

Paradigms of Motherhood in Shahid Nadeem's Plays:

Kala Meda Bhes/Black is my Robe and Bari/The Acquittal

Dr Sobia Mubarak, Madiha Aftab

Abstract

Shahid Nadeem's *Kala Meda Bhes* and *Bari* are two plays which especially centralize the character of the mother in an attempt to redefine the role of the mother typically assigned to women in the rural areas of Pakistan. These plays are matrifocal narratives since they investigate role of the mother in traditional patriarchy. This paper seeks to highlight the "agony" and the "ecstasy" of motherhood, manifested in the form of extreme societal pressure on childless women in *Kala Meda Bhes* and in the modes and methods of control, employed by the state to subjugate unwed mothers or rape victims, in gaining custody of their own children (*Bari*). This paper contends that a woman's privilege to give birth and reproduce is transformed into a covertly powerful tool for her exploitation and subjugation. As the women's regime operates under the supreme authority of the male heads of the family and community who have the power to veto any and all decisions taken by them. Patriarchy thus curtailed the physical and emotional esse of the women under its control. These two plays study how the identity of the woman is strongly tied to attaining the status of motherhood. These plays may be dubbed maternal texts; since they portray the plight of the women who have been slighted and blighted by the deformed notions of motherhood practiced in traditional patriarchy. The paper interrogates motherhood using the ideological frameworks of feminists like Elaine Tuttle Hanson, Adrien Rich and Helen Cixous.

Key words: Maternal, Matrifocal, Motherhood, Patriarchal, Power

Introduction

“Our lives are as they are because some of us have children and some of us do not.” Dowrick and Grundberg

The concept of motherhood has steadily acquired complexity as its various connotations have been worked upon by feminist theorists specifically when the differing views of feminists arrived at contradictory definitions of the concept. Woman as *mother* has always been idealized in the sub-continent, even deified in Indian Hindu society but it is also paradoxical as it can disempower and subjugate her in many ways. As Hansen notes, “motherhood offers women, a site of both power and oppression, self-esteem and self-sacrifice, reverence and debasement” (433). This paper argues that the female sphere of influence in Pakistani society is negotiated either via motherhood or sterility. This observation when applied to unmarried mothers shows how this small category of women are stigmatized and shamed through motherhood. Women as mothers are hailed into family structure as a locus of power, or, on the contrary, excluded as outcasts. Shahid Nadeem in *Kala Meda Bhes* and *Bari* illustrates women as scapegoats and emphasizes the contradictory nature of motherhood within the Pakistani context. Thus the status of the mother in our part of the world (Pakistan) is, “riddled with its history of psychic and social contradictions” (Hansen 433). In Pakistani society, lexical concepts like “banjh/barren” or “childless” have been employed to deny female agency and identity. The male counterpart of the word, banjh, used for female infertility, does not exist in the lexicon of the local language as there is no social concept of a ‘non-father’ (*Maternal Theory* 6). These plays enact the twin agonies of motherhood and highlight the fact that their maternal prowess is alternatively a source of great guilt for them if they are unable to reproduce or a source of great shame if they fall

pregnant without marriage. The portrayal of the childless mother in the said plays, covers the agonizing situations of the women who are made to give up the custody of their biological children, the traumatized psyche of the women who suffer abortion (*Bari*) and the tragic life and suffering of the women who are unable to conceive or reproduce (*Kala Meda Bhes*). This paper focuses on women belonging to the lower strata from rural areas of the country, as they are doubly deprived, rather their lack of wealth enhances their psychological suffering as it reduces their worth to a commodity or an outcast. In doing so the paper consequently highlights the exclusionary practices for motherhood prevalent in rural areas of Pakistan.

Nadeem focuses on the emotional damage done to a woman's sense of self when she is unable to conceive or reproduce. In Pakistani rural areas as well as in most South Asian societies a woman's status as a wife or whole woman is contingent upon her ability to successfully reproduce. This study illustrates the damage done to such a woman's self esteem and the perception of motherhood by extension in the society. The child rearing and child bearing culture of such societies represses the wife and nullifies her subjectivity and treats her inability to become pregnant as her inability to become a wholesome or whole woman. Nadeem's plays address these issues of subjectivity arising from a woman's being issueless. Foucault explicates this notion of subjectivity: "There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (777-94). As Foucault here talks of power dynamics in general I will read "woman" in place of "subject" in order to adapt the theory to this study's concerns. Hence, the woman in South Asia has to struggle against various patriarchal institutions and groups to gain subjectivity because it is controlled and

