

## Chapter V

### Summing Up

Joanne Temple says, “As long as there is theatre, as long as there are women, as long as there is an imperfect society, there will be women’s theatre” (Temple 84). The focus of this study has been to analyse comparatively the select plays of two distinct national cultural works of Indian women playwrights and African American women playwrights. Through the lens of theatre/plays/performances, the social issues raised by these women playwrights of their era still prevail in contemporary era of women’s liberation and continuous struggle for justice and equality against various types of violence and ill treatment shown to them in their particular national social systems. Margaret Lawrence in her book, *The School of Femininity*, states, “Women for the first time in history are saying their particular say about themselves, about men, and about life as it treats them separately and together with men” (xii). The Indian women playwrights like Dina Mehta, Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanbhan, Mahasweta Devi and Bharati Sarabhai, and the African American women playwrights like Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Ntozake Shange and Angelina Weld Grimke have strongly portrayed constant struggle of women towards self-realization and their efforts to understand society’s continuous indifferent, unequal attitude towards them. Their plays also have strongly voiced the effects of women’s increased economic independence, dowry, superstitions, the choices of marriage, gender imbalance, violence, and the traditional patriarchal family set up. In other words, the concerns related to women have been both psychological and social. bell hooks in her book *Ai’nt I a Woman* highlights the example given by Amanda Berry Smith, a 19<sup>th</sup> century black missionary reports on the condition of African and Indian woman:

The poor women of Africa, like those of India, have a hard time. As a rule, they have all the hard work to do. They have to cut and carry all the wood, carry all the water on their heads, and plant all the rice. The men and boys cut and burn the bush, with the help of the women; but sowing the rice. You will often see a great, big man walking ahead with nothing in his hand but a cutlass (as they always carry that or a spear), and a woman, his wife, coming on behind with a great, big child on her back, and a load on their head. No matter how tired she is, her lord would not think of bringing her a jar of water, to cook his supper with, or of beating the rice, no, she must do that (15).

The African American woman faces, in the words of Claudia Jones, 'triple oppression' that is based on classism, sexism and racism as bell hooks presents historical account of black women, "Rape was not the only method used to terrorize and de-Humanize black women. Sadistic floggings of naked black women were another method employed to strip the female slave of dignity. In the Victorian world, where white women were religiously covering every body part, black women were daily stripped of their clothing and publicly whipped. Slave owners were well aware that it added to the degradation and humiliation of female slaves for them to be forced to appear naked before male whippers and onlookers" (37). While the Indian woman faces multiple oppression as not only on the basis of class, caste, and colour of their skin but also social evil practices like, dowry, sati, witch (*bayen*), bonded slavery, and superstitious religious beliefs. These select women playwrights have depicted the social realities pertaining to their own experiences. What becomes clear is that more diversity brings more oppression. The women characters face oppression within the oppression as portrayed by the Indian women playwrights and the African American women playwrights. The journey of self-realization, self-identity and self-

determination take place as they occupy the stage/space which has been denied/unavailable/unaffordable to them for ages for various reasons. Their plays have been classified as plays of violence, plays of resistance and plays of *determinance*.

The contribution of these women playwrights manifests that the diversity and supremacy of their plays is immensely captivating and essential. The examination and exploration that their plays generate are not limited to domestic, regional, cultural, or national level. They have broader perspectives and vision and are universal in nature. What they have been experiencing is the rigid patriarchal society where even talented skilled and intellectual women felt insecure and suffocated to breathe the air of their own free will. The select playwrights have hardly left any area related to women's issues which is not taken into account. The select plays offer a wide range of interpretation with regard to the position of women in general that would initiate social change. Taking theatre, performance and drama/script as a route to decry violence against women, the close examination of the women's characters, themes and issues challenges the existing patriarchal, racial, social and cultural constructs against women. In the twenty first century where human life has evolved around a drastic and dramatic change, there is an urgent need to accept and acknowledge women without being biased or gender differences. It is time to look there support a co-ordination which would certainly make life more meaningful which will also create reforms in the society at large. The issues addressed by the select women playwrights of diverse national, cultural, social, political and religious identities have been comparatively and critically interpreted. The plays have also been analyzed practically, thematically and theoretically pertaining to women's issues.

