhsh or Shankar, living off the women characters. The verbal insults are a reflection of the pain and emptiness that she feels inside which makes her embrace the dog and retire into her own private world. The play ends with a question to the audience: whether Manto was more focused on the vulgarism of prostitution or dedicated to presenting women in that profession.



Photo 5: Madho and Sugandhi in *Namgottroheen – Manto'rMeyera* (Photo credit: Nagorik)

We, as female members of the audience, feel connected to the women characters on the stage and undoubtedly understand the crisis of the taboo profession, which in this case is prostitution, faced by all the three characters. There are thousands of women in our country who are forced to sell their bodies to earn a living to survive against the odds. The profession later on becomes bearable for them, but what tears them apart is the unacceptance of their profession in society. The same men who enjoy the prostitutes behave contrarily in front of the world, treating the women as dirt. This is what makes Sultana, Neeti, or Sugandhi lash out, voice their frustration, and at last negate the decisions imposed on them by the patriarchal society. Usha Ganguly very relevantly presented this through the adapted play and aptly names it *Naamgottroheen* which presents reality: these tabooed females do not have any name or caste, and are, therefore, a voiceless entity in the society.

The women characters in both the adapted plays are strong in handling their crisis or the tabooed relationships in which they find themselves. Being a prostitute or a single mother out of wedlock is not a personal issue for them. The crisis they fall into is a creation of the society that they live in, a society dominated by males and the decisions imposed on Vivien or Neeti are taken by the male members of the society. The rejection or the exploitation that they go through is also because of the males. The women in the plays want to be recognized as human beings. They all remained passive at first, and then the emotional battle leads them to become active through verbal or physical protestation. What all of them have in common is their unwavering sense of independence in the face of extreme hostility from the men. Taboos like prostitution and incest are taken up by both the adaptation writers to examine the process for handling the crisis, how the female characters respond to the crisis and emerge as strong individuals actively resisting the patriarchal ideologies. The difference in gender, race, culture, or religion is not focused on here. Rather, the truth about considering females as human beings is emphasized. The adaptation writers have experimented by presenting the foreign themes which have relevance in our society. A context is not needed as the voice of the female in such crisis will always be the same. The stories are selected to give voice to the countless females who suffer similarly and face the patriarchal society single-handedly. Hearing those voices on the stage is a unique experience and has mixed reactions among the audience. The change in the audience after watching the plays cannot be predicted. It is the audience who has to decide whether to accept or reject the idea of taboo that the adaptation writers focus on.

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