contingent upon her identity as mother or wife. The paper argues that when a woman is otherized and marginalized in most Asian communities, it is almost always in conjunction with her role as a mother and her reproductive prowess. Within the domestic sphere, particularly in villages women have embraced the subjugation of their identity to their ability to conceive and reproduce and thus feel extreme blame and shame when they are unable to become mothers. Motherhood should unequivocally grant ascendancy and power to the women but sadly the ingrained patriarchal norms regarding barren women and illegitimate children subjugate them.

Literature Review

If we trace the plays that have been written and performed in the context of the sub-continent, very few address the question of motherhood. Mahaswata Devi is amongst the most recognized authors and activists in India, remarkably addresses this concern in her *Breast Stories* and a play *Bayen/Witch*. Devi in her plays raises the concerns of class segregation and racial injustice. *Bayen/Witch* intensively reflects exclusionary practices of society in relation to motherhood, especially in rural and tribal areas of India. Vijay Tendulkar is another prominent Indian playwright who has addressed the issue of motherhood in, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, focusing more on plights of the unwed mothers. Mahesh Dattani is also one of the most eminent playwrights in India who has highlighted the dilemma of a mother who gives birth to conjoined twins. In order to get surgically separated, one of them will have to lose their leg, and the mother chooses her son because of the constraints of a male dominated society. This heinous crime crushes the mother with guilt and she ends up in a mental asylum. As far as Pakistani theatre is concerned, no serious attention has been paid to these issues. On the contrary, mothers have often been portrayed as caricatures and ridiculed in Punjabi theatre mostly based in Lahore.

Hence, scholarly work concerning motherhood and its different nuances in our society is almost non-existent. This paper makes a significant contribution in the sense that it focuses on the aspect of feminism which has remained neglected in Pakistani academia.

Kala Meda Bhes was first staged under the direction of Madeeha Gohar in Goethe Institute, Lahore in April 1996. Later on the play was staged at various prestigious locations in both India and Pakistan. The English translation, *Black is My Robe*, was also staged in October 2002 in the Lark Theatre in New York (Nadeem 149). The conflict and theme of this iconic play was taken from an actual news published in a mainstream Urdu daily:

In the remote village of Umarnkot, in Sindh (province in Pakistan), a water carrier, who had two wives, but no ox, had bartered his spare wife for an ox belonging to a peasant, who was in possession of two oxen, but no wife. A local defender of morality, then, found himself questioning whether or not such an exchange is permitted by sharia (according to Islamic law) (Nadeem 147).

This news morbidly fascinated the writer, Shahid Nadeem and his wife, the director, Madeeha Gohar who proceeded to produce a play based on this news which staunchly denounces the way women were treated in the famished rural areas of Pakistan. In this impoverished land, the downtrodden and gullible villagers are exploited by fake peers (spiritual healers who have the economic facility of a feudal and are usually the custodian of a shrine). The intertwined conflicts of barren women and fake peers are intricately woven and run parallel to each other throughout the play. The ostracization and banishment experienced by childless women within domestic spaces is exacerbated by the spiritual deception of a fake peer who owns the well—the only available water resource in the village. The status of women as non-mothers and of motherhood achieved via “unusual” ways will remain the focal concerns of this study. The title of the play is borrowed from the poetry of Sufi poet Baba Fareed which

translates as: “Black are my clothes and black is my robe/ I am full of sins but people call me a saint” (Nadeem 147).

Kala Meda Bhes depicts women being controlled through the crippling notions of female agency and identity. Female protagonist’s ‘empty womb’, exemplifies the paradigms of control exerted by patriarchy. The female protagonist, Sundri is demeaned by her husband and society as she is unable to perform the gender assigned duty of being a mother or ‘life-giver’. The barren or infertile woman, is therefore, condemned as she is not ‘natural’ since the crowning glory of her femininity is fertility in the absence of which she is relegated to being an unnatural or defected female. Such women fall beyond the boundary of femininity and are not considered ‘normal’ or ‘real woman’. (Hall 122). Helen Cixous presents a similar argument in “Stories”, where she discusses the predominant phallogocentric ideology in linguistic and social domains which leads to the othering of females and solidifies their subjugated status in society. Cixous pleads females to: “write about women and bring women to writing...through their bodies,” (*Laughter of the Medusa*) as it directs the perceiver’s focus on the female physical form which solely differs from the male due to its ability to reproduce which in turn will “release the hold of the maternal entity” from the male gaze. (13). Cixous maintains that the mother’s voice needs to be more inclusive by linking the notions of feminine to the body as “there is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in ink” (Ibid 9). Ajoka theatre’s drama, although written by a male playwright, addresses these questions but the fact that they were directed by a female director, Madeeha Gohar ensures that they remain matrifocal.