Their plays as a script, characterization as physical presence on stage and utterance of dialogues as their voices prove that they demand to recreate their on spaces not only on the stage but also in the society, profession and family. Most of the plays are one act or two act plays, that directly highlight various issues related to women and their female body, they hardly have fixed conclusions. There is no scope for entertainment like novels or poetry. They deal with serious issue therefore expect serious attention the plays disturb and demand social, political and economic equilibrium, they provoke and insist on response. The plays generate awareness and form a kind of audience that would respond to the situation optimistically. They audience are made to ponder over what it means to be a woman in the family and society. All the illustrated issues pertaining to women and children are of the type that have remained unexplored, unexpressed and hidden from the world. The male dramatists simply have not been able to deal sincerely with female body on the stage. Only women could represent women's issues emphatically, sincerely, and seriously. These women playwrights fulfill even that gap which has been left blank by the intellectuals for ages. The African American and Indian women have a lot in common at the same time there is a lot of dissimilarities. Violence against women, women in wedlock, women in family, propinquity of women, their sufferings, struggles and constant endeavours to emancipate themselves from cultural and social restrictions are certain common themes in their plays which almost all the select women dramatists of both countries share.

The African American women's triple oppression in America, and Indian women's multiple oppression in diverse Indian cultures, the women playwrights of both these countries aim to sensitize the readers/audience. Women playwrights in general present the experiences of women's world, which the male playwrights have

failed to do, which has paved the way for the women centred theatre or drama in the field of world drama.

In the introductory chapter, the history of women's drama both Indian and African American have been illustrated in detailed. It has also been highlighted that the appearance and emergence of women playwrights in Indian literature either writing in English or any other regional languages of multicultural, multilingual, diversified and multifarious society of historically renowned, economically developing and socially uplifting nation is laudable and heartening. Their contribution and place in the Indian drama is discussed in the first chapter as women have been the victims of socially constructed structures and stereotypes for a long time. However, their educational background and growing awareness in the literary field have successfully overshadowed the past-oppression. In the meantime, their experiences in their literary verve and creative imagination, they have outclassed male writers and have established themselves on par with them. Women writers have presented the social issues of contemporary Indian society as they are and sometimes better than their male counterparts have done so far. The women playwrights attempt to mirror social, cultural, political and religious issues and happenings using historical facts and keeping women's issues at the centre of attention. Their recalcitrant attitude towards the social injustice and inequality, male domination and stratification of class, caste and creed assure their sagacity and awareness towards the constructed evils and committed crimes.

Their contribution is pivotal to the Indian drama as their plays are highly socially reformative. The issues that have been highlighted are: violence against women, rape, injustice and inequality within family, physical abuse, child abuse, family secret, baffling and intricate relationships, incest, restrictions to cultural and

religious liberty, victims of superstition, class and caste and engulfing poverty. Every sentence that is printed on the script or spoken on the stage as performance is stained with resistance against the oppressors. The ferocity of violence, the enormity of physical abuse, restricted cultural, political and religious liberty and the plight of women overshadow the celebration of womanhood. Empowered by feminist philosophy and ideology, and influenced by Bertolt Brecht's notion of bringing about social change, these plays and performances lead not to feel but to think and change which could be combined and recognized as theatre of revolution.

Further, this theatre of revolution is empowered by the African American women playwrights who speak of more or less the same sad biting realities as Indian women playwrights. Their history has been illustrated through Harlem Renaissance and the four stages of Renaissance according to Henry Louis Gates Jr. Their sufferings based on colour, slavery and power relation mar their growth in the multicultural white dominated society. Manipulation and maltreatment of women is a universal phenomenon. Their protest against any form of manipulation came to the light with the upsurge of the Harlem Renaissance. *Wines in the Wilderness*, edited by Elizabeth Brown Guillory, and *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African American Women* edited by Sydne Mahone are the anthologies that illustrate the issues related to the African American women's social condition. Their plays have a strong message of truth and reality, of historical past, depicting the social life and sufferings of black folks. Race pride, family loyalty, lynching, church politics, poverty, miscegenation, injustice, rights to equality, black consciousness and assertiveness, self-respect, women's struggle and women's rights are some of the major themes that have been partially or totally dealt with. Hence, African American playwrights have written serious drama, characterized most frequently by racial and

social protest. They have spoken out against the enormous disparity between the poor and the rich, black and white and women and men.

