

Continuing Resistance: A Feminist Study of Select Plays by Poile Sengupta

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ABSTRACT

Poile Sengupta (b. 1948), one of India's foremost English-language playwrights, occupies a distinctive position in the landscape of Indian feminist theatre. Her plays — composed with deliberate consciousness of gender, power, and the politics of the everyday — constitute a sustained, multi-voiced resistance to the patriarchal structures that govern Indian women's lives. This paper examines three significant plays from her anthology *Women Centre Stage* (Routledge, 2010): *Mangalam* (1993), *Alipha* (2001), and *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni* (2001). Through the lenses of second- and third-wave feminist theory, post-colonial critique, and mythopoeia, the study argues that Sengupta constructs a theatre of continuing resistance — a dramaturgy in which silence, speech, memory, and mythic revision become tools for articulating women's agency. The paper attends closely to Sengupta's formal choices (the play-within-a-play, choric voice-over, and the universalisation of mythic figures) as feminist strategies and demonstrates how her work challenges both domestic and institutional patriarchy across historical time. The study concludes that Sengupta's theatre is less a theatre of victimhood than one of emergent, cumulative resistance.

Keywords: *Poile Sengupta, feminist theatre, Indian English drama, Women Centre Stage, Mangalam, Alipha, Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, patriarchy, resistance, mythopoeia.*

1. Introduction: The Theatre of Continuing Resistance

In the preface to *Women Centre Stage*, Poile Sengupta writes that she has "always been troubled about the status of women, and children, who seem to be the worst sufferers in any conflict, whether familial, social or political." This statement of authorial intent is also, in effect, a statement of feminist poetics. Sengupta does not merely observe; she troubles. Her plays disturb the comfortable assumptions of domestic normalcy, expose the choreographies of oppression that pass for tradition, and insist upon the moral and political visibility of women whose lives the mainstream narrative has rendered peripheral or silent. In doing so, she has fashioned — across more than three decades of playwriting — what this paper terms a theatre of continuing resistance.

The concept of "continuing resistance" signals several things simultaneously. First, it gestures toward the unbroken, cumulative nature of Sengupta's feminist project, which does not confine itself to a single polemical moment but builds, play by play, an archive of women's experience and protest. Second, it names the resistant energies within the plays themselves — the efforts of individual characters to speak, survive, and refuse the roles that society assigns them. Third, it foregrounds the temporal depth of Sengupta's feminist vision: she writes resistance not only in the present but across mythic and historical time, demonstrating that patriarchy has always been contested, even when the contestation has gone unrecorded.

Indian feminist theatre, as scholars such as Anita Singh have noted, differs from its Western counterpart in its articulation of resistance through indirection, irony, choric commentary, and the reclamation of marginalised figures from the epic and mythological tradition. Sengupta's dramaturgy is characteristic of this tradition even as it is distinctly personal. Her plays use the English language with a deliberately "Indian syntax" — a formal choice that is itself a kind of resistance, refusing both the cultural deracination of an unmodified imported English and the domestication into regional language convention. The linguistic hybridity of her dramatic voice mirrors the thematic hybridity of her feminist vision: rooted in Indian social reality, yet fluent in the theoretical vocabulary of global feminist discourse.

This paper focuses on three plays drawn from *Women Centre Stage* that represent different registers of Sengupta's feminist project: *Mangalam* (1993), a play about domestic sexual violence and its corrosive aftermath; *Alipha* (2001), a

drama that maps the intersections of political power, patriarchy, and institutional violence; and Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni (2001), a mythopoeic exercise in the recovery of silenced epic voices. Together, these plays trace a trajectory from the intimate domestic space to the sociopolitical arena to the mythic-historical palimpsest — demonstrating that women's resistance, for Sengupta, is simultaneously personal, political, and civilizational.