The setting for the play is the Cholistan desert situated in the Southern Punjab that shares its border with Rajasthan desert in India. Climate of these deserts is extremely arid and

the land remains parched year round due to the scarcity of water. Water quite literally spells both life and prosperity for the inhabitants of the region and for this reason most of the wells and underground water resources in the area are controlled by feudal lords or peers who feel no compunction in forcing people to bow to any and all of their whims. Villagers lead exceedingly indigent lives and completely depend on their cattle and land for survival. The land and cattle are in turn at the mercy of the sporadic rainfall or the water from wells to irrigate the land for agriculture and to sprout the grass for cattle's fodder. The play's protagonist of the play Allah Wasaya is a thirty-two-year-old water carrier who has two wives and no children. Akin to the barren land which is brought to life by the well and rainwater, Wasaya believes that his household will be blessed with children by the prayer of the Peer whose prayer prevents the well from drying. The 'preservation' of the last remaining water well by the Peer is seen as the greatest proof of his spiritual powers by the illiterate villagers like Wasaya. Sundari is the senior wife and is in her late twenties whereas, Sohni is the new wife whom Wasaya marries in hope of getting children. The names of both the women are synonyms of beauty which is indicative of their objectified status in their husband's life as an aesthetic yet valuable object. Wives' infertility and the water generating miracles of the Peer are aptly intertwined in the play to illustrate how patriarchal societies abuse life giving women and water in their arrogant arrogance. Barren women are masterfully equated with the dry desert by Nadeem which gives the play's conflict great depth by contrasting Wasaya's personal yearning for children with the whole society's longing for water for agriculture. Water and children are interchangeably used as motifs of yearning and desire of the patriarchy in the play as the men want to prove their masculinity by digging up both. The digging of the well on stage can be taken as a Brechtian

gest. For the well can be interpreted as an emblem for women and procreation.

The curtain rises to the raucous scene of men dancing onto the stage. Amid the drum beat two narrators who in keeping with the tradition of the 'swaang' narrate the story in a rhythmic way. The play portrays a desolate picture of an impoverished village ravaged by drought whose last remaining source of water is a well which is controlled by Peer of the well. Naive villagers are unable to perceive the manipulation of the Peer and his goons who control the whole village. The first scene of the drama lays out this twin conflict clearly when Wasaya appears accompanied by both wives; first wife Sundari, and new wife Sohni, both of whom are victims of systems that allows the exchange and purchase of women via money and cattle. This opening scene superimposes women and cattle effectively highlighting them as the two most significant things affecting the life of a male from the village: "And a healthy ox is as important as a healthy wife" (Nadeem 150). Wasaya as the happy groom in this scene equally celebrates his young bride Sohni and the new ox she has brought as dowry to his house to augment his income. The character of Opra (the outsider) is introduced in the first scene who is unknown to the villagers but his comments establish him as a threat to the system as he seems to discern the peer and his goons' wrongdoings. Opra is dressed in a black robe which enhances his mystique for the villagers who know nothing of his origins. The black color of his robe may paradoxically link him to the spiritual order of the sufis and saint and hints at his sinful past concealed from the eyes of the villagers. Opra is able to see through the manipulation of the Peer Saen and is able to rationally explain all the happenings that the superstitious villagers relegate to black magic or the evil eye. Therefore, he does not fear disobeying the Peer like the villagers do because unlike them he does not believe in the

supernatural powers of retribution of the peer. Opra advises Sundari who under his tutelage wears a black robe and becomes aware of her own self and the society around her at the end of the play.

