Politics of Gender Representation: A Study of Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakini* and Nissim Ezekiel's *Nalini*

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Power determines all relations but at the same time it works as stimulus to create resistance to the agency of power, as Foucault says: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.' (Foucault, 1978, 95) The affect of Power and resistance as co-existential terms is all pervasive and their interplay results in shaping the gender identity. Human history has been a witness to male-hegemony in all walks of life and the projection of gender in society is regulated as per the socio-cultural norms of the day. Gender is created through socialization of norms and internalization of those social with approval from the society. The representation of gender, masculine and feminine, is culture, space and time specific and have signifiers of that specific culture to be donned. The constructing agency showers praise and applaud to the conforming agent with approving terms as 'dignified' 'acceptable' whereas denounces and deplores those not going by the norms with smearing. Since the patriarchy has enjoyed complete control over naming and defining process, creating binaries and hierarchies like masculine/feminine, mind/body, good/bad, white/black, centre/margin, active/passive, reception/rejection, dignified/derogated etc. the projection gender with its multiple markers like body, space, place, gender, colour, ethnicity, dress, costume etc. reflects the stratagems of the centre (man) in subverting the margin (woman). The unlimited power leads to discrimination and injustice against the powerless and this continued exploitation and suppression results in resistance, collective or solitary. The representation of gender in literary texts, both at private and public spaces, and of late at 'third' or 'shared space' as well, is the reflection of this power- politics involved in projecting gender. The long trajectory of resistance to gender appropriating forces—from small steps with suffragette movement, to Bronte sisters to Woolf to different phases of Feminism, alongwith massive socio-economic, cultural interventions transforming the world into a global world –all this express a gradual and perpetual churning of gender alignments, more from the perspective of marginalized entity. The agency projecting gender in literary representation-the author-is under scanner because of its perceived bias and prejudice in gender representation. The representation of gender, they believe, is as per the author's own conception of gender which is nothing but an expression of dominant discourse. This challenge or resistance in the form of accusations against the male writers for not doing justice with the portrayal of women in the literary texts put the gender of the writers- men and women –in a dicey situation and necessitates for deconstruction of the process in which the authorial voice affects the representation of gender. The conventional patriarchy controlled gender-structuring process is continuously re-defined, re-structured and re-imagined, and is constantly evolving into a new

shape where masculinity is losing its traditional sheen while femininity is gradually acquiring masculine identity. The statement 'Gender is between the ears, sex is between the legs' implies that whereas sex is permanent, gender becomes the target of the interested players to work upon and to structure as per the design of the affecting agency. Thais Morgan feels: 'The interaction of writing and gender is complex and fraught with cultural significance when the author projects a voice from the imagined perspective of the opposite sex' (Morgan, 1) and the reason behind a '…major theoretical issue throughout Men Writing the Feminine is the tension between the sexed body of the author (male) and the double gender-marking of his discourse: performatively feminine but politically masculine.' (Morgan, 6) The process of gender representation takes into accounts various spatial, temporal factors-fixed and fluid-like socio-cultural norms, sexual identity, ethnicity, body, language, spaces, racial features etc. and the process has been explored and analyzed from multiple aspects: Beauvoir's social construct theory to Butler's performance theory to Roland Barth's 'Death of the Author' (1967) at the expense of the birth of the reader and finally the arrival of digital texts and writings.

The relationship between the authorial voice and the gender representation is very complicated and often controversial as well, leading to disagreements and divisions amongst the writers on the basis of their gender. The creation of hierarchies and binaries has a design behind it; socio-cultural politics projects one at the centre and the other at the margin, the former controlling the latter, but in the modern world all hierarchies are questioned by those at the periphery. One's sexual identity is fixed, but the gender has attributes which are flexible and erasable because of socio-cultural inscriptions on construction of gender. A thin line of protest that emerged the world over amongst the women writers, thinkers, and philosophers against the projection of gender on specific lines—masculine- dominant, active, assertive male and feminine- conforming, meek, submissive, pliant, passive female- also affected the writers in India as well. Gender as a signifier, with its -visible (contours, appearance, skin) and invisible signifiers (socially constructed) assumes pivotal position in performance with body, language and stage becoming a site for negotiation and transformation of cultural dynamics of gender. Taking a cue from what the Western writers like Cixous urged women: 'Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it' (Cixous, 1976, 876), the women playwrights in India, homogeneous in feelings, aspirations and sense of self and feeling a special communion, make an umbrella group in the form of 'Feminist Theatre' and voice the concerns they have felt for centuries about the woman as a gender from their own perspective.

The 'Feminist Theatre' comes out of the shadow of mainstream theatre dominated by the male playwrights and protests against male playwrights' obsession with gender stereotypes. This block thinks that '[de]centring the authority of the playwright is crucial to the development of feminist theatre.'(Singh, 2016, p.270) Their focus is on depiction of what is close to a woman's her heart, what is happening at her subconscious level—feelings, emotions, relationships, belongingness, trauma, violence (physical, mental, psychological), love, affection, dignity, position, space, their