2. Poile Sengupta and the Feminist Stage: Contextual Considerations

Poile Sengupta entered the theatre in 1993 at a moment when Indian women's writing in English was beginning to establish its own critical weight, though the theatrical landscape remained overwhelmingly male-authored. As Anita Singh observes in her introduction to *Gender, Space and Resistance: Women and Theatre in India* (2013), women playwrights who worked in English occupied a doubly marginalised position: marginalised as women within a patriarchal theatrical culture, and marginalised as English-language writers within the broader arena of Indian-language drama. The very choice of English as a dramatic medium was read, often dismissively, as a sign of urban privilege and cultural inauthenticity.

Sengupta's response to this predicament is characteristically oblique and productive. Rather than abandoning the English language or retreating from its difficulties, she works within them — fashioning a dramatic English that is idiomatic, regionally inflected, and structurally interrupted by the rhythms of Indian speech. The result is a theatre that is simultaneously accessible to an educated urban audience and embedded in the textures of South Indian social life. Her plays are set in recognisable Indian contexts: a Tamil family home, a small-town college staffroom, a social activist's circle, an epic battlefield reimagined in contemporary dress. The universality of their feminist concerns is achieved not through abstraction but through precision of local detail.

Sengupta belongs to the generation of women playwrights — including Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, and Mahasweta Devi — who collectively transformed the Indian feminist theatrical landscape in the final decades of the twentieth century. Like Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and *Harvest*, Sengupta's plays treat women's embodied vulnerability — to sexual violence, to institutional neglect, to the invisible violences of normative domesticity — as their central dramatic subject. But where Padmanabhan often tends toward dystopian allegory, Sengupta's dramaturgy is grounded in the social realistic mode, even when it incorporates mythic or metatheatrical elements. Her plays do not move away from the world; they burrow more deeply into it.

It is also important to situate Sengupta's feminist theatre within the broader context of Indian feminist discourse. The 1980s and 1990s in India witnessed an intensification of feminist activism and scholarship — the anti-dowry movement, campaigns against rape and sexual harassment, debates over personal law and women's rights — that provided both the political context and the critical vocabulary for Sengupta's dramatic project. Her plays engage, with remarkable directness, the issues that animated the feminist public sphere of her time: domestic violence, sexual exploitation, the impunity of men in positions of power, and the silencing mechanisms through which patriarchy reproduces itself across generations and across the mythic archive.

3. Mangalam (1993): Silence, Memory, and the Archaeology of Violation

Mangalam, Sengupta's first play, establishes what will become one of her most characteristic dramaturgical procedures: the use of an absent female body — dead, silent, beyond the reach of narrative remedy — to generate a living investigation of the forces that destroyed her. The play is structured in two acts, the first of which is itself a play-within-a-play. The audience of the outer play are the characters who become protagonists of the second act, discovering that their own lives rehearse the patterns of suffering and suppression they have just witnessed on stage.

Mangalam, the eponymous character, never appears in the play. She is known only through memory, through the narrator's choric commentary, and through the slow revelation of what was done to her. We learn, gradually, that she was molested by her own brother-in-law, and that the social mechanisms of family honour and male solidarity conspired to ensure that she suffered in silence. The female narrator's voice-over frames this story with a precision that amounts to moral diagnosis:

"Because a woman has patience, she is not allowed to speak; And she never learns the words."

"Women die many kinds of deaths; men do not know this."

These lines capture the epistemological dimension of Sengupta's feminism: it is not only that women are silenced, but that the forms of their suffering are illegible to the men who inflict and benefit from that silence. Mangalam's story is a story about a form of dying that registers nowhere on the instruments of patriarchal understanding — a death by accumulated suppression, by the slow erasure of the self under the weight of imposed shame and permitted violence.

The formal device of the play-within-a-play is, in this context, not merely a Brechtian distancing mechanism but a feminist epistemological strategy. By making the audience of the inner play into the protagonists of the outer play, Sengupta demonstrates that the conditions that destroyed Mangalam are not historical curiosities but living realities — the watchers are themselves implicated in the structures that silence and destroy women like Mangalam. Sumati, who watches Mangalam's story in Act One, becomes in Act Two the victim of a similar violation. The repetition is ruthless and deliberate: this is not coincidence but structure, the structural reproduction of patriarchal violence across time and social location.