In South Asian societies a woman is not considered complete or whole unless she increases the household by consummating her marriage and reproducing. The play brilliantly delineates the conundrum faced by women in traditional patriarchal setups where their identity is equated to and justified by their motherhood. The two wives of Wasaya offer comic relief in the play when they argue and fight in public places regarding motherhood. Each woman contests the other on the basis of motherhood. The first woman to become a mother will become the favored wife and will not be divorced or discarded by their husband Wasaya. The following scene is an instance of black humour in the play which demonstrates Sundri and Sohni fighting over the affections of their husband:

Sundri: You may be the bride, but I am the first, okay!

Sohni: I will bear a child and celebrate, okay!

Sundri: You can't bear a child, you will mourn, okay!

Sohni: You have a black tongue and an empty lap, okay! (Nadeem 153)

Adrienne Rich talks about a similar reduction of womanhood to motherhood when she says that throughout ages barren women have been frowned upon for not being “real” women. A married woman cannot be considered fulfilled unless she bears a child; only then her womanhood can be celebrated. On the contrary, an infertile woman is demonized as she becomes a pitiable and abject figure. She becomes a bad omen for other women who aspire to become mothers. In order to cure their infertility, unlettered and naive women can go to any extent,

pinning their hopes to fake Peers in villages. Peer Saeen, is the most immoral character of the play who exploits the hopes and fears of the unlettered villagers mercilessly. The gullible villagers attribute all bad happenings to the anger of the Peer Saeen and consequently offer him money and sacrifices for all catastrophes in the personal and social life. Wasaya is no different than any other villager when he seeks the Peer's blessing unto his second wife, Sohni and the ox he receives in her dowry. He purchases amulets from the Peer to make his new wife pregnant and to increase his water supplying business. Wasaya naively trusts the Peer with his financial and familial wellbeing. Meanwhile the Peer wants to feather his own nest and anticipates that Wasaya's new ox will enable him to import water from the neighboring village and thereby end his monopoly on the water supply of the village. To prevent Wasaya from expanding his business the Peer gives him a slow poison for his ox under the guise of "blessed" medicine which eventually causes the animal's death. The death of Wasaya's ox is instrumental in development of the conflict of the play which reaches its zenith when Ditta, another peasant, who has no wife but has a house full of children to look after, offers Wasaya his ox in exchange for his first wife, Sundri who has become superfluous after the arrival of the second wife Sohni. Women are seen as merely child bearers in the play. Ditta already has children; he only needs a woman to look after his brood so Sundri will suffice for him. Whereas Wasaya's dream of increasing his water carrying business hinges upon the availability of an ox so he is happy to get rid of his 'extra' wife in favor of the cattle. Women despite being sentient beings are thus turned into objects of a barter trade by the necessity driven life of the impoverished villagers. Sundri who is a woman and a barren wife is doubly dispossessed of free will and is handed over to Ditta by her husband despite her unwillingness. Sundri becomes an object or commodity of lesser

value. French economist Condillac maintains: “It is false that, in the exchange of commodities, equal value is given and obtained. The contrary is true. Each of the two contracting parties, invariably gives a smaller value for a greater one...Why? The value of things resides solely in their relation to our wants. What is more to one man, is less to the other and vice versa” (qtd *Capital* 25). Bartering of Sundri is doubly degrading as it takes away her identity as human also because her identity as a woman has already been questioned by her infertility. Sundri has thus morphed into a “useless” object which may be removed from one’s house with impunity.

The barter of a wife between these peasants highlights the demeaning rather dehumanizing circumstances faced by women in South Asian societies if they are barren or childless after marriage. Infertility leads to double marginalization of Sundri because being divorced is an added stigma in addition to her barrenness. Sundri after becoming a “discounted” person rages in front of her second husband, Ditta: “I don't blame you, Ditta. I was only hurt by Wasaya’s attitude. He threw away ten years of companionship without a wink” (Nadeem 170). Thus, Sundri’s fate exemplifies the fact that “a child solidifies a wife’s often fragile bond with a spouse in an arranged marriage and improves her status in joint family and larger community...” (Reismann 112).