The following chapters analyze the plays selected for the study. There is one to one comparison of these women playwrights. Based on the themes of the select plays, they have been analyzed and categorized in different chapters. Their plays share a lot of similarities and dissimilarities midst cultural, political, social and religious differences, which have been discussed especially in the second, the third and the fourth chapter. African American women playwrights and Indian women playwrights share a number of similarities in the conglomeration of themes structures and semiotics of their plays. Their plays mainly deal with violence especially against helpless and marginalized women. The violence can further be classified into many forms as physical, psychological, domestic and emotional. Be it *Brides Are not For Burning* by Dina Mehta or *Wedding Band* by Alice Childress, *Rudali*, *Bayen*, and *Mother of 1084* by Mahasweta Devi or *Les Blancs*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *What use are Flowers For*, and *The Drinking Gourd* by Lorraine Hansberry, *Lights Out* and *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan or *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Safe*, *Blue Blood*, and *Blue Eyed Black Boy* by Georgia Douglas Johnson, these women playwrights do not hesitate to present the atrocity and the violence against women in their respective communities or societies. The violence mars their hope for justice and equality. The treatment they receive often is scurrilous and insolent which exacerbate everyday difficulties. They seek space solace to socialize in an otherwise hostile world. Violence in any form is insufferable and degrades women yet it has intensified their desire to liberalize themselves for an equally respected and dignified life on par with men.

The next similarity observed is sexual exploitation and harassment. The playwrights have not shied away to expose the hypocrisy of male dominated world. They seek justice and protection under men's shadow, ironically they get sexually exploited. Rape, one of the most heinous act existing for centuries, still haunt women in their plays indicating women still face a lot of exploitation in many forms. The African American women have been perhaps the worst victims of sexual exploitation, as women were forced to be not only slaves but also child bearing machines. bell hooks remarks, "The area that most clearly reveals the differentiation between the status of male slaves and female slaves is the work area. The black male slave was primarily exploited as a labourer in the fields, the black female was exploited as a labourer in the fields, a worker in the domestic households, a breeder and an object of white male sexual assault" (22). They were slaves in plantations and bred the children of their masters. Raped by their owners they had to bear children in order to increase the labour force in the plantations. Many African American women playwrights have portrayed sexual exploitation of women by the whites and the blacks alike. Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanbhan, and Dina Mehta have also strongly protested against eh sexual exploitation. *Getting Away With Murder*, *Mangalam*, *Lights Out* and *Harvest* are a few plays that deal with physical oppression of women not only outside the family but also within the family.

The next similarity can be traced as oppression within the race and community. The women playwrights have been aware that the women are vulnerable even in the familial relationships. The exploitation and oppression also take place by their own people in the community in Indian scenario as the plays of Mahasweta Devi reveal or many African American women playwrights depict that even black men have tortured the black women physically.

The concept of motherhood also finds place in their plays which is highlighted vibrantly by these women playwrights. Motherhood is a universal truth be it at any corner of the world. Mothers always provide protection for their children. The treatment of motherhood and maternal love are found in the plays of Lorraine Hansberry, Mahasweta Devi, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. They portray the maternal feelings and intense love of a mother. The sacrifice, intense care, love and affection that the mothers display towards their children make the plays more realistic, serious in tone and pungent in their portrayal. *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blends*, *Mother of 1084*, *Bayen*, *Safe*, and *Florence* highlight how mothers protect their children in every circumstances of life. Shockingly, in *Safe*, Liza kills her new born baby in order to protect him from future lynching in the public. Many African American women took unexpected and unnatural way only to protect their children from either the fear of being sold or being killed when they are young. Toni Morison portrays mother killing her children in her award winning *Beloved* in order to save them from being sold or lynched and relives the past.

Illiteracy is seen as one of the reasons for the increase exploitation of women by the select women playwrights, though they have not directly portray except Mahasweta Devi in *Aajir* yet the historical sociological views on illiteracy cannot be denied. Many African American women playwrights have taken writing plays and staging them with a purpose that they could reach the uneducated African American women and men and create awareness of the oppression of white society. The aim was also to educate them to live with dignity and pride and celebrate that black is beautiful.

The exploitation and violence affect the very life of women badly still women have borne every burnt and have never given up hope for the change and better

tomorrow. The disturbed psyche but determined spirit is the next similarity that is found in the plays of African American women and Indian women. Respecting women is respecting entire humanity because women bring up every other being. Paradoxically, violence on women grows day by day. *Wine in the Wilderness*, *Bayen, for the colored girls who have considered suicide suicide/when rainbow is enuf*, *Florence, Mother of 1084* and *Harvest* are a number of plays that portray women as shattered but ever determined to strive for equality, justice, and freedom of choice. They have been weak and vulnerable in certain unavoidable consequences but have never-say-die spirit. It is their perseverance; patience and determination transform them into stronger and self-determined being.