Sengupta's use of the domestic space in Mangalam is particularly significant from a feminist perspective. The home — that cardinal institution of patriarchal management — is revealed in the play to be not a space of protection but a space of systematic violence. Dorai's household, ostensibly a site of family life and social respectability, is the site where Mangalam is abused. The boundary that tradition imagines as protective (Sita's Lakshman Rekha, the domestic threshold that marks the space of feminine virtue) is shown to be not a protection but a trap — a spatial inscription of patriarchal power that constrains women while leaving them exposed to the violence of the men inside the boundary.

The play's treatment of complicity is equally nuanced. Sengupta is careful not to construct a simple binary between male oppressors and female victims. Women within the patriarchal family — sisters, mothers-in-law, aunts — are shown to participate, often unconsciously, in the reproduction of the silencing mechanisms that destroy Mangalam. This is not a gesture of victim-blaming but a feminist acknowledgment of the complexity of patriarchal inscription: women too are products of the system, trained from childhood to manage their own oppression, to prioritise the honour of the family over the suffering of their sisters. Mangalam is a study in the social production of silence — and of the enormous cost that silence exacts.

4. Alipha (2001): Political Power, Patriarchy, and the Embodied Activist

If Mangalam is primarily a drama of the domestic sphere, Alipha extends Sengupta's feminist analysis into the domain of formal politics and institutional power. The play traces the intersecting stories of a female social activist (the Woman) and a corrupt male politician (the Politician), exploring how political power functions as an extension of patriarchal logic — how the same structures of domination that operate within the family reproduce themselves at the level of the state, the trade union, and the political machine.

The play's title — Alipha, the first letter of the alphabet — operates as a central metaphor. Alphabets are the instruments of literacy, of self-inscription, of entry into the symbolic order. For women in Alipha, the struggle for literacy and the struggle against exploitation are the same struggle. The social activist's work of teaching and empowerment is set against a backdrop of systematic male violence: Devi, one of the Woman's students, is gang-raped by Babu and his associates after she has the temerity to oppose their illegal activities. The violence is both punishment and deterrent — a demonstration that women who step outside the prescribed boundaries of passivity and submission will be returned to their bodies by force.

"So many rules. Keep your legs closed.... You must understand, the world is not ready for women like you."

This line — spoken with the casual authority of patriarchal normalisation — encapsulates the play's diagnosis of how sexual violence functions as a political instrument. The body of the woman activist is the terrain on which political battles are fought; her violation is not incidental to the play's political drama but central to it. Sengupta refuses the comfortable liberal separation between the personal and the political: the gang-rape of Devi is a political act, motivated by Babu's connections to the Politician, enabled by the impunity that political power confers on its male clients.

The play's treatment of the Politician is one of Sengupta's most penetrating studies of the psychology of patriarchal power. The Politician is not a cartoon villain but a complex figure whose grandiosity and need for absolute control are revealed as expressions of deep insecurity — an insecurity that can only be managed by the domination of others, particularly women. His declaration that the world is "at my command" and that women are objects to be used and discarded is both a boast and a symptom: a symptom of the dependence of patriarchal self-construction on the subjugation of women. Sengupta thus practices, in *Alipha*, a form of feminist psychoanalysis of power: she shows that patriarchal domination is not a sign of masculine strength but of masculine need.

The social activist, by contrast, is Sengupta's most fully realised portrait of a feminist protagonist who practises resistance not as heroic individual defiance but as sustained, collective work. She educates, organises, protests, documents, and persists. She is also, crucially, not immune to fear, exhaustion, or defeat. Sengupta does not romanticise feminist activism; she represents it in its full difficulty, acknowledging the costs that women pay for their resistance while insisting on the necessity and the value of continuing. This is what distinguishes Sengupta's feminist theatre from a merely consolatory drama of female triumph: she is interested not in the fantasy of liberation but in the reality of ongoing struggle.

5. Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni (2001): Mythopoeia and the Recovery of Silenced Voices

If *Mangalam* works through the realist register and *Alipha* through the socio-political, *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* deploys the resources of mythology and mythopoeia as feminist strategies. The play takes as its subject two of the most vilified and marginalised figures in the Hindu epic tradition: Shoorpanakha from the *Ramayana* and Shakuni from the *Mahabharata*. By giving these figures voice — by allowing them to narrate their own stories of misrepresentation and marginalisation — Sengupta practises a form of feminist counter-mythology, dismantling the received narratives that have used these figures to stigmatise female desire and masculine vulnerability.

Shoorpanakha, in the *Ramayana*'s canonical telling, is the demoness who desires Rama and Lakshmana, is mutilated for her desire (Lakshmana cuts off her nose and ears), and whose humiliation provides the pretext for Ravana's abduction of Sita and the war that follows. In Sengupta's revisionary reading, Shoorpanakha is not a monster but a woman: a woman who dared to express desire openly and without apology, and who was punished for this transgression with spectacular, mutilating violence. The mutilation of Shoorpanakha is revealed in the play as what it is: a patriarchal disciplinary act, a literal inscription of the rule that women who express desire too openly will be punished in their bodies.

"They tossed me this way and that, as if . . . as if I did not deserve any more respect. As if I was a . . . a broken plaything."

Sengupta's formal strategy in this play is particularly elegant and politically significant. She strips Shoorpanakha and Shakuni of their epic names and epic costumes, presenting them simply as Woman and Man in contemporary dress. This universalisation operates in two directions simultaneously: it draws the mythic figures into the present, suggesting that their experiences and the structures that produced them are still operative today, and it draws the contemporary present back into the mythic past, revealing that the dynamics of gender violence and marginalisation are as old as the culture's deepest narratives. The temporality of the play is thus radically collapsed: patriarchy is shown not as a historical aberration but as a civilizational structure, woven into the foundational stories that a culture tells about itself.

The figure of Shakuni, whose story Sengupta grafts onto Shoorpanakha's, complicates the play's feminist analysis in productive ways. In the *Mahabharata*, Shakuni is the scheming uncle of the Kauravas, the agent of the dice game that strips Draupadi of her dignity. Sengupta's Shakuni is a victim of a different kind of violence: his family was destroyed, his sister abused, and his revenge on the Pandavas grew from genuine grief and genuine injustice. By juxtaposing these two figures — a woman punished for female desire, a man radicalised by systemic injustice — Sengupta creates a dialogue about the relationship between different forms of marginalisation, asking whether the violence of the excluded can ever be simply condemned, or whether it must also be understood as a response to prior violence.

The play's treatment of mythic reworking places Sengupta within a wider tradition of feminist revisionary mythology in contemporary Indian literature — alongside writers such as Pratibha Ray, Volga, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Kavita Kane, who have produced counter-readings of the epics that restore subjectivity to figures whose stories the mainstream

tradition has suppressed or distorted. What distinguishes Sengupta's contribution is the theatrical medium: by staging the recovery of silenced voices as a dramatic encounter, she makes the process of feminist revisionary reading visible as an act of imagination and resistance. The audience does not simply read an alternative myth; it witnesses a woman claiming the right to speak, and claiming it in the face of a cultural apparatus that has spent millennia ensuring that she cannot.

6. Feminist Dramaturgy: Form as Resistance

It would be a mistake to read Sengupta's feminist project purely at the level of theme and content without attending to the formal and dramaturgical choices through which that project is enacted. The ways in which Sengupta structures her plays — her uses of metatheatre, choric voice-over, the deliberate universalisation of named characters, and the manipulation of theatrical time — are themselves feminist strategies, not merely vehicles for feminist content.