loneliness etc. Poile Sengupta is one of the major voices of the 'Feminist Theatre', alongwith Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta and Tripurari Sharma, and their plays are women-centric; through her dramatic works, she constantly challenges the stereotyped projection of gender in the old-fashioned parochial, patriarchy-supporting customs and traditions and advocates subverting of the prevalent practices and mindsets with alternate possibilities. No doubt, she writes about issues very close to a woman's heart but refuses to be labeled as a Feminist, to be closeted within certain boundaries and labeling. Elaborating about the objectives of the 'Feminist Theatre', Anita Singh remarks: 'Feminist plays deconstruct the emasculating structures of ancient legends and criticize the feminine myths still operating in Indian society... Beauvoir expresses a commonly held feminist opinion by arguing that mythology validates the subjugation of women in patriarchal culture. Mainstream hero centered literature and myth normalize contemporary patriarchal cultural values. It is precisely this process that feminist myth revision seeks to overcome.' (Singh, Anita, 2014, 8) Acknowledging the contribution of women playwrights in India, Indu Pandey says: 'The feminist theatre ... has given voice to the silence, reconstructed the traditional images of women and presented them on stage.' (Pandey, 47-48) Cixous firmly believes that the male and female writers can do justice with the projection of their own genders in literary texts, because both man and woman writers live, feel and react as their own respective gender. She negates the argument that representation of the opposite gender will not be influenced by the projector's own gender. The issues related to power, desire and control come into play when a male writer writes about feminine or he may be getting voyeuristic pleasures. Freud defines 'voyeurism as an act of sadistic looking in which the subject exerts power over someone else by regarding him or (often) her as a sexual object.' While writing about women playwrights, C S Lakshmi comments that the stage becomes 'a body transformed into a sign, signifying a thousand meanings, creating a thousand tests…and the meanings…descend like a giant mirror before people, reflecting their lives, their culture.' (Lakshmi xiii).

The politics of representing gender encompass various factors like body, space, place, speech and language, socio-cultural mores, economics, the power-structures—all having multiple signifiers. The present paper discusses two plays by the two Indian playwrights who wrote in English—Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni and* Nissim Ezekiel's *Nalini*— both representing two genders—male and female—and explores whether the gender of the playwright affects the creation of the gendered identities in these plays. Both Poile and Ezekiel give expression to the unique Indian culture and sensibility; Polie's play is rooted in myths and history whereas Ezekiel depicts his keen observation of Indians oddities and absurdities in progressive modern India. The relationship between myth and history is closely inter-twined. There are numerous versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, with multiple understandings and interpretations of these mythical histories as epics but the present discussion focuses on Poile's literary text. All the incidents, actions and characters have alternative, deconstructive possibilities. While talking about this play, Polie says: 'Thus Spake is a modern play that deals with conflict that is timeless. The two protagonists suffer because they belong to

the oppressed communities; they are also forgotten by Valmiki and Vyasa [authors of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, respectively] themselves after a point. Though each of them trigger[s] the Great War in the respective epics, neither is given much attention after the battle lines are drawn. My play brings them center stage, as the marginalized should be, and brings their suffering forward to our times. The play was prophetic; the day before it premiered, the world saw the horrifying images of the destruction of the twin towers in New York City. '(Sengupta, 2010, 86) The influence of the Western dramatic techniques and styles, very much discernible in the works of many Indian playwrights in English, also finds echo in the Poile's dramaturgy as everything takes place in front of the audience—from changing costumes to make-up, and the audience remains aware that they are watching a work of art, and keep them dispassionate and objective about what is happening on stage. While discussing the stagecraft in *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* Sengupta remarks: 'The actors straddle their different worlds seamlessly, changing costume and make-up on stage, in full view of audience. This is the first time in English theatre in India that the script specifically builds in elements of alienation in its production design, creating an illusion and simultaneously abnegating it.' (Sengupta, 2010, 242)

The play seems a redeeming act from the perspective of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni and presents them as the most misunderstood characters of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, existing at the gap of thousands of years, and explores the pattern behind their slandering over the centuries. The working of invisible powers that determine and control all spheres of human life in society, express a pattern where one's fixed and all-pervasive identity—gender—plays a decisive role. Here, whatever is accepted socially, culturally is reversed as the accepted popular nation is countered. Two divergent images emerge with regard to the cosmic drama depicted in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—the earlier one having the sanctity of historical approval and the alternate one as presented by Poile, giving space and stage to these marginalized Shoorpanakha and Shakuni to put their sides before the world. Talking about the play, Poile says '…the play intermittently travels back in time to the two Indian epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—and pulls them into present day relevance.' (Sengupta, *Thus Spake*…, 242) Derided as lecher and temptress, schemer and conspirator throughout the history, these two are allowed to come out of their forced identity and show their humane side. The entire history with its mythical overbearings gets submerged into a new identity when contemporary Shoorpanakha and Shakuni come across at a busy airport as their flights have been delayed. The airport becomes the site for the cosmic drama where the audience listens to the Poile's re-tellings.

This re-telling of ancient mythical characters' positions questions the historical perception about them and unmasks the politics and maneuverings behind their representation. Shoorpanakha and Shakuni, devoid of any individual identity, bump into each other at the airport as MAN and WOMAN and appear fretting about their delayed flight and start talking to each other to while away time. Poile keeps Shoorpanakha and Shakuni's identity anonymous by referring them as WOMAN and MAN respectively —the former is projected as a seductress, enchantress, licentious and revengeful woman who cares nothing for the norms of the society of the day for

the fulfillment of her physical desires: I'm an enchantress '(252) and enchants 'Everybody. Every heterosexual man. Even…even married men. Especially married men.' (Sengupta, 2010, 252) Whereas the latter Shakuni is a hardcore schemer for whom revenge is the only solace for the brutalities afflicted on his family by the Kurus—usurpation of his father's kingdom, death of his brothers and forced marriage of his sister Gandhari with a blind king Dhritsrashtra. Poile's projection of a defiant, bold and unorthodox Shoorpanakha speaks of the playwright's belief and sense of communion with the lot woman's position in society. Through new Shoorpanakha and aggrieved Shakuni she wants to alter the entire popular narrative generated by male dominated society through the centuries about the stereotyped positioning of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni.