Motherhood grants women agency and power in South Asian societies while infertility relegates them to the status of the doubly deprived by taking away their feminine power and agency. Reismann observes that Pakistani and Indian women: “are keenly aware that their reproductive capacities are an important source of power, especially when they lack it from other sources” (112). In *Kala Meda Bhes*, Wasaya’s second wife, Sohni is able to enjoy a more empowered status than the first wife because she is expected to become pregnant. In expectation

of this fortuitous event Wasaya treats her more affectionately as compared to his first wife, Sundri, who in the first ten years of their marriage, has disappointed him by not giving birth. Sohni exploits this expectation of pregnancy by refusing to do her share of the household chores. This puts the burden of all domestic work on the first wife, Sundri, who is expected to remain barren, and consequently all tasks requiring physical effort are relegated to her. Such scenes in the play seem to question the status of the women in traditional societies where pronatalism is the dominant ideology while determining the status of women. We see another instance of power being bestowed on mothers in the play when Sundri vicariously regains status after becoming stepmother to Dittu's children in the play even though this marriage takes place against her will. The status of Sundri changes from non-mother to mother so her character gains agency in the plot of the play. In Scene 8 we encounter Sundri taking care of her stepchildren who respectfully call her Mother Sundri. Most remarkable quality of the scene is the lack of bitterness in Sundri, as she nurtures Dittu's children and even defends Dittu's search of a water well, telling his children that she also agrees with their father for the necessity of a new water well:

“Child: Mother Sundri, I am hungry.

Sundri (while feeding him): God knows when your father will find the well. Child: Mother, why is father searching for the well? When did he lose it? Sundri: He is searching the well so that the village people can have sweet and cool water to drink and don't remain dependent on Peer Saen's well. Child: But why doesn't anyone else look for it?

Sundri: Because no one else believes in it” (Nadeem 171).

Thus Sundri gains her status and agency as a woman after becoming the stepmother of Dittu's children. In her second marriage respect and status previously denied to Sundri is finally bestowed on her because she has become a mother ergo a complete woman. Ashurt & Hall observe: “birth is the only defense against the inevitability of death” it is an “an intimation of our

immortality” and becomes “our new hope for the future” (97). Thus viewed, a woman's role in her community is defined via her biological ability to reproduce and repopulate the land she lives in. In this scene Sundri is at peace because her community service and her role in society is fulfilled by her becoming the matriarch.

Strategies of survival and resistance adopted by Sundri show the resilience of her character. Earlier in the play when Sohni mocks her she holds on to what little control she retains on her fate by controlling her own reaction to the tragedies befalling her.

Sohni: How can a woman be merry when her husband has just married
another woman.

Sundri: Why not. You want me to cry and beat my breast! But I will not give you
that satisfaction.” (Nadeem 159)

Reismann notes regarding the resilience of such characters: “resistant thinking also occurs in family contexts, where it often substitutes for speaking out...” (123). Sundri exemplifies this brand of resilience when she voices her angst at times by refusing house chores but ultimately she is not able to govern her circumstances as Wasaya ends up divorcing and forcibly wedding her to Dittu despite her protest. Massi or the wise woman in the play arranger this marriage to Dittu telling Sundri: “Why? Whoever asks a woman’s consent?” (Nadeem 169). This scene from the drama resonates with Gyatri Spivak’s argument regarding a subaltern that is unable to speak; she is not allowed any verbal agency; her lot is to only submit to the fate being mapped out for by forces bigger than herself. Her only resilience is in biding her time and to wait for the opportunity when her words will matter. This opportunity for Sundri comes when Dittu discovers the well and is brutally murdered by the goons on order of the Peer Saen. This tragedy is another blow for Sundri who had come to domestic independence so late in life after

her second marriage. This incident however, once again leaves Sundri who now has to mourn the loss of her second husband. However, her personal sorrow does not stop her from accusing the Peer of the death of her husband in front of the whole village. This fearless daring of Sundri reveals her as a resilient character who exposes the dark deeds of the Peer. She brings Reshma and Opra as eyewitnesses who validate her accusations against the Peer. Sundri no longer is the passive receiver of suffering as we see her helplessness in being evicted from the house of her first husband, Wasaya. Here she is proactive and takes control of her fate. This shift in the character of Sundri has come because she is now a mother and a nurturer whose right to protect her children against any threat is implicitly granted by the society. Therefore, she is able to take revenge for the death of her husband and become the owner of the well. Sundri has been granted agency in the play's patriarchal system after becoming a mother. As she is a mother and her role is that of a nurturer she declares that the well's water will be given to all the villagers free of charge and wears the black robe of the Opra. Sundri wearing of Opra's role signifies that she will fulfill the role played by the Opra in making people realize the error of their ways and the evil of the Peer Saeen. The robe also honours Sundri who is now as revered by the villagers as the Peer was. Sundri assumes an elevated status among her people, and like Chandidasi in *Bayen* became goddess-mother appropriate to Hindu society, Sundri becomes mystic-mother in *Kala Meda Bhes* in line with the Islamic society. In Sufism the colour black has spiritual significance for saints and dervishes and thus signifies the character's enlightenment which elevates her from the mundane to the spiritual realm and announces his lack of regard for the material world.

