

Anuradha Marwah

Raging in Delhi and Rajasthan: Post-show Audience Discussions of *Medea*

From April to November 2019, eight members of the pandies' theatre, a Delhi-based activist theatre group, toured Delhi and Rajasthan with a fifty-five-minute version of Euripides' *Medea*, in Hindustani. The group gave fifteen performances in the round, in spaces ranging from a tin shed to a plush air-conditioned conference room, addressing diverse audiences. During post-performance discussions in four spaces – Ambedkar University of Delhi, the village of Mangliawas in Rajasthan, the India Habitat Centre, and Studio Safdar in New Delhi – spontaneous debates arose between women on the one side and men on the other in which the women expressed their understanding of *Medea*'s actions or their 'identification' with her character. Anuradha Marwah, the director of the play, discusses these debates with reference to the 'agonistic' character of *Medea* (431 BCE) while framing the tour as a feminist activist endeavour in India today, where the condition of abandoned women and those considered to be outsiders has become even more precarious due to increasing divisiveness and chauvinism. Anuradha Marwah is a theatre activist and a Professor in the Department of English at Zakir Husain Delhi College, Delhi University. She was a Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Fellow at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Study of Global Change, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in 2017. Her publications include two plays, *A Pipe Dream in Delhi* and *Ismat's Love Stories*, three novels, and several academic and popular articles.

Key terms: pandies' theatre, India, feminism, activism, performance-in-the-round, audience response.

THE DELHI-BASED activist group that I work with, the pandies' theatre, identifies itself as feminist.¹ Sanjay Kumar, the founder of the pandies, introduced the group in the following way:

The pandies' theatre is from the margins, a theatre of children, women, slum-dwellers, the homeless, and of vulnerable sections and subsections within those margins. We are feminist and proud of being so. We feel that patriarchal modes have failed and if we want to inhabit a better world it has to be more woman-oriented, more woman-friendly, more feminist.²

In the same article, he traces the history of the group from 1993 to 2004, describing its evolution from a university group that performed plays by Genet, Brecht, Strindberg, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, to an avowedly activist group that responded to contemporary issues by several means: creating original protest plays, carrying out direct interventionist programmes, and advocating human rights, gender equality, and communal amity

through community workshops.³ There are more than a hundred students, academics, and professionals who joined the pandies' theatre at various times and return periodically to participate in its activities. At any time, however, there is a stable core of about fifteen members, making our purely voluntary work possible. I joined the group in 2001, scripting plays in English for stage performances and conducting workshop theatre in Hindi and Hindustani in Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, and especially in Rajasthan, where I run a community NGO.⁴

However, feminist activism was not the primary concern when, in 2018, I started work on a Hindustani version of Euripides' *Medea*. Nor did I conceive it as a stage play or a community initiative. I designed it as a performance-in-the-round by trained pandies' actors for both middle-class theatregoers and our community partners. During a short period in the University of Minnesota in 2017, I had the opportunity to watch Euripides' *Electra* at a recovery centre. Ten Thousand

Things, a Minneapolis-based professional company that performs in non-traditional venues and has been taking quality theatre to non-theatregoers for almost thirty years, had staged it.⁵ I participated in a national workshop that this company had organized in Minneapolis for American companies that use their model of theatre, and I subsequently invited two of their members to Delhi to conduct workshops with our pandies' theatre creative team.

Inspired, I too planned to take world classics where they have never been before – to the *bastis* (urban villages) of Delhi and rural spaces in Rajasthan. Our primary objective with Project Samtal ('on level ground'), of which *Medea* was the first offering, may be described as an attempt to make profound themes and aesthetic values associated with elite theatres in India accessible to everyone, especially to those in underserved spaces.⁶ We were aware that we had a lot to learn from our audiences in order to be able to do this effectively. *Medea* was thus an experimental foray into democratizing theatre culture. However, on looking back at our effort and reviewing the audience responses in the fifteen disparate spaces where it was performed, I can describe it as a feminist activist endeavour in which the audiences proactively defined and realized the proto-feminist elements in the Ancient Greek play. In this narrative account, I discuss my adaptation of Euripides' text. Further, I identify four spaces in which the post-performance discussions reflected the contest between the dominant patriarchal point of view and woman-centred perception, relating these discussions to the real-life issues of abandonment and violence that have become more charged for women in present-day India.

Adapting Euripides' *Medea*

I intuitively aimed for a fast-paced and emotive script for the diverse audiences I had in mind. I shortened speeches, rewrote some of them as crisp dialogue, and cut out extraneous references to Greek mythology, and the Aegeus scene completely. *Medea's* meeting with Aegeus is the only large section in the original play that can be dispensed with while

keeping the rest of the storyline intact. I soon became aware of the advantages of these initial edits. With Aegeus's promise of offering refuge removed, *Medea's* situation became truly vulnerable. Our *Medea* had literally nowhere to go after Creon had banished her.

Becoming homeless, suddenly and unexpectedly, with destitution staring one in the face, is something that many Indians, especially women, intimately know. Single, divorced, widowed, and abandoned women in India have been identified as a significantly vulnerable group, facing social exclusion and economic hardship. According to the 2011 census, the number of such women was then 71.4 million. Increasing sectarianism in the country has, however, shifted the focus from gender inequality as regards access to that of the control of economic resources, and religious differences. Critiquing the present right-wing Hindutva government's selective focus on the plight of Muslim women and divisive amendments to the Muslim personal law, Abusaleh Shariff and Syed Khalid describe, on the basis of a statistical survey, the general condition of abandoned women, emphasizing that gender prejudice cuts across class and community:⁷

The life of every woman unilaterally separated from her spouse is pathetic, irrespective of whether she is the wife of Raja Bhoj or Gangu Teli. They face challenges and constraints both in their marital and natal families. The marital home does not support them as their son has abandoned her [*sic*] and the natal home ignores her as she is traditionally considered *paraya dhan* – belonging to someone else.⁸

Drawing also from my own experience of a bitter legal and social battle for divorce and maintenance, I worked at pushing further this correspondence of circumstances between audiences and the play. I added the line 'I am a mother' several times to *Medea's* speeches. It came effortlessly with the cadences of Hindustani due to the frequent use of this kind of assertion by women in such situations when they are trying to enlist sympathy and support. Traditionally, mothers are supposed to be revered in India. But, too often, women bereft of husbands or other male support find themselves running from pillar to

post for small benefits and concessions for their children.