Both the playwrights—Poile and Ezekiel— give extensive space to their women to capture their reactions, both outward as well as at subconscious level —Shoorpanakha, Gandhari, and two Nalinis—the enlightened as well as the stereotyped. In the ancient India, a woman's sexuality was always kept under control (Child marriages, Widow, Sati) and a 'good' woman never expresses her sexuality. Her sexual life was ordained as per the dicta of the patriarchy. Shoorpanakha is unconventional in this regard and threatens the established structure. Denial of sexuality and rights over property reduces her to domesticity, with reproduction and family care her sole responsibility, keeping her confined to private, solitary spaces (home), and all this with a design to keep her at the margins. This confinement to interiors, and use of veils when venturing out in public spaces only for some specific purposes (religious) was her operative part. Both Shoorpanakha and Shakuni have been projected as incarnation of Desire, and can go to any level for the fulfillment of their desire. Shoorpanakha is bowled over by the handsome looks and sturdy body of Rama, but he being married, her eyes gets riveted on Laxmana, and lusts for him. But she is pained when she is treated like a plaything by the two brothers. Devoid of emotional fulfillment, she seems vulnerable to love and belongingness, as she wants to submerge her own self with that of Rama: 'They teased me. Mocked me. The older one said, ask my brother … he might want you … the younger one said … I can't marry without my brother's consent … ask him …. 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.' (262) She is very much aware of her own self and brazenly rebuffs the co-passenger when the latter intrudes into her life: 'Do you have to classify me? … (Wearily.) I am a woman, don't you understand? A woman. Not a saint. Not a whore. Not just a mother, a sister, a daughter. I am a woman." (Sengupta, 2010, 267) She calls the passenger a 'misogynist' (Sengupta, 2010, 257) for his moralizing talk. When juxtaposed with what Bharat says in Ezekiel's *Nalini*: 'I'm unreal. I'm nobody. ...But I'm a man. I'm a human being. I've got feelings. I've got needs. . . . I'm alive. . . I don't know what I am, but I am.'(Ezekiel, 38) the gender boundaries become intertwined. Shoorpanakha and Bharat's coming to terms with reality with regard to their positioning and their understanding of their own respective self have a close resemblance—longing for being listened by the powers at the centre and the refusal of the latter, leaving them jittery and nervous. (Spivak, 1993)

Poile makes Shoorpanakha traverse both worlds on stage—the mythical in the consciousness of people and the modern, in front of the audience with stage intervention. Both Shoorpanakhas, mythical as well as on stage, having unreal or illusory existence, are deconstructed. The mythical transforms herself into a modern one with her costume, accessories, make-up, body language and the tone tenor of her expression tells that she has come off all the abuses thrown at her. Despite her long journey through the lens of male-gaze, she is as rebellious as earlier. No doubt, at times she appears a bundle of contradictions—she wants to re-write the codes of her own life as a human being and still she objectifies herself with her appearance to attract man. Here, the relationship between mind and body becomes blurry; she has a mind of her own but at the same time she wants to listen to what her body demands, but her existence as a body is negated with the brutal alteration of her physical, territorial borders. Shoorpanakha as a rebel with her unorthodox approach and Gandhari as a conformist with her silence resist the identities thrust upon them. The regulation of their bodies (Shoorpanakha and Gandhari) signifies the presence of resistance to the existing power. As gender is a cultural construct, the most sacred of epics under the influence of dominant culture appear perpetuating patriarchy by reducing women to the state of play-things or objects to be used by men (Shoorpanakha, Sita, Gandhari, Draupadi). For love, Shoorpanakha has to pay a heavy price, physically as well as socially. She understands her status as a woman, and starts comparing herself with Gandhari: 'Your sister lost only her sight. I lost myself…I lost me.'(Sengupta, 2010, 267) Despite being assertive and demanding, the longing for love has a transforming effect on Shoorpanakha. She refuses to be a sweet doll, cooing all the time like other traditional Indian wives but later she is ready to kiss the feet of Rama and Laxmana provided she gets love. Being extrovert and domineering in nature and with a strong physicality, she has the feminine touch and craves for love, soft touches and companionship in life. Anita Singh observes that 'Shoorpanakha represents all those women who are bold enough to remain single and declare their desire for male companionship without taking recourse to false modesty. Such women threaten the male world and so they are described as dangerous *rakshasis* who must be controlled/punished before they can upset the patriarchal set up.' (Singh Anita, 166-67). Shoorpanakha invites all the brutalities on her body as well as slandering of her name from the forces hostile to her because she refuses to fit into the image of a good woman constructed by the patriarchy. As no one has tried to know the side of Shoorpanakha for centuries, Poile lets her to open her heart, full of pain and anguish: 'It's my story.'(Sengupta, 2010, 255)