The play-within-a-play structure of *Mangalam* is the most obvious of these formal devices. By embedding one representation of women's suffering within another, Sengupta creates a formal analogue for the reproductive logic of patriarchy itself: just as the structures of violence are reproduced across time (from the story of *Mangalam* in Act One to the story of Sumati in Act Two), so too is the play reproduced within the play. The audience is made to see the act of theatrical spectatorship as itself implicated in the structures being represented — we too are the watchers who have watched and done nothing. This is Brechtian in its pedagogical intent but specifically feminist in its target: it is patriarchal spectatorship, the comfortable neutrality of those who witness women's suffering without intervening, that is being interrogated.

The choric voice-over that Sengupta uses in *Mangalam* and elsewhere is another specifically feminist formal device. The voice-over speaks in generalised, proverbial terms — "Women die many kinds of deaths; men do not know this" — but with the authority of accumulated, collective experience. It speaks for a collectivity of women rather than a single individual; it insists on a pattern where the individual narrative might suggest only an isolated case. This collective feminine voice — authoritative, reflective, and undeceived — constitutes a feminist counter-discourse to the dominant narratives of the plays' social worlds, naming what those worlds prefer to leave unnamed.

Sengupta's linguistic choices are also politically significant. Her decision to write in English — a language associated with urban, educated, elite culture — while insisting on the "Indian syntax" of that English is a formal negotiation of the tensions between accessibility and authenticity, between the international reach of feminist discourse and the local specificity of Indian women's experience. The language of her plays is neither the sanitised Standard English of the colonial period nor the phonetic transcription of regional speech, but something in between: a hybrid theatrical vernacular that is itself a formal figure for the hybrid condition of the Indian feminist intellectual — positioned between global feminist theory and local patriarchal practice, required to speak in a language that is never quite one's own.

7. Conclusion: The Grammar of Resistance

What emerges from a reading of these three plays is a feminist dramaturgy of remarkable consistency, coherence, and depth. Poile Sengupta has fashioned a theatre that is simultaneously local and global, contemporary and mythically resonant, realist and metatheatrical. Her central concern — the systematic subjugation of women through domestic violence, institutional indifference, political manipulation, and cultural narrative — is approached from multiple angles and across multiple temporalities, always with the dual awareness that oppression is structural (and therefore reproducible across time) and that resistance is also structural (and therefore sustainable across time).

The title of this paper, *Continuing Resistance*, is meant to capture both the temporal persistence of Sengupta's feminist project across her career and the ongoing, never-completed quality of resistance as she dramatises it within her plays. Her women do not achieve liberation in any simple or final sense. *Mangalam* is dead before the play begins. Devi is gang-raped despite her courage. Shoorpanakha's mutilation cannot be undone. But in each case, Sengupta insists on the value and the reality of resistance — on the fact that these women did not simply acquiesce, that they protested and refused and persisted, that their stories of suffering are also stories of agency, however constrained.

This insistence on agency-in-constraint is, perhaps, Sengupta's most significant contribution to the theory and practice of feminist theatre. She refuses the twin temptations of the feminist dramatic imagination: the temptation of triumph (the fantasy that women's struggles will produce clear, unambiguous victories) and the temptation of despair (the conviction that patriarchal structures are so complete and so deep that resistance is meaningless). Between these two positions she carves out a theatre of the difficult middle: a space in which women resist, partially succeed, are partially defeated, and continue. The grammar of this resistance is not the grammar of the heroic narrative but the grammar of the everyday — repetitive, cumulative, unglamorous, and absolutely necessary.

It is in this insistence that Sengupta's work speaks most powerfully to the present. In a contemporary Indian context in which gender-based violence remains pervasive, in which the institutions of law, politics, and culture continue to be shaped by patriarchal assumptions, and in which the stories that a culture tells about itself — in epics, in media, in domestic ideology — continue to function as instruments of women's subordination, Sengupta's theatre of continuing resistance remains not merely artistically significant but politically urgent. She is not writing about the past. She is writing about now.

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