I also use the term 'refugee' twice in the play to indicate Medea's status, retaining the English word in the Hindustani script since it is widely used in the country. With the National Register of Citizens (NRC) being updated in Assam and the impending amendments to the citizenship act (CAA), citizenship was being discussed in all public spaces.⁹ It was widely feared that the Hindutva government was targeting minorities – especially Muslims – by bringing in the variable of religion to redefine citizenship. I was fairly confident that, wherever we were to perform, Indian audiences would understand the word 'refugee' as loaded with national chauvinism. Medea's situation as the outsider of Corinthian society was a ready-made peg for the 'connect' I was seeking.

Connections like this one with lived life were important not only because they communicated the texture of Medea's situation, but also because so much of the play was unfamiliar to our audiences. It is set in mythic time and in a place that would sound 'far, far away'. The characters have strange, exotic-sounding names. We had heightened the fairy-tale effect with innovative costumes, whimsical sets (a pink flowering tree) and life-size puppets for Medea's two sons (Figure 1). The play started with a masked dance depicting heartbreak. All this was intended to transport audiences to a magical space and to delight and entertain them. But, in order to tell a convincing story, we also needed to relate it to the here and now.

Having attempted to blend the 'real' with the magic of theatre, I was unsure whether there should be a discussion after the performance, as we usually have after all the pandies' plays. I felt that the horror and pity that we were working so hard to generate should not be dissipated by conversations. But the audiences of our first two urban-village shows stayed on to speak with the cast and crew. Intrigued by the intimate responses we were getting, we made the post-performance discussion part of our programme in subsequent shows.

We did fifteen fifty-five-minute performances-in-the-round of *Medea* in Hindustani in



Figure 1. *Medea*. Photo: Robin Singh. Courtesy of Anuradha Marwah.

very disparate settings, ranging from a tin shed in a Rajasthan village to a plush air-conditioned hall in the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi. Our audiences included school-going adolescents, undergraduate and research students, first-generation literates, migrant labour, rural and urban-village communities, academics, MNC executives, and theatre aficionados. By way of a corollary to their deeply insightful comments about the play, audiences brought in contemporary concerns that ranged from responsibility for childcare to Hindutva politics into post-performance discussions. Debates ensued about both *Medea* and present-day issues. In at least four places out of fifteen, these debates seemed to reflect the 'agon' in a text that has been widely discussed in literary criticism.

The 'Agon' in *Medea*

The 'agon' in Ancient Greek drama may be defined as a verbal contest or debate between

two characters that glosses the central conflict of the play but is formally set off from the rest of the drama. C. Collard, in his essay 'Formal Debates in Euripides' Drama', describes the 'prime character' of Greek tragedy as 'agonistic' and marks the debate as an essential part of its dramatic form.¹⁰ 'Exposition, development, climax, resolution, action and reaction – all movement occurs in the narrow room of at most three stage persons at any one time debating to confirm or change their attitudes or intentions.'¹¹

Medea and Jason have extended debates with each other in the play. Michael Lloyd notes that both participants are 'well versed in rhetorical technique'.¹² However, the first debate in which Jason tries to present a rational argument for his marriage with Glauce only goes to establish that his is 'the weaker case'.¹³ Where Medea's speech comes to 'an impassioned climax',¹⁴ his response exhorting Medea to eschew passion in favour of reason only sounds 'shallow and insincere'.¹⁵

It can be argued that a reversal of sympathy takes place later in the play. Collard describes the final debate between them as follows:

Medea, her cruel vengeance taken, escaping . . . in her magic chariot, calls down in triumph to the helpless and embittered Jason (*Med.* 1317 ff.). She rejects his accusation of the children's murder, defiantly refusing him their burial. There are short rheseis, of unequal length, and fierce stichomythia (1323–88), then a final curiously dissonant exchange, in anapaests, half-abusive, half-pathetic; familiar idioms of lamenting parents help the play to its end on a note of tragedy (1389–1414).¹⁶

Rheseis and stichomythia are linguistic elements in rhetoric that identify the scene as a formal debate. Collard observes that the last debate 'reverses the sympathies the play's whole course has fostered',¹⁷ making one wonder 'How could Jason merit such vengeance?'¹⁸

Aristide Tessitore also notes this reversal in his essay on the political dimensions of *Medea*. He warns: 'The tendency to simplify Medea by rendering her more consistently as a heroine or villain, although intelligible, betrays Euripides' play.'¹⁹ He notes that in the first half of the play, Medea is portrayed in the tradition of the greatest heroes:

Not only does Euripides present Medea as a new champion for Greek women, he also depicts her as belonging to a select group constituted by the greatest Greek heroes. She has suffered unjustified dishonour and will inflict a bloody retribution upon her enemies. Euripides fashions Medea with the boldness, determination, and passionate intensity characteristic of the hero.²⁰

However, Medea is not a sympathetic character. Tessitore describes the systematic stripping away of heroic glory from Medea in the latter half of the play and the revelation of her 'terrible brutality'.²¹ By this reversal, Euripides suggests 'the irreducibly ambiguous character of spiritedness, the warrior virtue par excellence'.²² On the eve of the Peloponnesian war, Euripides, the 'wisest of poets', meant to sound a note of caution to the Athenians.²³

The responses that we received for *Medea* in 2019 were understandably different from the kind Collard, Lloyd, or Tessitore indicate in their discussion of Euripides' text. Yet they are not at odds with these writers' assessments of the play. For our audiences, the reversal, due to spiritedness, foregrounded Medea not so much as a hero-turned-demon as a courageous woman who faces redoubled oppression and resists in the only way she has learned to resist in the patriarchal world. I would also say that the rhetorical question by Collard quoted above – 'How could Jason merit such vengeance?' – transmuted, in contemporary India, into the combative 'Why was Medea driven to wreak such vengeance?'