A woman is a walking spectacle; wherever she goes she invites attention on account of her physicality, body, shape, colour, even the costume. In Ezekiel's play *Nalini*, Bharat's comment about Nalini's body: 'You are 35-24-35,' (TP, 49) confirms how a female body gets attention from men, and they feed their eyes. Nalini of dreams, with her body offers maximum voyeuristic pleasure to man: '…her hair done up in a bee-hive, her choli short, low-cut and backless, revealing a figure of some splendor. She wears her sari like a tight skirt and walks in with casual elegance.' (Ezekiel, 25) She is an object to be devoured by the male eyes as said by Laura Mulvey in her famous article: 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has

been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.' (Mulvey, 837) The body has dual identity: subjective and objective, the representational and the material, physical. Nalini's body is looked down with two approaches—the conforming glam doll and the assertive, rational Nalini. The body of a woman is not a sexed body only; it has socio-cultural, historical inscriptions, inscripted by the outside agency. Inscription on body (Female) is a continuous process with an ulterior motive; a woman's body is a testimony to all that had been done with her body by the patriarchy, and consequently reduced to silence, and ironically this silence on stage becomes a tool of resistance. Forrester, a literary critic writes about male gaze: 'We don't know what women's vision is. What do women's eyes see? How do they carve, invent, decipher the world, I don't know—I know my own vision, the vision of one woman, but the world seen through the eyes of others. I only know what men's eyes see.'(Forrester, 34) As a woman communicates through her body and questions the established order of gender projection, the ridiculing of Shoorpanakha by Rama and Laxmana and later Laxman's act of chopping of her body parts are but a design to make the women fall in line. The mind/body (matter) hierarchical binary is at work in altering of Shoorpanakh's physicality but unlike the glamorous Nalini of the showbiz world, the former questions the controlling agency with her mind and body. Laxman's action of altering the geographical borders of a Shhorpanakha's body speaks about male world' obsession with a gendered body, because it is through her body that Shoorpanakha articulates her own self and rebuts the dominant structures. Madalina forther extends this argument that 'A woman does not live her body as an inert entity. Her everyday embodiment is complexly and continuously constituted as a socially constructed (female) body, a lived body, a constrained and regulated body and as a resistant body.' (Madalina, 111) Altering of Shoorpanakha's bodily territory is to divest her of her sexuality and feministic identity. As body remains the most dominant and visible signifier of woman's gender identity, this chopping of her body parts is a result of collective consciousness of men to silence any dissent, as endorsed by Kathleen M. Erndl : 'Disfigurement of the woman is the most common punishment for crimes of a sexual nature.'(Richman 82). But modern Shoorpanakha rattles the psyche of man through her body—posture, movement, donning etc. Emphasizing on how a woman's body is perceived as something different and unique from any other male body, Bowden remarks: 'Women's bodies perceived to be more bodily than men's - and their minds accordingly weaker.' (Bowden, 49)

Poile uses various tools in her dramaturgy to reject the traditionally conceived notion of gender, particularly feminine. In Shoorpanakha, she creates a character who defies all established norms; she uses all the arsenals at her disposal against the established norms of gender construction -her body, speech, silence, changing of costume—to assert her position in the powerful male dominated society. Quite contrary to the ideal image of womanhood modeled on goddess 'Sita', she defies all norms by making advances towards Rama and openly expressing her longings for him; she wants to surrender herself in his arms, to submerge her own self with that of her love: 'I wanted him to tear my clothes off and tear through me and yet I also wanted him to be tender and

melting. I would suckle him. I would hold him in my arms the stars and I would kiss those feet that held all the sunsets of the universe. (Sengupta, 2010, 256- 57). The women who are unorthodox and unconventional in expressing their longings are looked with a smirk by the male dominated society, and are coerced into a set pattern conduct and character; if they refuse to toe line, they are labeled as 'demoness,' 'witch' or seductress. By having control over defining and naming process, the dominant agency becomes intimidative: 'By defining women by the pure/impure binary, 'men could render them relatively harmless', blunting their male challenge to male privilege'. (Douglas, p.36) The deconstruction of terms like 'pativerta' and 'pati permeshwar' confirms the politics behind the projection of gender in a specific desired way in a patriarchal society. Quite contrary to a traditionally 'good' woman, Shoorpanakaha is never shy of expressing her sexuality. She asserts her sexual identity: 'I am the other woman. Beautiful … sexy …. (Pause.) Hot. (256) The so-called civilized society shuns her in public gaze whereas a shy, conforming, demur, abiding, submissive and serve are regarded as respectable woman by the powerful patriarchy. Rekha explains how the patriarchy operates to make 'Woman as conforming entity'—Those who conform are idealized, while those who deviate or resist, personify normative fissures, and tensions or embody ambiguities and thus produce unstable results, are demonized.' (Rekha, 11)

The society has devised plans in the forms of its norms and signifiers for labeling man/woman-good or bad, beautiful or ugly, acceptable or unacceptable. Shoorpanakha is very much conscious of her looks, colour, figure, and features and knows how the agency recognizes one's identity on the basis of these markers. Colour of skin and body are the universally prevalent signifiers of gender, more particularly women, as the world of showbiz, through advertisements affect the psyche of the target people, and the post-colonial India, with its own cultural signifiers of gender like caste, religion, class, also akin to the western signifiers of gender. Shoorpanakha knows that being dark with ordinary features, she can't stand a chance before good looking, fair complexioned women, and she knows how gender is constructed: ' Because she was dark and big. She wasn't the way men like women to be. Fair-complexioned. Delicate. Shy … biddable. Pause.… Look at the Ramayana. The hero is tall … straight-nosed … handsome. The villain is grotesque with ten heads. The heroine is slender-waisted, dazzlingly fair. The vamp is dark, swarthy, big. Outspoken. Coarse. Therefore the vamp is a demon. Because she speaks her mind. (Sengupta, 2010, 277) Fox describes 'how bodies serve as signifiers, just as a text in a book or a piece of film. They have been attributed meaning, and they can be read by others, and rewritten, they *are* texts, carrying knowledgeability and power.' (Fox, 26) The denial of bodily pleasures to a woman as socio-cultural taboo, laments Cixous, is used as a stratagem to deprive her of identity: 'We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them?' (Cixous, 1976, 885)) For a woman her body belongs to her only and any unwarranted, forceful encroachment upon her territory is resisted in different ways.