Another source of oppression upon childless women in rural societies like the one depicted in the play is the ignorance surrounding the biological process of conception and birth.

As a result of this the barren women are subjected to heinous cruelty and indignities by fake Peers under the guise of treatment for childbirth. We see an example of this in the play when Sohni, the younger wife of Wasaya, is led to the Peer to get his blessing for becoming pregnant. Peer then instructs Wasaya to leave his wife at the house overnight as he needs to recite a long prayer for her to become pregnant. Peer rapes Sohni after the departure of her husband. This is the cruelest of treatment for pregnancy that could be inflicted on the body of a helpless woman. The sanctity of her body is violated and abused for the cause of procreation. This incident in the play exposes the underbelly of violence upon women pronatal societies like Pakistan and India. Women are desperate enough to try any amulet, charm or ritual in order to become pregnant as their right to a respectable space in the domestic sphere depends on their ability to procreate. The play typifies spiritual/religious exploitation of women at the hands of so-called Peers and saints in the rural and far-fetched areas of the country. The illiteracy, ignorance of the women in addition to their desire for domestic bliss makes them extremely susceptible to the traps of fake Peers. However, *Black is My Robe*, ends on the note of empowering women when it reinstates Sundri as the mother figure in the play who nourishes not only her children but the whole community by freeing their water/ life from the clutches of the Peer and his goons. Simultaneously the play also highlights the downside of such maternal power i.e. that it can only be acquired through self-abnegation and self-denial. A woman attains the status of good mother by renouncing her subjectivity as an individual. As her whole existence is confined to her role as a mother and she ceases to exist as an individual.

Another play by Shahid Nadeem *Bari* portrays the stigma faced by unwed mothers. The play discusses ostracization faced by such women which pollutes or sours motherhood and the

privileges it bestows on other women. The society lands all responsibility of illegitimate birth at the feet of the woman. It does not matter if the unwed mother was raped or abandoned by a lover she is considered as the culprit and not the victim by society. Becoming pregnant without a wedding is the most stigmatizing act that can be performed by a woman in Asian patriarchal societies. These strictly patriarchal communities, women need to become pregnant under the sanctified institution of marriage only. Vijay Tendulkar illustrates in his play, *Silence the Court is in Session*, the kind of social mores that inevitably shuns the woman while granting impunity to the man responsible for her predicament. Nadeem's *Bari* contrarily deals with the dilemma of a woman who conceives as a consequence of being raped while being incarcerated. The prison officials rape her inside the prison highlighting the impossibility of escape for the victim. Both these plays are similar in the fact that they both show how the society takes charge of these illegitimate children and their unfortunate mothers. Both plays exemplify Foucault's concept of biopower that translates as supreme power or privilege of governing authorities to "dispose" off the very existence of children produced through rape by enslaving them slaves of the state (258). Just like Tendulkar's Benare, Mariam in Nadeem's *The Acquittal* is preyed upon by men. Mariam is serving a three-month sentence in prison for dancing at the shrine of a Sufi saint in public. The incarceration of the protagonist is not for any real crime but for the crime of expressing femininity through her dance which was deemed punishable by the law. The law in the play is gendered as it caters to the male gaze. As the action in the play starts Mariam is five months along in her pregnancy as a result of the repeatedly raped by the prison officials. Nadeem here portrays a photographic picture of what happens to uneducated women in prisons. Most of them are the victims of unfavorable circumstances and oppressive traditions. The name of the

protagonist alludes to virgin Mary and is portrayed as a saint-like figure in the play. She is punished for being a 'mast' (a person in spiritual trance). In order to cover their crime, the jailors want Mariam to have an abortion. This snatching of the baby from a mother's womb illustrates the abject misery of a mother who cannot protect her body or her baby from the male assault. Like Benare, she is denied agency or free will. In the absence of the ability to act for herself Mariam chooses to lose herself in trance-like dance and occasionally sings the verses of Bulleh Shah. Bulleh Shah's poetry is an emblem of subversion as in his time he has been condemned by clerics as a heretic. Mariam's homage to the Sufi poet implies that she shares the same fate as the poet and will be hauled over hot coals for her divine love.