One of the most prominent similarities found in the African American and Indian women playwrights is breaking the stereotypes of the construction of women in literature as well as in the society. Men playwrights as well as poets, novelists and several literary critics have portrayed them to the extremes. Women playwrights have depicted women characters as they are without being bias. It is also found that their plays have powerful and balanced characterization of women which is another noteworthy similarity. The women characters are not of aristocratic caliber nor are they of high profile. The women characters are common people living and ordinary life. Everyday struggle of life make transform them into a stronger and more determined towards the adversities and challenges. They never fall unlike the heroes and heroines of Greek or Shakespearean tragedies. Their portrayal is not of tragic women but of dynamic heroines. These dynamic heroines have succeeded creating space at the centre of the stage. This is one of the biggest changes that has occurred in the history of the world drama. Women representing women have come through placing them at the centre and made them seen and heard. In other words, women

playwrights have made their presence felt on the stage and created space and the visibility of women who almost remained invisible on the stage for centuries. The voice and visibility of women accomplished the purpose of the African American women and the Indian women playwrights.

‘The purpose of change, change in every form of life’ is the most common feature of the select playwrights. A change in the attitude of men towards women, a change in the society to abolish racial and gender discrimination, a change to provide equal opportunity and access to women and treat them equal to men. A change that is required to restore peace and harmony in the family and society, a change that is required to respect every individual especially downtrodden and poor, a change to provide the space for women for their growth and development, a change that contribution, collaboration, and active participation of women will build a health society, a change that women be leaders in social and political set up. They appeal for a change as social renaissance.

Apart from the similarities the select playwrights and their plays also have long dissimilarities. As mentioned earlier, these women playwrights are distinct and different from one another from cultural, social, political, economic and religious point of views. Contrasts are quite natural unavoidable to appear in their literary works on many aspects. The plays of African American women are imbued with cultural consciousness while the Indian women influenced by the caste consciousness, former deals with the racial discrimination while the latter deals with gender discrimination. Though partial gender discrimination is also found in the African American plays, yet they are highly subjected to racial discrimination based on the colour of their skins and history of slavery.

Miscegenation is depicted as continuous process in the African American plays as many women were forced to sexual exploitation by the white men while the lusty white women were sexually attracted towards the black men for their virility and vigour which the white women found better than the white men. On the other hand the Indian plays mostly deal with incest, sexual exploitation within the blood relationship. The African American women enjoy traditional and cultural flexibility while the Indian women face restrictions and live under rigid traditional norms in and outside family. Therefore the African Americans appear to be more liberal in their approach while the Indians remain conservative.

For the Indian women playwrights the availability of the great epics like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Vedas* and classical Sanskrit playwrights like Kalidasa and Bhasa and his thirteen plays, one of the best sources of drama *Natyashastra* by Sage Bharatmuni, many regional classical dances like *bharatnatyam*, *kathakkali*, *bhangda*, and *garba* etc place them above the African American playwrights they can draw influences from the Indian cultural heritage. Contrary, the African American women playwrights do not enjoy the rich heritage like Indians as they almost gave up because of slave trade from their African cultural heritage remained aloof to them as white masters did not allow them to practice. Even after emancipation the African heritage especially Jazz, is filled with their creative writings. This has also become part of American culture. They sing Jazz and Blues merrily. The African Americans are eager to fulfill their American dream of prosperity while the Indian plays portray the dream to liberate the self. The African American women playwrights have attempted to save and revive the black manhood while the Indian women playwrights have shown revenge against men. The difference is also seen from feminism point of view

as black feminism and Indian feminism, though both feminisms are influenced by the western feminism.

Different cultures of African Americans and Indians determine their creative literary works as well. Indian society as a whole is multicultural and multilingual. India is a country practicing many religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Christianity. Therefore, there is more religious tolerance. As India comprises of twenty eight states and seven union territories, each state has its own culture and traditional values and different language and dialects. Therefore, it is highly difficult to learn every culture. Dance, music, dresses, festivals, religious rituals, even food habits differ from state to state which influence the social, cultural, religious, and lingual differences within India itself