Under the design of fashion and cosmetic industries, more particularly among the advanced sections of society, women, and of late men as well, are undergoing bodily changes, with the feeling that their bodies have some abnormality in them. In the world of show-biz a woman is preferred to have a specific type of body-shape, colour, ethnicity alonwith her status (single/married) Male are working as heroes in bolywood well past sixty, woman in thirties are offered the roles of mother. This cultural regulation of human bodies as normal/acceptable and abnormal/unacceptable bodies emanates from power agency having the backing of patriarchy but at the same time it makes identity fluid, not fixed. The masculine identity demands the projection of feminine in a specific, desired way. The removal of Shoorpanakha's body parts by the male agent is just to deny her sexual, feminine identity; placed in a voyeuristic position the agency overcomes his conflict by altering Shoorpanakah's territorial sanctity of her body. Chopping off all that sticking out in Shoorpanakha's body further intensifies the obsession of man's own perception of himself with authority with his sticking out organ. As a woman's body is different from a man's body on account of her contours as well as sexuality, this assault on her body by Laxmana is a frustrating act by man in front of an assertive woman: 'I was all open to him … like the earth receiving the rain. And he … he was entranced too. He talked to me as if … as if he needed all those arguments … about respectability and fucking commitment … to keep away from me. Otherwise if I so much as touched his elbow, he would crumple into my arm and suck the breath out through my lips.' (267) She further expresses her humaneness, well aware of her own self as a woman: I've forgotten how he hurt me. And I…(*Softly*.) I can't hurt anyone anymore. I have lost the need to hurt…I am a woman.'(267)The target body inscribed and codified with socio-cultural inscriptions turn into a platform of resistance as happened in the case of 'slut walk' and 'chaddi gang', as echoed by Grosz: 'Body is never simply a passive object upon which regimes of power are played out. ' (Grosz, 1990, 64) Body here becomes a metaphor—and covering this body with various costumes also lead to different interpretations, as the characters –Shoorpanakha and Shakuni change their costume onstage—Shoorpanakha donning new outfits representing our times. Recounting the degree of violence against women, Gilbert admits that '…images of sexual violence suggest, women's bodies often function in post-colonial theatre as the spaces on and through which larger territorial or cultural battles are being fought.' (Gilbert, 1996, 215) No doubt, Shoorpanakha lands herself in trouble because of her desires, as 'desire, according to Sartre is a 'trouble'

Space is an important signifier in determining gender, depending upon various processes of gender construction on the basis of spaces—private, public, or third or shared spaces. Man is conceived as an active agent, moving walking, controlling, signifies time whereas woman as a mass of body occupying a space, passive and ready to be controlled and affected. Shoorpanakha defies the traditional regulation of her gender identity by trespassing the boundaries constructed for a female gender: 'Because she takes up space….What was Shoorpanakha's crime? (Sengupta, 2010, 277) Shoorpanakha defies conventional norms of space occupation; with her

solo, outgoing actions and she re-writes the norms of accepted behavior of a woman in a society, ruled by patriarchy directed norms. This was unacceptable to the power-drunk male society. A woman with her sexuality is regarded vulnerable to dangers and is not supposed to wander alone in the deserted, lonely deep forests, but she here questions this spatial division of gender boundaries. One's sense of identity is based on one's sense of body, and this body belongs to the individual as well as to the public; its movement in spaces is also regulated by gender-constructing forces. The German artist Marrianne Wex observes how the gender defining forces affect the body posturing of man and woman in public spaces—women make themselves smaller, shrinks, don't spread and take less space while men contrary to women, like spreading, covering more space than required. She argues that body language, with unconscious gestures, is the result of sex-based, patriarchal socialization behavioural pattern in daily life. She writes: 'Beginning as children, men are encouraged on all levels to make themselves broad, especially in front of women while the intimidation of women leads them to take up as little space as possible.'(Wex, 1984) Body and space are co-related signifiers affecting the gender projection process. Body, still or stirred requires space. It can shrink as well as expand as per the requirement of time and to convey a meaning with its posturing. The defiling of a woman's modesty with defacement of her body in the public space, on the stage is collapsing of those gendered spaces which are disadvantageous to woman. Woman's body is attributed to be a spatial reality, rendering her passive, an object to be affected, ordered, exercise of authority before an active male agent that wants to cover or control woman as a space. Shoorpanakha's sitting posture at the airport reflects her intimidating nature with her wish to cover more and more space to corner the 'other's space, defying the socially constructed the gender boundaries of feminine. She is presented as occupying one chair oblivious of the surrounding while keeping the other one for her handbag. She doesn't like to vacate the other chair by removing her hand bag. Her willingness to capture both chairs for herself and her reluctance to allow other passenger, a male to take the chair speaks of her desire to rewrite the gender specific spatial boundaries. She refuses to confine herself to her own space; rather she wants to encroach a space beyond her, a masculine characteristic. The advertising agency in *Nalini* works in public space, but the male world by exposing her to the public space wants to make inroads into her private space as well. But the New Nalini, much to the disappointment of oppressive male gaze and also in contravention to stereotyped projection of gender in media with focus body contours imbued with sexuality, wants to keep her private space for herself only, not to share with lecher like Raj and Bharat. Kathryne Beebe describes 'space 'as 'dynamic, constructed, and contested. It was where issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender—amongst a myriad of other power/knowledge struggles—were sited, created, and fought out.' (Beebe, 2)