We had made no attempt in our performance to reduce the terrible nature of Medea's actions or to underplay the extent of Jason's hurt and grief. Nor had Hindustani adaptation dislodged the dramatis personae from their original Ancient Greek spaces and mythical time. Even so, the 'agon' in four post-performance discussions was won by present-day Medeas who critiqued the Jasons and Creons of our time.

The Audience in Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD): 25 September 2019

We had just finished performing *Medea* in one of the large and rather run-down seminar halls of the university. There were about a

hundred people in the audience and, as we wrote in the programme, it was now time for the post-performance discussion. The seven actors took their bows to the gratifying sound of continuing applause and then Priya, who had started the play with a masked dance and subsequently acted as one of the three members of the chorus of Corinthian citizens, called me into the centre of the circle to initiate the discussion.²⁴

I was very excited by the apparent enthusiasm of the audience and eager to see how interaction would take shape in this space. This was our sixth show. The first two shows had been in the urban villages of Delhi and the following two in Studio 81, which is in an upscale residential colony. Our fifth show was hosted by the English Department of a women's college where the audience was mainly made up of undergraduate students. This was a public university, more socially diverse than a college, and more consciously 'intellectual' than any space we had performed in up until then. There was a big contingent from MA Psychology in the audience doing a course on motherhood, graduate students and teaching staff from various departments, including History and Women's Studies, and some guests from outside the university. I spoke about our Samtal programme and our stated objective. I also referred to our forthcoming tour in Rajasthan.

Responses started hesitantly, as they sometimes do in a post-performance discussion. The first speakers complimented us on our initiative and the work of our actors. But, very soon, a spectator cut to the heart of the matter, asking about the 'experience of rage'. It was a general question to the group. Explaining what he meant further, he observed that 'there were extraordinary circumstances in *Medea*' and that, where the acting was concerned, a lot was happening with *Medea* 'beyond the verbal level'. His question, he said, had to do with the 'everyday experience of rage'. Lead actor Janees answered, saying that her interpretation of *Medea* was of a woman betrayed; she was also a woman who was angry against the norms of patriarchal society where the unacceptable behaviour of privileged men

towards 'women' and 'outsiders' had been normalized.

The next question explicitly brought the issue of a woman's rage to the present time. A male student asked: 'Do you think *Medea* is possible today? Would she have done the same thing now?' I started my response by mentioning some reviews of performances in Europe and the USA that had held opposing points of view about *Medea*'s relevance to the present. I pointed out that we had not performed *Medea* as a museum piece. The costumes, the minimal sets, and stage props were not period details but innovative ones, and, in that sense, they were timeless. I added that in all our preceding shows audiences had referenced contemporary situations.

An academic intervened next. He commended the group for 'a mesmerizing one hour' and then expressed two concerns regarding the message and the impact of the play. I had cited justice as one of the predominant themes, and he was concerned that, 'in today's time, seeking justice through violence could be problematic'. His second concern was that the play could be seen to reinforce 'misogyny' – 'not patriarchy', he later stressed in the discussion, 'but pre-existing notions about women being irrational and hysterical'. These observations reminded me of a classicist's view, as quoted by Helen Foley in her article about twentieth-century performances of *Medea*:

Nancy Rabinowitz's *Anxiety Veiled*, for example, argues that the play's problematic agenda deliberately includes convincing its male audience that women who step out of line are threatening to male children, and that female subjectivity or encroachment on masculine territory is dangerous. She finds all attempts to appropriate *Medea* from a modern feminist perspective to be problematic.²⁵

However, before I could speak about our decision to retain the multivocality of the original script and our offering of a clash of world-views through the equally powerful characters of *Medea* and Jason, a hand urgently waved at us. This was a young woman who teaches in the Department of Women's Studies, and she challenged the perspectives on *Medea*'s rage of the male speakers quoted

above, pointing out that such rage was both relevant and salutary for our time:

I am curious as to what made you think that misogyny would be reinforced. Or, for that matter, your question [*gesturing to the second questioner*] whether there are Medeas in the present time. I was telling him [*indicating her male companion*] that of course there are Medeas today, capable of this kind of action. . . . [*laughs*] My identification was so strongly with Medea. You did a tremendous job [*to the actor who played Medea*]. Both of you [*to the actor who played Jason*]. One hated one and loved the other . . . so I am curious [about these questions] . . . about what the men in the room are thinking. Are they defensive, are they afraid? I am not saying killing is justified, especially [killing] children . . . and [to me] I appreciate what you said about [a] cycle of violence that needs to be broken. The play is about the understanding of emotions that women are going through. I was thinking that people would be mad at men. I was full of rage . . . Then I hear the men in the room asking these [questions].

It seemed that she had swung the vote in Medea's favour. The discussion in AUD continued for more than an hour. Several students spoke about the social sanctions against mothers articulating any negative emotions they might feel towards her children; they also referred to the trope of consecrated motherhood as a trope of right-wing nationalism in India. There were many questions about the two community shows we had already performed, and curiosity about the kind of audience response we were expecting from our shows in Rajasthan. I found the observations by an audience member, who introduced himself as a Dalit scholar working on Dalit politics, particularly significant in the context of what had been debated earlier. He expressed dissatisfaction with the ending of our play: the Chorus here appeared to him needlessly 'pacifist'. He observed that, when the Dalits revolt against centuries of oppression, they are told to eschew violence, and, he complained, this is ultimately what happens in this play. His detailed critique included Gandhi, whom he saw as a bourgeois pacifist.

The discussion had ranged from attributing a risky radical agenda to the play, to impatience with our Gandhian pacifism. Besides, a

significant debate had taken place among the spectators on social and intellectual responsibility. I wondered what the responses would be like in decidedly more conservative and tradition-bound Rajasthan.