Conclusion

The chief analogy between Mariyam and Sundri is their similar plight of motherhood as a mother and barren woman respectively. These women are penalized on account of their potential for motherhood, one is considered a deviant woman while the other a deficient woman. These notions of motherhood deny the femininity of both women as it considers them as mere vessels for procreation rather as an individual with their unique subjectivity. Women in all the plays discussed by the study are controlled through their bodily function of procreation. The powerful gender bias of the patriarchy silences the resistance offered by the women, who as subalterns cannot speak. The protest and suffering of woman largely goes unnoticed.

It is a complex question whether the above plays fall into the category of feminist dramas because there is no single definition that characterizes feminist theater practice. If these plays are analyzed in view of British and American feminist dramas, they will definitely fall short as they do not demonstrate any clear break from patriarchy as they do. None of the female characters

abandons post like Nora Helmer of *A Doll's House*. In fact, some critics may outright deny the claim of these plays as being feminist at all on account of their realistic mode of representation. These dramas show the feminist playwright's negative opinion about female protagonists who have no agency and respond via melodrama to their suffering. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan states: "Getting raped, going crazy, and, of course, dying- this is what women appear to do most often in realistic theatre" (5). Such observations imply that females are able to appear only in the "death space" or "space of absence, negativity, un-representability, is where femininity most often takes place" (5). Noticeably, Nadeem does not represent Sundri negatively; despite lacking motherhood Sundri is a positive character. Tendulkar designs Benare's character as the realized potential of an ideal woman who denounces social norms.

Nadeem's play masterfully depicts Sundri's metamorphosis from being a humiliated and passive character to a resilient and powerful female who defeats the villainous Peer and his goons. Not only that, Sundri's maternal instinct envelops the whole community when she decides to make well water free for all villagers. The fact that Sundri does not commit suicide in the face of repeated displacement and subjugation gives the play a hopeful ending.

Although Ajoka Theatre's plays have been written by Shahid Nadeem, a male writer, they remarkably represent the standpoint of the woman. All the plays deal with the liminality of female agency due to the instinct and ability of motherhood being monopolized and exploited by patriarchal societies. Finally, it can be argued whether women portrayed in each of them attain agency or not. Marium in *Bari* is deprived of her unborn child by the use of force; she registers her resistance through song and dance. In the same vein, *Kala Meda Bhes* is also a matrifocal narrative. The protagonist, who is infertile, becomes the mother of the entire village. These plays

therefore depict women in various quandaries from a woman's perspective. Each protagonist gains ascendancy as a mother, even the mother whose maternal rights have been usurped by the patriarchy.

Works Cited

Abel, Lionel. *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.

Adair, Vivyan C. "Branded with infamy: Inscriptions of poverty and class in the United States." *Signs* (2002): 451-471.

Banerjee, Arundhati. *Five Plays of Vijay Tendulkar*. Bombay: OUP, 1992.

Basourakos, John. "Witches, Matriarchs, and Whores: Casting Intrasexual and Intersexual

Oppression in Caryl Churchill's VINEGAR TOM." *The Explicator* 70.4 (2012): 279-282.

Buchanan, Lindal. *Rhetorics of motherhood*. SIU Press, 2013.

Chaudhuri, Soma. "Women as Easy Scapegoats Witchcraft Accusations and Women as Targets in Tea Plantations of India." *Violence against women* 18.10 (2012): 1213-1234.

Creed, Barbara. *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Psychology Press, 1993.

Devi, Mahaswata. *Five Plays: Mother of 1084, Aajir, Bayen, Urwashi and Johny, Water*. Trans.

Samik Bandyopadhyay. Calcutta: Seagull, 1999.

Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777-95.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197>Hansen, Tuttle Elaine. "A Sketch in Progress: Introducing the Mother without Child." in

Maternal Theory: Essential Readings. ed. Andrea O'Reilly. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007.

Mitchell, Donna. " Of Monsters and Men: Absent Mothers and Unnatural Children. " Living Literary Others (2014): 105.O'Reilly, Andrea, Marie Porter, and Patricia Short, eds. Motherhood: Power and oppression. Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005.

Podnieks, Elizabeth, and Andrea O'Reilly, eds. Textual mothers/maternal texts: Motherhood in contemporary women's literatures. Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2010.