Shoorpanakha oscillates between two centres—tradition and modernity—she wants to be loved and still rejects marriage, craves for love without accepting the norms of the day. A woman defying marriage is viewed with suspicion and unacceptable to the society. Modern Shoorpanakha's advances towards Shakuni and her candid acceptance of sexual desires make her

a rebel throughout history. She refuses to be controlled by the agency and her ventures in the forest defy conventional feminine gender. She displays all the ingredients of a masculine gender through her action, and as performance determines one's gender (Butler, 1990, 139) and all 'gendered relations are tied up with relations of power.' (Alsop, 99) Shakuni is presented as a schemer whose only motto is revenge. Outwardly appearing as a well-wisher maternal uncle of the Kauravas, his sole motto is revenge against the entire Kuru clan for the sake of the injustice meted out to her sister Gandhari by compelling his family to marry her with the blind Dhritrashtra. He wants destruction of the entire Kuru clan and fans the fire of revenge among them resulting in war between the Pandavas and Kaurava. Shakuni while describing the lot of her sister expresses his deep anguish: …She [Gandhari] merely … she … deliberately blindfolded herself. She wore a dark, thick, bloody bandage over her eyes … kept it there all twenty-four hours, all her life. Blinded. Living in constant darkness … in unrelenting night. (Softly.) She who was as free as the birds flying across the hills … why did she choose … choose to blot out the sun? (264) He dots on his sister and the image of Gandhari's willful blindness haunts him and by provoking, instigating Kuravas and Pandavs to play the game of dice he leads them to their doom through war. He is determined to take revenge: '…when plotting revenge, nothing else is important … not my nephews … not me …. Finally … not even my sister …. I wanted to turn everything to dust. Dust and ashes.'(271) One gets reminded of what Quentin says in *After the Fall*, a play by Arthur Miller: 'MAN: In Shakuni's world nobody is innocent. '(280) But towards the end he appears mollified and can be persuaded to shun the path of revenge. Between the two Shoorpanakha is more rational, argumentative and aware and balanced character in comparison to Shakuni who doesn't reveal all his cards. One craves for love while another wants revenge:

WOAMN: I wanted love …. Just a little love … for a little while.
MAN: I wanted revenge too. Hot … bloody … fanged revenge.(262)

Speech and silence are two major strategic elements used by Poile for subverting the power structure. Shoorpanakha is very candid and outspoken in expressing her inner self and voices her feelings openly without any social inhibitions. On the other hand Gandhari adopts silence as a strategy. In the 'Feminist Theatre' women adopt their own ways and strategies to voice their concerns and to communicate with the world around them. She uses her own body, special kind of speech and language as well as her silences to register her protest. Poile describes silence as an effective dramatic device to communicate the desired thing: 'Apart from the words, movement and gesture and also, paradoxically, of communication. In fact, among all forms performing arts, it is theatre that uses silence as powerful and effective device.' (Sengupta, 119, 2014) As language has its own gender (Woolf), in *Thus Spake* … Shoorpanakha uses a language that makes traverse the tradionally constructed gender boundaries of masculine and feminine. A masculine sentence is full of intimidation, authority, command, and carries power with the use action, cuss words, full of vulgarity whereas a feminine sentence is persuasive, soft, loaded with feelings, assimilative characterized with docility and timidity. Shoorpanakha uses a language that smacks of authority, assertiveness, voicing her sexuality and questions the gender boundaries:

'She showed off her breasts and thrust out her hips. So?'(277) 'What's happened, lover? No sex in the last six hours.' (248), 'To have casual sex with a stranger?' (260) In *Nalini* the play, the Nalini of fantasy gets all attention on account of her bodily attributes: 'Nalini enters briskly, pauses for a moment then moves in a fluttering walk into the spotlight. She is *slender and sweet, tall, fair completely modern in style.'* (Ezekiel, 25)

The modern Shoorpanakha adopts silence and indifference as tools to put in place the male passenger. Her stubbornness smacks of a woman's counter to the process of gender construction:

MAN: Is this chair taken?

Silence.

MAN: (*Louder*) Is this chair taken, Madam?

No Answer. (*Thus Spake*, 246)

Her body language, the way she carries herself, and the kind of words she chooses to communicate—all this tells about a resolute and enlightened Shoorpanakha who has shrugged off all the humiliations and shame. Later on, she is fuming with anger and puts MAN off with her choice of what butler said power-ridden comments: 'Move your hooves off my chair.… (Shouts,) Move your fucking…'(249)

Desire works as a stimulant in the play and causes war; Shoorpanakha desires love, whereas Shakuni longs for revenge. Both are steadfast in getting what they wish for; they adopt all sorts of strategies, and even had to go through unspeakable indignities, physical as well as social, but they don't budge from their stand. Like a normal woman, Shoorpanakha doesn't hide her lusty desires, unacceptable to the male-world, and this invites the wrath of conventional male-dominated society is an 'alter ego of Sita.' (Richman, 10) She has the combination of both-feminine and masculine—when she expresses her deep interiors she is the most feminine and when she retaliates she becomes masculine. Even in her physique she has the combination of the two; bodily, she has been blessed with a beautiful figure, but not beautiful so far her facial features are concerned. Gayatri Spivak explains how the centre-margin interplay of power-games are at work when a '…cultural identity is thrust upon one because the centre wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the centre' (Spivak, 55) They are conditioned to behave, speak, and conduct in particular at private as well as public places. Different writers have used their artistic liberty in portraying Shoorpanakha differently -ugly, demanding, demonized, beautiful, enchantress, seductress. Shoorpanakha never fits into the image of a traditional, docile woman. She questions the institution of marriage, a threat to the institution giving legitimacy to human relations: 'Do I look like a wife?… You don't have to be married to know what a wife looks like. They are all over the place. Wives. (Spits out the word.) Bloody wives… All over the place. Like … like pigeons. Cooing (Cooks.) like bloody pigeons. Come home soon darling … I've cooked you your favourite dinner. Do you know you son has