The 'Agon' in Mangliawas: 1 October 2019

Most troupe members were seeing a Rajasthan village for the first time. We had boarded our light commercial vehicle that seats twelve passengers just half an hour before at the hotel in the city of Ajmer, where we had been staying for three days. We had already done four shows in Rajasthan: the first in a *dharamshala* (shelter-house) in semi-rural Arain,²⁶ and the second, third, and fourth in Ajmer. These had been in the elite St Mary's Convent, where I had studied almost forty years ago; Government Girls' College, where my mother used to teach; and Khwaja Model School, a co-educational institution run by the Dargah committee to providing modern education to its mainly Muslim students. Mangliawas was the most remote of our designated places – a small village by comparison with Arain, whose row of middle-class houses on a tarred road could qualify it as a *kasba* (small town). To get to Mangliawas, we drove down a dust track off the highway, and the landscape had transformed into *kachcha* (clay and straw) housing, small farms, and livestock.²⁷ The actors were fascinated, and asked our coordinator in Rajasthan, who was accompanying us, many questions about the anticipated audience.

We were in Mangliawas on the invitation of an NGO, which held ongoing education and development residential camps for fifty adolescent schoolgirls, aged between seventeen and nineteen, from several nearby villages for a four-month period. They had invited us to perform for the girls and their instructors as well as community members from Mangliawas. The longstanding relationship between the Ajmer Adult Education Association (AAEA), established by my mother in 1970, and the NGO had made possible this performance, together with the one in Arain. Responses in Arain and the educational institutions in Ajmer had been deeply insightful

and enthusiastic, but I was a little apprehensive about our show in the village. Having worked in nearby areas, I was aware of its deep-seated traditionalism, evident in early marriages, a preference for male children, and increasing incidences of female foeticide. How would the rural community respond to the story of a mother who kills her sons?

A group of girl students welcomed us with garlands and the auspicious *tilak* (the mark on the forehead) from a stainless steel platter with an earthen lamp. This is a practice that has persisted stubbornly in many areas of Rajasthan in spite of efforts by progressive NGOs to secularize the traditional Hindu custom. Prince Salim, a charismatic non-Hindu leader and long-time associate of AAEA, was running the camp, but it was obvious that he had given up trying to bring about this reform.

'The ground is rocky,' declared Nirbhay, who played the Tutor and the Messenger in our show, after testing the performance space. 'It will hurt the soles of our feet.' (The cast performs barefoot.) The six other cast members followed suit to test the ground, jumping up and down, dancing, and stretching out in a circle. Indeed, there *was* gravel beneath the thin green carpets that had been spread out on the mud floor in the tin shed. I too took off my sandals and tried walking, but quickly put them on again. 'You can wear socks during the performance,' I said, but the actors scoffed at the suggestion. A couple of them went on to tease Nirbhay for being a 'softy' – which he gamely admitted. The actors assured me that the gravel couldn't hurt their hard-rehearsed feet. 'Anyway, you've made us run around and dance for months,' quipped Zeeshan, who plays Jason (Figure 2).

Besides, as someone pointed out, everyone in Mangliawas was walking around barefoot. The group of girls who had welcomed us was accompanying the cast everywhere. They periodically handed out rounds of tea and a veritable feast of *mathris* (a kind of flaky biscuit). A lively conversation was going on, and a fair amount of banter. Another group of girls and their instructors were preparing the changing rooms and bathrooms for us in the adjoining residential quarters. 'Do the boys



Figure 2. Zeeshan as Jason. *Medea*. Photo: Robin Singh. Courtesy of Anuradha Marwah. The audiences visible in this and following images are those of the first performance of the production, which was held at Shaktishalini Kushalta Vikas Kendra (Skills Development Centre) located in Nehru Basti, New Delhi.

want a mirror too?' was a giggling query that I overheard. There was an atmosphere of excitement and togetherness. The cast had intuitively dismissed the potentially divisive armour I had unthinkingly offered their city-pampered feet.

The audience came in full strength within half an hour of the announced time, which was, in any case, the 'real' beginning time that we had decided on. From where I sat, I could see the gate on the compound wall of the Jain shelter-house where the programme was being held. There were a couple of cows looking in curiously at the gathering. The NGO workers were turning away latecomers. But in our space, glowing green and earthen in the setting sun, there was a hush of expectancy. I had never felt the magic of performance more keenly. Was it my imagination or were the

actors really going out closer to the audience, so as to convey every nuance of emotion, more than they had ever done before during our preceding ten performances? And was everyone who was sitting around them on the green carpets and the few chairs available really leaning forward to catch every word and gesture?

Indeed, it seemed that there had been an hour of intense communication because, the minute the discussion was announced, one of the girls, who had been especially active with tea and refreshments, started to speak as if to decode for everyone's benefit what had passed between her and the actors. She played back the story to us, pointing at every character. She referred to female characters as *Didi* (big sister) and male characters as *Bhaiya* (big brother). She concluded her summary with an observation: '*Bhaiya* [Jason] thinks he has done the right thing, but I don't agree. None of these terrible things would have happened if he hadn't left his children and Medea.' She got a round of applause from the audience. A woman in a yellow sari, an instructor at the camp, as we found out later, nodded her approval to the student, but felt the need to add that it was wrong on Medea's part to kill her children: 'The purpose was vengeance, which is what often happens in real life. But women shouldn't kill their children. Some other way can be explored to teach a lesson to the husband.'

The discussion continued along these lines, with another woman instructor wondering whether other options were available to Medea, and a girl suggesting that she could have tried to reason with Jason and his new wife. Two men, also instructors, remarked on the theme's contemporaneity. Both were of the opinion that men habitually fail to do their duty towards their family, and this play depicted the terrible consequences of typical masculine dereliction. One of them followed his remark with an interesting observation about how some women are branded as *dakan* (witches) in the village. He then asked: 'Is there any truth to Medea putting a curse on the gold crown and the dress that she sends to Creon's daughter? Both Creon and his daughter die of poison, even though they don't

consume anything. Do things like this actually happen and are the audience supposed to believe in them too?' In my answer I stressed the fairy-tale elements of the performance – the whimsical sets, the imaginative costumes, and how the puppets were children. I also added that the purpose of the magic sequence in the play, in which Medea works a spell on the gifts, was to represent the execution of her murderous intention, which she had expressed earlier.