The African American culture is also unique in its own way but mostly is influenced by the American way of life and has influenced its own African culture to the Americans partially. It refers to the cultural contributions of blacks/African Americans who are American citizen but are of African origin to the mainstream American culture. The culture of blacks or African Americans finds its roots in the historical past right from the beginning of slavery era to their emancipation. This involves the amalgam of many events as slavery or slave trade that began in 1619, the oral traditions that slaves brought with them to the New Land, their music especially Jazz, the emergence of Harlem Renaissance, and Black Arts Movement of 1960s. The rich cultural and traditional heritage of the African Americans flourish rapidly mainly in music, art, literature and religion after their emancipation. The African American culture is refined through these events and retains a distinct identity which has also been mixed with American culture

In the second chapter characters like Tshambe, Madame Neilson, and woman dancer in *Les Blancs*, Sanichari in *Rudali*, Sujata Chatterjee in *Mother of 1084*, Julia in *Wedding Band*, Malini in *Brides are not for Burning* and Liza Pettigrew in *Safe*, have been powerfully portrayed who react and act out on their own free wills. The Indian as well as African American women's existence and survival based on the sex and physical appearance, the adversaries and the hardships that women and men of both nation's marginalized community have to face is an issue that disturbs and frightens an individual's very psyche. The chapter further has analyzed women's relationship within a family circle and outside the family, and how their relationship either succeeds to have good impact on others or how it brings about more prejudices and wrong notions against them.

The third chapter has highlighted the violence against female body and women characters' growing resistance against such exploitation on the stage, and their confidence and courage to tackle the power struggle they experience or that is portrayed in the plays, reach heights of exploitation resulting in strong protest and resistance through women characters' visible bodies. Mistress and Paatan in *Aajir*, Tomorrow Marie in *Wine in the Wilderness*, Jaya, Ma and Jitu in *Harvest*, the lady in brown, the lady in yellow, the lady in red, the lady in blue, the lady in orange, and the lady in purple in *for the colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, Mrs. Hrimaan and Laavanya in *Inner Laws*, and Hannibal and his mother in *The Drinking Gourd* are the characters who stand against the prevailing systems and show their strong determination. The chapter portrays the African American and Indian women's constant struggle in terms of race, class (power) and gender. Their persistent endeavours to attain respectability and identity in a class ridden, caste

ridden and race ridden society are attributes and assertion of selfhood and a protest against such practices.

The fourth chapter has evolved around the strong will power and courage of women characters. It has dealt with women's journey as symbol of protest and resistance in the form of symbolic representation of women characters. Their journey as actors, performers, central characters, and tortured self comes to a full circle. Iris, Gloria, Chandidasi, Florence, Thangam, Leela, Sonali, Malu, Thelma and Naina are strong characters with determination. The study of these women's plays grows from violence to resistance to *determinance* and dominance. In other words women's protest on the stage becomes a social appeal to the audience/readers. Their search for identify and self-determination gets fulfilled.

Each playwright claims her space on the stage, who plays a dramatic role in the evolution of art form (drama/theatre), using it as a tool for the transformation of human consciousness. It is common thought for all the playwrights that the complete experience of their works lies in the magical space of the theatre where the actor, the light, the sound, the audience and the language awaken the senses. The comparative study of the Indian and African American women playwrights in the second, third and the fourth chapter of the thesis establishes a fact that women belonging to different cultures and national identity suffer a common mode of violence and oppression. Race, class, caste creed and gender are hopelessly intertwined in the cultures of both the countries and the select plays of these women playwrights have reflected the intertwined issues. Margaret B Wilkerson rightly observes that "black women are a prism through which the searing rays of race, class and sex are first focused and then refracted. The creative among us transform these rays into a spectrum of brilliant colors, a rainbow which illuminates the experiences of all humankind" (xiii). Jasbir

Jain a notable feminist critic says that “the play in English has also learnt to live at the level of the page. It is only now that it has found the breathing space in a metropolitan centres” (26). Therefore, women breathe freely while adopting theatre as a mode of communication. Either it is Bharati Sarabhai, Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta, Dina Mehta and Mahasweta Devi or Angelina Weld Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress and Ntozake Shange, they have sharply commented on the issue of cultural and sexual politics and have determined themselves through the powerful characterization of women. The basis for the main three chapters is the common understanding of the various forms of oppression, violence based on gender, race, class, caste and creed, these issues have been elaborately compared, commented and highlighted. Their self-determination amidst cultural and sexual politics gets established in a circle as they face violence, raise strong resistance and establish self-identity and self-determination. The thesis opens a wide range of cross-cultural studies for further research in terms of feminist theatre, various theatrical devices and techniques, and comparison of women’s drama to that of men’s drama of their respective national literatures.