come thirty-first in class? Such an improvement. Just like his father. (255) Writing about bestowing about regard and respect to woman in society, Jasbir Jain observes: They [women] are able to redeem themselves mainly through devotion, sacrifice and sublimation. And even when placed within the family situation, there is a deep realization that they are alone, that they don't belong, feel perpetually uprooted and on trial. They are also constantly exposed to male exploitation. In both kinds of accounts—the folk and the mythical –women's lives are defined by male control, thus depriving them of the element of choice.' (Jain, 2015, 325) But Shoorpanakha refuses to accept the role of an ideal woman; rather she makes fun of these domesticated women: '…Who would want to be a wife? To be a pigeon. Grey and stupid and cooing … cooing all the time.… Oh yes, there are. Those are the crows. Caw! Caw! Why are you so late? What did you do with your salary? Caw …. Why haven't you paid the school fees? Caw … Caw. Who is that bitch I saw you with? Caw! … Caw …(256) While expressing her own self, a woman is not using her speech only; rather her entire body, her consciousness of her own self become the active agent of her expression, as argued by Cixous : 'Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering… She doesn't 'speak', she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she virtually supports the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. she draws her story into history.' (Cixous, 1976, 881) The working of invisible power that determine and control all spheres of human life, shows a pattern where one's gender is defined but Shoorpanakha counters the popular nation of gender. The play *Thus Spake* ...have a cathartic effect on the people as they come to know about the more humane side of these 'villainous' characters and start looking at them with empathy and kindness, entirely a new, alternate positioning is bestowed upon them. Traversing through the rumblings of cosmic war, Shoorpanakha and Shakuni feel a special affinity towards each other. Shakuni evokes death and destruction with bomb in his suitcase to destroy the airport. But he is different from Shoorpanakha in the sense that he is blindly obsessed about revenge whereas Shoorpanakha is craving for soft touches and fulfillment in life with the man of his dreams. She dissuades Shakuni from the heinous act of blasting bomb at the airport; she is equally assertive and confident in her talks with Shakuni at the airport. Shoorpanakha appears completely devastated and lonely at the end when she remarks that Shakuni 'turned out to be better bother than mine'. This suggests that she was not a victim of hostilities from the outside world only; rather her own brother and family was inconsiderate towards her. But despite all this, she doesn't lose her sanity and rationality; she remains calm and dissuades Shakuni from the path revenge.

Exzekiel's *Nalini* exposes the hollowness surrounding the advertizing world and captures the psyche of two male characters toward a woman artist. Ezekiel's own familiarity with the advertizing world enables him to honestly delineate how this glitzy world operates. With the projection of two Nalinis, one operating through body and another through mind in the perception of the male world, Ezekiel lays bare the politics behind projection of gender construction, as articulated by Fox: 'The surface of the body is surely the most discussed,

imagined, prescribed and proscribed, disfigured, disguised and disciplined surface in the physical world…Behind closed doors, professionals gaze upon the surface of the body for indications of what is happening beneath that surface.' (Fox, 23) Like Shoorpanakha, the awakened Nalini challenges the established gender construction norms, and with both the women re-define the role of woman in a society. Women are pitted against the powerful gender construction and appropriation norms, and when pushed to the wall, they try to resist and negotiate through the tough terrain with the kind of arsenal they have at their disposal—body, language, space. Both the major male characters Bharat and Raj are projected sexually perverted and obsessed about Nalini who is submissive, beautiful and compliant. They are always running after the girls for sexual gratification, but they can't face a real woman who is confident, aware and assertive. Ezekiel here brings forth the point how a woman remains a source of entertainment for man, a plaything. But at the same time he creates a fantasized Nalini, enlightened and new woman who refuses to bite the bait and rebuffs any unwarranted advances with courage and conviction. As a male writer Ezekiel exposes the power game behind Bharat and Raj's strategy in controlling or retreating from the compliant or defiant Nalini but being a male writer his writing about woman, suggests Morgan, will be viewed with some doubt as 'Men's practice of writing the feminine raises several important questions about desire and power: Is a male author engaging in voyeurism when he writes in a feminine voice about (what he thinks are) the intimate thoughts and feelings of Women?' (Morgan, 4) Bharat's seduction of Nalini emanates from man's 'confidence, bravado, poise, the power of positive thinking.' (Ezekiel, 20) Man treats woman as objects of desire, how the 'body' is viewed as a territory for extension of man's dominance. In Indian society, the body of a woman doesn't remain of flesh and blood; rather it has socio-cultural significance associated with its identity as pure and impure, as the comment on Nalini's body 'you are not a virgin' (Ezekiel, 50) clarifies. Bharat's belief that women are just objects of sex and pleasure and they can be won with just use of soft 'words' (Ezekiel, 18) and when he encounters a confident Nalini as an artist, all his patriarchal confidence and power falls to pieces. Svati Shah says that 'All women (on the street) are subject to, public moral scrutiny which evaluates women along binaries of good/bad, honourable/dishonourable, promiscuous/safe, etc.' (Shah, 234) Bharat's comment that 'Man are never saints with women. At least this man is not. (Ezekiel, 10) attests male/female gender positioning and how the dominant gender looks at a woman. By controlling physically they want to control even the minds of women which is nothing but an expression of power.