It was at this point that an elderly gentleman, a community member, who seemed to command respect in the area, addressed me: 'Madam, I would like to say one thing. It cannot be all Jason's fault. It is never like this. Medea must have been at some fault.' Actor Sameer, who plays Creon, burst in, 'So you're saying it's fine that men get themselves second wives!' But the elderly gentleman continued more assertively than before: 'No, they don't. Men don't get themselves second wives unless there's a good reason for them to do so. It is difficult socially and financially. This is why I am saying that I am sure that Medea must have been at fault.'

A woman instructor cross-questioned the elderly gentleman: 'How can you say that? How did you come to know that Medea was at fault?' 'When such things happen, it is also the fault of women,' he repeated emphatically. 'No man behaves like this without a reason'. It was then that the instructor in the yellow sari stood up again and asked for permission to speak. Below is a running translation of her brief speech:

You have said something very big – that women are at fault. For that I thank you. Yes, they are at fault and I will tell you why. A woman marries and comes to her husband's home. Soon she bears him one or two babies and she has to give time to them. But Jason loves the body of the woman and sees that his wife is busy with the children. Men like him, from the royal family, are used to imbibing alcohol. Once he has had those drinks, he wants his wife, but she is busy with the children. So he gets himself another woman. Soon he falls in love with her. Now I will speak about the king's 'role-play'. The king sees that he will not be able to get a match like Jason for his daughter. So he marries them off, thinking she will be happy with Jason. Jason is happy too with his new bride. What no one realizes

is that, once the new bride has children, it will be the same story for her as well. Let me tell you, sir, that when a woman doesn't have children, she can devote all her time to her husband. But, when she gets one or two children, she has to divide her attention. This is how husbands start to find fault with their wives.

There had been no reference to alcohol in our play, and for a moment I wondered on whose behalf the instructor was arguing her persuasive case. I am, of course, aware of the prevailing sentiment against alcohol among women in the villages of Rajasthan – and also in other parts of the country. It is at the liquor store that men often 'burn up' the day's wages, coming home to beat up or rape protesting wives, and sometimes children and other women of the household, too. This is the template of cases of domestic violence in village after village only too familiar to NGOs, activists, and law-enforcing agencies like the police.

Women's groups in several villages have lobbied successfully to get the liquor store shifted far away from the village to make procuring alcohol much more difficult for men. So, on a moment's reflection, it was easy for me to understand why, when women mount a counter-attack on men, the irresponsible drunken behaviour that they experience as daily punishment should be emphasized. The elderly gentleman tried to speak again, but was led away by some other men. It seemed to me that such exchanges must have taken place often here between the progressive NGO and the traditional patriarchal voices of the community.

The discussion continued with points coming up about the similarity between prejudice towards certain communities in Mangliawas and the attitude of the Corinthians towards Colchis, Medea's expression of the deep jealousy that a woman 'typically' feels towards another woman, and the significance of Medea's rejection of victimhood. The project director spoke at length towards the end, outlining the importance of a performance like ours for building a case for an egalitarian society. He spoke of the situation of various sections of society that are discriminated against: people who are considered 'lower

caste', minorities, the differently abled, and the LGBTQIA. 'It is when you experience the emotions of one who has been wronged [as an actor or an audience member] that you realize from how and where violence originates,' he observed.

He also invoked the Buddha, Mahavir, and Jesus as messengers of peace and equality. After his concluding remarks, a woman instructor felt the need to emphasize another aspect of the play's impact. What she had liked best was our reworking of the stereotypical fairy tale that we continue to tell our children: there was a king and he had two (or three or four) queens. . . In contrast to this, Medea's refusal, more than two thousand years ago, to accept Jason's second marriage was a powerful and praiseworthy bid for equality. This was her 'learning' that evening, she added.

The actors, surrounded by students and young people who had watched the show, were reluctant to leave Mangliawas. Mobile phones taking photographs were flashing everywhere as night fell; phone numbers were exchanged. 'Early next morning we have to start back for Delhi,' I reminded them, although I felt as they did. There was a collective groan in which I participated mentally.

We discussed the audience's responses on our way back. Everyone agreed that the audience response in Mangliawas had been the most 'dramatic' so far. The consensus was that the instructor in the yellow sari had emerged as the real heroine of the evening. Arham, who had played the Nurse and Chorus in the play, remarked that her speech reminded her of the faculty member from the Women's Studies Department at AUD. It was not only the similarity of their positions as younger and 'spirited' teachers in their respectively very different settings that brought them together, but also the primary importance of felt experience in their frontal attack on men through *Medea*. It may be argued that there were weaknesses in their formulations; and both had located themselves in the normative patterns of patriarchal structures.

By contrast, in Khwaja Model School, where we had performed that very morning, a seventeen-year-old girl student had asked

Janees: 'Medea *Didi*, was Jason *Bhaiya* the only man left in the world? Why didn't you just look for someone else?' It was a provocative question aimed archly at the boys who had been made to sit in separate rows in the hall. It flew in the face of the frowning Management Committee that had not bargained for a post-performance discussion involving students, let alone such outspokenness from a girl. The character of Medea, however, is not only about challenging male arrogance, for she is also a woman heartbroken because of betrayal. In our play, Jason denounces Medea for her horrifying act of murder 'just because' he had married another woman. Medea retorts: 'Do you think love is an inconsequential thing for a woman?'

In the metropolitan University, as in a camp in the village of Mangliawas, Medea, with her obsessive love of Jason, had provided recognition of how many women actually behave in comparable situations of abandonment. Awareness that Medea's

murderous reaction was no remedy for the skewed power dynamics in relationships between men and women did not take away from the searing pathos of her reply, as perceived by two spirited young teachers who, no doubt, were champions of women in the spaces they inhabited (Figure 3).

**At the India Habitat Centre (IHC):
23 November 2019**

In both AUD and Mangliawas, a significant part of the audiences knew each other. In fact, this was the case in ten out of the fifteen performances of *Medea*. The remaining five – two each in Studio 81 and Studio Safdar, and one in the IHC – were general, and the audiences were mostly strangers to each other. I had expected a less intense discussion at the decidedly up-market IHC, where the audiences, in addition to coming from a very different environment from our previous ones, were also part of the city's professional and cultural elite.



Figure 3. Janees as Medea and Zeeshan as Jason. *Medea*. Photo: Robin Singh. Courtesy of Anuradha Marwah.

Surprisingly, not only was there a thirty-five-minute discussion but also a debate. The debate was particularly significant. Although it did not have the same immediacy as those in AUD or Mangliawas, it touched upon something that concerns theatre practitioners the most in the present time: the shrinking space for performing oppositional politics. It started when a man proclaimed the superiority of 'Indian' mythology over the Greek. He had reacted to the first speaker, an English Literature student, who had opened the discussion with a veritable paean to Greek myths. 'Our *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata* are older and much richer,' the man proclaimed. He spoke about the god Indra and the concept of *swarga* (heavenly abode) in the scriptures, and then asserted: 'We are Indians and we need to know about our scriptures.'²⁸

I took this opportunity to speak about Samtal and to outline our reason for not picking up for our first tour the classics that he had mentioned. I explained that we were attempting to address everyone equally and that this would not have been possible had we selected a classic identified with the dominant Hindu community, even though doing so might have made funding the venture much easier! Besides, increasing factionalism and politically motivated divisiveness in the country have made it risky for an activist group like ours to attempt performing any religious Indian text. The answer seemed to satisfy the audience. But the assertion of the superiority of Hindu mythology over the Greek went on to draw at least two more reactions. Both respondents were women and they spoke only after other matters had come up in the discussion. Neither referred to the speaker directly, but the position they were taking was openly in opposition to the chauvinistic notion of the superiority of Hindu texts, mythology, and way of life.

The first woman contrasted the myth of Ganga (from the *Mahabharata*) with Medea. Ganga, who is sent from heaven to earth, marries King Shantanu and subsequently drowns seven of their eight sons. However, the reasons for her killing them are explained in the text, and the myth is, in her words, 'neatly wrapped up': Ganga kills the children

so that they can attain salvation. Both the Medea and Ganga stories are set in patriarchies. Motherhood is a profound experience – a woman's deepest link to life – but also her greatest 'encumbrance', and, she observed, this was felt so strongly in our play. She concluded by wondering why the human element – the struggle of women – is absent from the story of Ganga.

Towards the end of the discussion, the second woman, who had watched the play twice, stood up to speak, taking on the notion of Hindu superiority even more directly. After complimenting the cast and the crew, she said: 'I love your play because it is troubling. I am deeply troubled about what fear can do; what hatred can do. Looking at the present time – this is what all of us are grappling with: fear, hatred, and helplessness.' Janees, the lead actor, asked her a question about hatred, saying that what she had felt as the Medea character was better described as anguish or agony (Figure 4). The woman explained: 'The play is about passion. There are many kinds of passion. Hindutva is also a passion . . . It breeds fear and hatred. You reject a professor of Sanskrit because he is a Muslim. Where are we today?' She was referring to a recent occurrence in Benaras Hindu University, where there had been violent protests against a Muslim professor who taught sacred Sanskrit texts.²⁹ She was speaking with the conviction that the evening's performance of a non-Indian play, discussed intimately by Indian audiences, had advanced the cause of those protesting against such prejudice and exclusion.

Our choice to perform an Ancient Greek play at a time when the country was buzzing with discourses on ancient Indian or rather 'Hindu' superiority in all spheres (including medicine, engineering, and architecture) was thereby received and discussed as an oppositional gesture in the IHC, even though there were no direct references to the state of Indian polity. In a few other spaces – in the Government College for Girls (Rajasthan) and the IP (Indraprastha College for Women) at Delhi University – audiences had likened Medea to the goddess Kali, who denotes female power in Hindu mythology. Being a local and



Figure 4. Janees as Medea. *Medea*. Photo: Robin Singh. Courtesy of Anuradha Marwah.

indigenous icon, the goddess Kali has been used widely by Indian feminists to challenge the hegemony of male Brahminical deities.

Thinking of all this, I was reminded of the discussions that we periodically have in our theatre group on how much should be stated directly in an activist endeavour. The following lines from another Ancient Greek dramatist, Aristophanes, a writer of Attic comedy, started to play in my mind:

As for the audience,
You are mistaken
If you think subtle points
Will not be taken.
Such fears are vain, I vow;
They've all got textbooks now –
However high your brow,
They won't be shaken.³⁰

Like the English Literature student who had been pulled up for not being nationalistic enough, I too felt immensely grateful to the Greeks for their plays and their wisdom.

Concluding at Studio Safdar: 24 November 2019

It was a proud evening for us to be invited to perform in the first community-curated festival of India at Studio Safdar. Studio Safdar can be said to be the diametric opposite of the bourgeois India Habitat Centre in terms of ethos and history. On Facebook, it is introduced as 'a space to experiment fearlessly, a space for edgy, creative, and even dissenting ideas'. Instead of paintings on the walls by well-known artists, as happens in the Habitat Centre, there are pictures of Safdar Hashmi, who was killed by political hoodlums in 1989, while performing a street play in Jhandapur. There are also posters of street plays by the theatre group Jana Natya Manch (Janam). Janam runs Studio Safdar and the May Day Bookshop that stands in Ranjeet Nagar. The residents of Ranjeet Nagar urban village curated the festival in conjunction with doyens associated with Studio Safdar and the Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai.

Sudhanva Deshpande, actor and director of *Janam*, describes the discussion following our play, which we performed at the conclusion of the festival:

Over the two weeks, we found that the participation of locals kept going up, and their involvement in the post-show discussion also became more and more incisive and complex. For example, the last show was a production of the Greek tragedy *Medea*. One spectator spoke about how his father had abandoned his mother when he was still a child, but how his mother brought up the children single-handedly. 'I understand what Medea went through, but I don't agree with what she does.' Another spectator said that she thought the play was not about 'right' and 'wrong', but was trying to say something else. A third spectator appreciated the fact that the play had the audience sitting all around, and that there was no curtain.³¹

The disagreement between the first and second spectator that Deshpande mentions involved a debate between some men, on one side, and a woman, on the other. There were a couple of men who agreed with the first spectator that Medea's actions were 'wrong'; another man added that there were too many issues in our play for it to be amenable to discussion – refugees, polygamy, betrayal, and so on. The woman spectator spoke at length twice and refuted these views. She explained her position by saying that, although Medea's children die at her hands, we still need to ask who the real murderer is. She admired the 'complexity' of the play: 'It is not only about love and betrayal; it is also about how resources get divided in our society and how the woman is left with nothing.' She related Medea's situation to a woman who had been 'trafficked', adding: 'Women are often left asking what, if anything, belongs to them.' One of the men retorted by asking whether or not she considered the killing of children wrong. It is then that she replied that the play was not about 'right' or 'wrong', and nothing in it, or what she was saying about it, was a justification of the murders.