Bharat, in his fantasy, on the pretext of launching Nalini's bright career as an artist drives her to the point of seduction by urging her 'to paint well, to be an artist you must flick aside your inhibitions'(28) and is able to take her to his bed, only in dreams. But the real Nalini is a different woman who snubs all the advances of a lecher like Bharat and even slaps him. She is confident, assertive, aware and above all a genius, a quality with which the male characters can't cope up with. She sees through the designs of men like Bharat and Raj, and by slapping the former when he comments on her sexuality, she shows the place to the entire patriarchal forces of fixing gender: 'You have a formula; you can't imagine an individual woman. You can't

believe that a woman may want to create a world of her own just as a creative man does, a woman with a will to explore herself and the world around her." (Ezekiel, 38) Bharat appear timid and jittery in front of Nalini the artist so he rejects her because she is 'an Independent woman, with the intelligence of a man and the determination of an orthodox Indian mother-in-law.'(Ezekiel, 45) Towards the end, Bharat realizes his folly in understanding Nalini as a woman, and admits it is the men who are wrong not the women. The New, confident Nalini speaks of the arrival of a new woman where she plays her role in gender fixation: 'I want to be on the side of change, the unpredictable, exploration, discovery, invention, in short the future, the evolution of the other woman within me, who must one day become me.' (Ezekiel, 43)

Gender identity and its representation is going through a phase of churning, making it more fluid with gradual modification and erasure, more so in fast changing contemporary times where traditionally established boundaries rare collapsing fast, every day offering new conception and possibilities within the masculine feminine discourse. Within the masculine and feminine separately, there are layers and layers of further gendering, or cross gendering. Binaries are becoming obsolete with pluralities and multi-dimensionsl in every sphere of gender marking. Both Poile and Ezekiel are able to identify the causes of disagreements and divisions in gender discourse which cause confrontation and polarization on the basis of gender. Out of choice or compulsion or demanding situation, gender is gradually losing its fixed nature and identity with masculine-female and feminine-male, not to forget the other gender identities such as LGBT, another aspect of the politics of gender discourse where the marginal are further pushed to the wall.

Polie tries to deconstruct the power structures affecting gender representation as well as the designs latent in those discourses. The reaction with regard to gendered roles, argues Moi, has the backing of socio-cultural history: '…We all speak from a specific position shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors.' (Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, 42) The characters of Poile and Ezekeiel are what society or power structures made them; in the post-modern re-readings there are signs of sanity and humanness in their responses. In an interview with Poile, Anita Singh presents her side: 'She agrees that she cannot escape her gender, but it not her sole identity. She feels her women characters live in a troubled, patriarchal world, but they are strong and capable of speaking and acting for themselves. She has also depicted new Indian male whom she calls 'metrosexual' male who are sensitive and willing to accept gender equality.' (Singh Anita, 83)

Both Poile and Ezekiel appear open to the changing dimension of gender in their dramaturgy. The playwrights' projection of unconventional within the stereotypes represents gradual metamorphosing nature of gender, stretching and expanding the patriarchy-controlled-boundaries: 'The resistance that the writers/their protagonist bring to bear on a patriarchal domination, however does not aim at creating a coherent, closed, unitary and stable female

subject. The female subject that emerges outside the conventional straightjacket of binaries is one that is complex, interpolated/interpellated and as such, is the one that may both collide and collude with the masculinist locations.'(Rekha, 205) It is through these processes of confrontation and assimilation between man and woman that gender roles are recreated, redefined and restructured where the patriarchy is becoming more accommodative before the collective, subtle but assertive maneuvering of woman—writers, critics and thinkers. Ania Loomba's suggestion holds ground in this regard: 'It would be better to reformulate the relationship as more inter-active, since women are not just the ground for the enactment of agendas which are directed elsewhere but direct targets of these agendas.'(Loomba, 7) The patriarchal hegemony is continuously conceding the ground and getting weakened and the world is outwardly look becoming feminine but actually strengthening masculine signifiers. The gender boundaries are continuously stretching, shrinking, making it difficult 'to take granted what it is to be a man or woman, or that the world is simply with divisions in it.' (Alsop, 2)

Poile herself in her interview negates the premise taken by some women writers that the delineation of gender in literary texts gets affected by the gender of the writer: 'I have always felt it unfair that women writers are so consistently asked to see the world through "a woman's eyes" and to comment on gender politics. All creative people are artists and crafts-persons first. There are notable exceptions, of course, like Mahasweta Devi, whose activism is integral to her creative work. As for me, I believe that a readership, an audience, asks to be engaged in the creative construct that is before them ….'(A. Singh, 87)

The arrival of 'Digital Texts' alongwith the negation of hegemony-preserving binaries with Homi Bhabha's cultural theory of 'third space', 'hy-bridity' and 'in-betweenness' offers many possibilities as authors' man-womanly and woman-manly representations of gender in texts is the re-defining of traditionally defined gender identities amid voices of protest arising against popular discourse of masculine hegemony. Williams strikes a balancing act in this regard: 'Even the writers who put forth this thesis of different masculine and feminine viewpoints agree that not all men and women fit a gender-based stereotype.' (Williams, 175) Schwenger's opinion also lends credence to the opinion that 'becoming self-conscious of their sex, male writers are now laboring under disadvantage that was formerly women's alone.' (Schwenger, 10)

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