This was at the second post-performance discussion in Studio Safdar. In the first show, a man from Nepal had invoked the *Ramayana*, the Hindu text that has great political currency

these days.³² The ruling party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, the Indian People's Party), arguably came to power on the promise of building a temple dedicated to the god Ram on the site of the medieval Babri Masjid that was demolished on 6 December 1992 by masses intent on recapturing what they believed was the birthplace of Ram. A few days before our performance in Studio Safdar on 9 November 2019, the Supreme Court had handed over the disputed land to a trust (to be created by the government of India) to build a Ram temple, even as it pronounced the demolition of the Masjid to be illegal. The spectator from Nepal, where the Hindu religion is protected by the constitution, narrated the story of Sita's abandonment by Ram and how she gave birth to two sons and brought them up in exile as a shining contrast to Medea's murders.³³

At once, another spectator countered this one, asking whether Ram's abandonment of Sita could be defended on any grounds at all. A third spectator added that the 'real' issue in *Medea* was that Jason had not sought Medea's consent to marry another woman. Someone turned to ask him whether consent was required for 'polygamy'. This was a likely reference to Muslim personal law, which, by a recent ruling, disallowed triple talaq (divorce), causing intense public discussion. The third spectator confirmed that, according to Islamic law, consent of the first wife was required for a man to marry again. He went on to assert, however, that the play showed what women were reduced to in such cases and, in his opinion, polygamy was wrong, with or without the first wife's consent. Although this was not strictly a debate, such references in this discussion to recent events glossed the issues that had made women rage in the four instances identified above.

A Universal Rage?

Beneath all Greek mythology
Are struggles between He and She
That we are still waging.
In every quiet suburban wife
Dissatisfied with married life
Is Medea raging.³⁴

Thus sings the chorus in Tony Harrison's *Medea: A Sex-War Opera*. However, it is not my intention to argue for the 'universality' of the themes and concerns of classical Greek plays. I only mean to describe how audiences played out local conflicts, reflecting the principal character of Euripides' *Medea* in four very diverse spaces in India. My account is intended to add to the writings of practitioners by describing performances and audience responses.

I find myself asking whether, during this tour, I had discovered more about our own situation in contemporary India than about the feminist potential of Euripides' *Medea*. It was unexpected to see that, more than two thousand years after it was written, *Medea*'s oppositional politics could translate so easily, in our fifteen shows, into the present context. I was entertained by the fact that some well-meaning men had critiqued Jason's betrayal by drawing on paternalistic notions of men's responsibility towards women and children. Yet what other way could there be for men deeply entrenched in normative family structures to make sense of the play? My reason for calling our endeavour 'feminist activist' goes beyond affirming the image of the ideal family that such responses might conjure up: it is based on the audiences' diagnosis of the state of the body politic in India.

In her essay on twentieth-century performances of *Medea*, Helen Foley refers to how a New York audience 'disconcertingly laughed out loud' at the play's 'explicit references' to gender issues in order to indicate why feminist appropriations might be problematic.³⁵ Needless to say, nobody in our fifteen shows laughed in the scene where *Medea* makes a persuasive case to the Corinthians about the institutional oppression of women. Not one person from our more than 1,500 spectators hinted by word or gesture that *Medea* was window-dressing her selfish purpose by exaggerating the inferior status of women or, for that matter, of refugees. Of course, this had a great deal to do with how we represented the character and the lead actor's prowess in establishing an instant emotional connection with audiences. A successful connection of this kind can be said to be the cause of the

'success' of our feminist endeavour but, for me, what was disconcerting and even worrying was the way women and girls, and some men, continued to identify with *Medea*, even after her murderous acts. Zeeshan, being our most experienced actor, made the bereaved Jason's laments powerful, and he delivered them unfailingly to hushed silence, even when restless children were watching the show (Figure 5). Many women and girls praised his powerful performance, but the tears that they shed were ultimately for *Medea*.

Is it then too far-fetched to conclude that those who argued for *Medea* in post-performance discussions did so because they perceived marriage, abandonment, class, caste, and community/citizenship status, which construct social identity in India, to function in a similar if not analogous way to Ancient Greece? Foley notes: 'Euripides' horrific innovation' in *Medea* was 'to make the



Figure 5. Janees as *Medea*, Zeeshan as Jason and Priya (Chorus). *Medea*. Photo: Robin Singh. Courtesy of Anuradha Marwah.

heroine's choice an act of sanity generated by complex issues of social identity'.³⁶ The terrible, self-destructive murders committed by an oppressed woman were definitely recognized as 'an act of sanity' by all our audiences and, most obviously, when our present-day Medeas argued with the men present. Medea's spiritedness – the warrior virtue par excellence – is truly admirable in the war against patriarchy and chauvinism in the first section of Euripides' play. In the latter half, it should have horrified much more by its excesses. But the dominant response to our 'faithful' rendering of the classical play was understanding and pity after the horror of infanticide – not revulsion. The discussions after the play highlighted the parallels of Medea's situation with that of abandoned women and, moreover, with those who are deemed to be outsiders or refugees. It would seem that, in our country, we were making good sense of the double-edged nature of a refugee/outsider woman's spiritedness by critiquing what institutionalized inequity can do to heroes.³⁷

The pro-activism of the post-performance debates also went beyond despairing recognition, indicating some hope for the future. I would like to believe that the raging of women audience members after *Medea* points towards a simmering feminist resistance to politically motivated chauvinism and divisiveness, which have overrun the country. I tell myself that you cannot keep so many good women down for too long!

Notes and References

1. The 'pandies' theatre', or 'theatre of the pandies [subversive elements]', plays on the British pronunciation of the Indian surname Pandey. Much troubled by Mangal Pandey and others in 1857, the colonial rulers started to use the term 'pandies' disparagingly to refer to all mutineers. The group decided to call itself this in 1993, in the spirit of self-reflexive irony. The original members of the theatre group were all middle-class and educated in English ways, and it was elitism of this kind that the group set out to challenge.
2. Sanjay Kumar, 'ACTing: The pandies' theatre of Delhi', *TDR: The Drama Review*, XLVIII, No. 3 (Fall 2004), p. 79–95 (p. 80).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 79–95.
4. 'NGO' is the generic term for Non-Government Organization, a not-for-profit organization, or a voluntary

organization. I am the Secretary of the NGO Ajmer Adult Education Association (AAEA), founded by my mother in 1970. We have been working for the education and development of out-of-school adolescents in the villages of Ajmer since 2006.

5. Ten Thousand Things is a Minneapolis-based professional theatre company specializing in performance-in-the-round.

6. Greek tragedy is performed only in hallowed spaces in India. Coincidentally, in the year we performed *Medea* in the villages of Rajasthan, an elaborate English version of the play, directed by Ira Khan for Nautankisa Production, was mounted in Mumbai. The cheapest tickets were 500 rupees (which would be less than five pounds or seven dollars, but is still a considerable sum for a theatre ticket in a place where a meal can be bought for less than a pound). All our shows were free entry, except for the two Studio Safdar Shows. Studio Safdar charged 20 rupees (or less, if necessary) for community audiences and 200 for others. Thus, through Samtal, we tried to democratize performance of Greek tragedy. Our next play is based on Rabindranath Tagore's short story, 'Kabuliwala' (1892).

7. The Supreme Court declared the form of divorce known as triple talaq to be unconstitutional in 2017. Subsequently the Parliament, via the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, criminalized triple talaq.

8. Abusaleh Shariff and Syed Khalid, 'Abandoned Women Vastly Outnumber Victims of Triple Talaq and It's Time Modi Spoke Up for Them', *Business Standard* (13 December 2016), <<https://www.business-standard.com>>. See also see their 'Unimportance of Triple Talaq', in *Indian Express*, 29 May 2017, <<https://indianexpress.com>>.

9. The National Register of Citizens was finalized in Assam in August 2019. There were 31 million names out of the population of 33 million. 1.9 million (19 lakh) applicants were thereby rendered potentially stateless. Protests against the NRC dovetailed with nationwide anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests in 2020. Several articles in the press discussed the agenda of the Hindutva government with NRC and the CAA. See, for example, <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-cao-and-nrc-1630771-2019-12-23>> and <<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-only-muslims-have-to-prove-their-credentials-for-nrc-others-are-exempt-under-cao/344546>>.

10. C. Collard, 'Formal Debates in Euripides' Drama', *Greece & Rome*, XXII, No. 1 (April 1975), p. 58–71 (p. 58).

11. *Ibid.*

12. Michael Lloyd, *The Agon in Euripides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992), p. 41.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

16. Collard, 'Formal Debates', p. 64.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Aristide Tessitore, 'Euripides' *Medea* and the Problem of Spiritedness', *The Review of Politics*, LIII, No. 4 (Autumn 1991), p. 587–601 (p. 587).

20. *Ibid.*, p. 590.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 588.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 587.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 594.

24. All actors of *Medea* have been identified, at their request, by their first names in the brochure and all other records of the performances. I thus use only the first names for all seven actors in this article. They are: Janees as *Medea*; Zeeshan as Jason; Priiya as the dancer and Chorus; Arham as the Nurse and Chorus; Sameer as Creon; Nirbhay as the Tutor and the Messenger; and Robin and Aakash as Chorus.

25. Helen P. Foley, 'Twentieth-Century Performance and Adaptation of Euripides', *Illinois Classical Studies*, XXIV–XXV (1999–2000), p. 1–13 (p. 10).

26. The Hindi word *dharamshala* denotes a shelter or rest house run for philanthropic or religious purposes. Pilgrims and poor travellers stay here for short periods free of charge or at minimal cost.

27. *Kachcha* construction uses natural materials such as mud plaster, bamboo, thatch, and wood, and is cheap and short-lived by contrast with *pucca* construction in which stone, cement, bricks, tar, and so on, are used.

28. *Swarga* (or *svarga loka*) is the 'heavenly world', the highest in Hindu cosmology. Also referred to as '*Indra loka*', it is a transitory place for righteous souls.

29. Feroze Khan, who was appointed as an Assistant Professor in the Literature Department of the Sanskrit Vidya Dharma Vijnan (SVDV) of Banaras Hindu University (BHU), faced protests in October–November 2019 on the grounds that, as a Muslim, he was not suited to teach religious Hindu texts. He ultimately resigned and switched to the Arts Faculty in the same university.

30. Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, in *The Wasps, The Poet and The Woman, The Frogs*, trans. David Barrett, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 196.

31. Sudhanva Deshpande, 'Plays for People: Shadi-pur Natak Utsav', <www.MumbaiTheatreGuide.com>.

32. The concept of Ramrajya or the ideal rule of Lord Ram as described in the *Ramayana*, is often invoked by politicians, especially those subscribing to Hindutva parties.

33. Interestingly, the feminist artist Nalini Malini has a painting called *Sita/Medea* which followed her involvement in the *Medea Project* (1993), in which she collaborated with the actor and director Alaknanda Samarth for a performance/installation piece at the Max Muller Bhavan Bombay, a branch of the Goethe Institute. They worked with Heiner Müller's adaptation of *Medea*. Her painting portrays Sita and Medea as archetypes of abandoned women.

34. Tony Harrison, *Medea: A Sex-War Opera*, in *Dramatic Verse: 1973–1985* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 371.

35. Foley, 'Twentieth-Century Performance', p. 10.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

37. As Aristide Tessitore observes: 'The difficulty with spiritedness is that it can lead to both noble and savage extremes. The Platonic Socrates later makes explicit the problematic character of spiritedness in what is undoubtedly one of the most famous discussions of warrior virtue in classical literature' ('Euripides' *Medea*', p. 590).