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A Wife's Letter: A Stage Adaptation of Tagore's Short Story About Child Brides Features Degendered Roles

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# A Wife's Letter

A STAGE ADAPTION OF TAGORE'S SHORT STORY  
ABOUT CHILD BRIDES FEATURES DEGENDERED ROLES

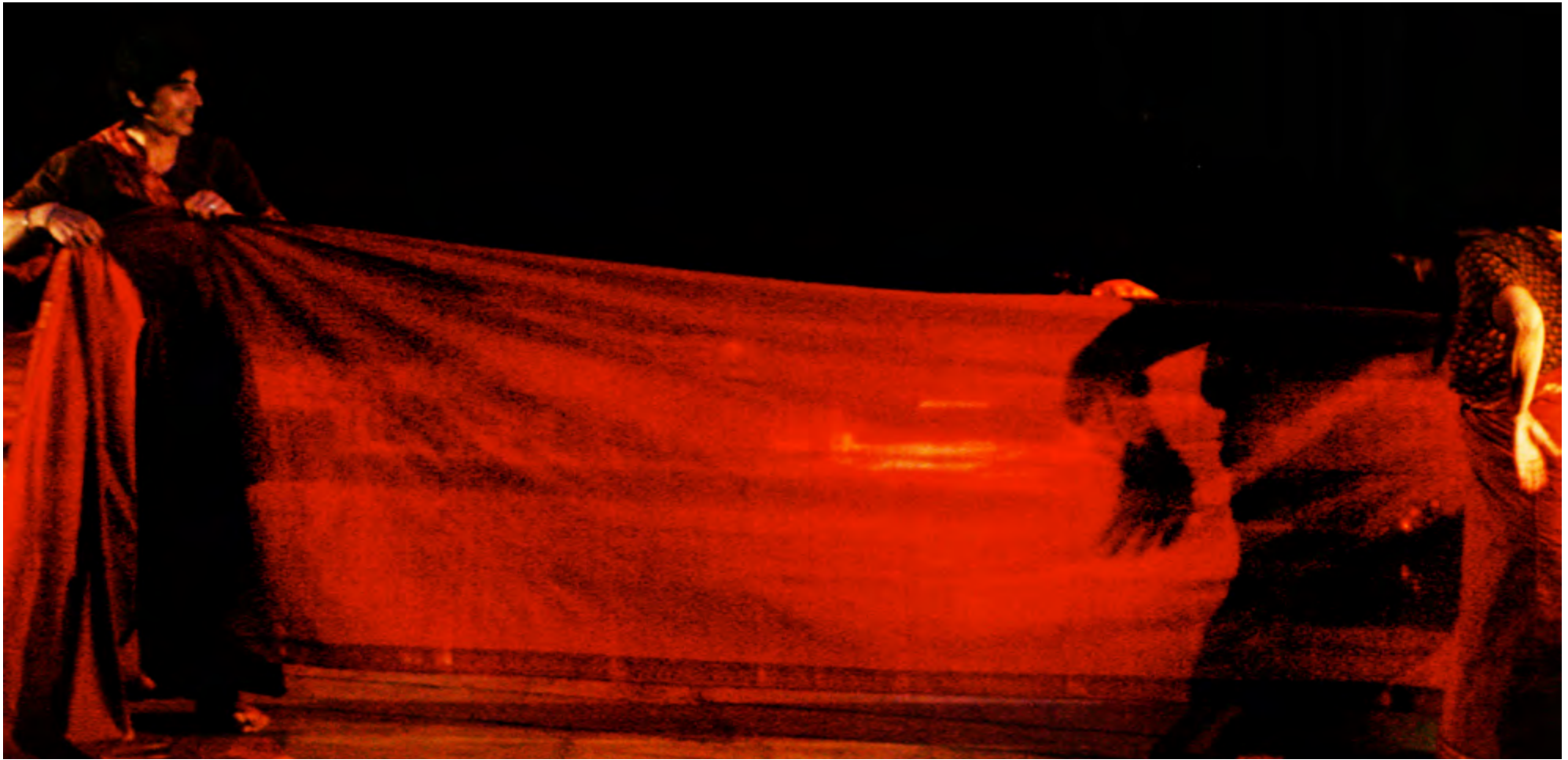
**R**ABINDRANATH TAGORE was most distrustful of the restricted, narrow, domestic interiors of the bourgeois household, and he translated this distrust into a way of understanding or representing character. The precise contours of a character's inner life or aspirations may be viewed against their placement in a material space or in the public. As a result, this has helped me to understand that even though the characters were subjected to a feudal and domestic order, they found their "imaginary" space where they could dream, weave games, and play...The male actor who portrays Mrinal is not constructing the role as a female impersonator nor is he playing androgynous. He is creating a

degendering of his role, leading perhaps to a more egalitarian approach to performance, according to the directorial note in the program.

A stage adaption of Tagore's short story, *A Wife's Letter*, was the inaugural event of the *Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics*, a conference organized by the UCLA Center for Performance Studies and UCLA Center for the Study of Women. Before the performance, Anurima Banerji provided a brief introduction to the performance, which was directed by Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, a renowned figure in contemporary Indian drama, and performed by Gick Grewal and Vansh Bhardwaj. As the full-length version of *A Wife's Letter*

involves a larger cast as well as live musicians and other elements, the performance presented excerpts from the play. On the left side of the stage was a red bed. On the right side of the stage were three mats that held a few simple props: The mat closest to the front of the stage held a stack of steel plates and a neatly-folded red cloth. On the mat situated behind that were two square containers filled with water. The mat to the rear of the stage held a black box with a drawing of a white cow on it.

The plot, which is roughly the same in Tagore's story and Chowdhry's adaptation, revolves around complex family relationships that emerge in the context of child marriage. It unfolds in the



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form of a letter from a wife (Mrinal) to her husband, telling of her childhood and of her isolation and oppression as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. Mrinal develops a companionship with Bindu, her elder sister-in-law's orphaned sister. As the play was performed in Punjabi, I was able to concentrate more on the actors' movements than on the dialogue.

Mrinal and Bindu stood still, facing each other. Mrinal wore a brown shirt and dress with a red sash across her chest. Bindu wore a brown dress in a matching color. Both were barefoot. In Mrinal's hands was a jump rope that enclosed the two. Mrinal and Bindu looked at each other and laughed out loud. The two started to playfully jump rope. They broke apart, but Mrinal continued to jump rope as she sang. Bindu chased after Mrinal, clapping her hands. Mrinal tied Bindu with the jump rope. Then the two each took an end of the rope, as if in a tug-of-war. Mrinal fell first. Next, Bindu fell. The two became silent. Their toes touched for a brief moment. This scene was one of several throughout the performance that created an atmosphere that signified their undefined relationship.

Bindu got up and began to draw square-like figures on the stage. Next, she went to the water box where she playfully splashed the water, then washed her hands. Mrinal approached Bindu from behind, then washed Bindu's feet. After conversing briefly, the two changed into new

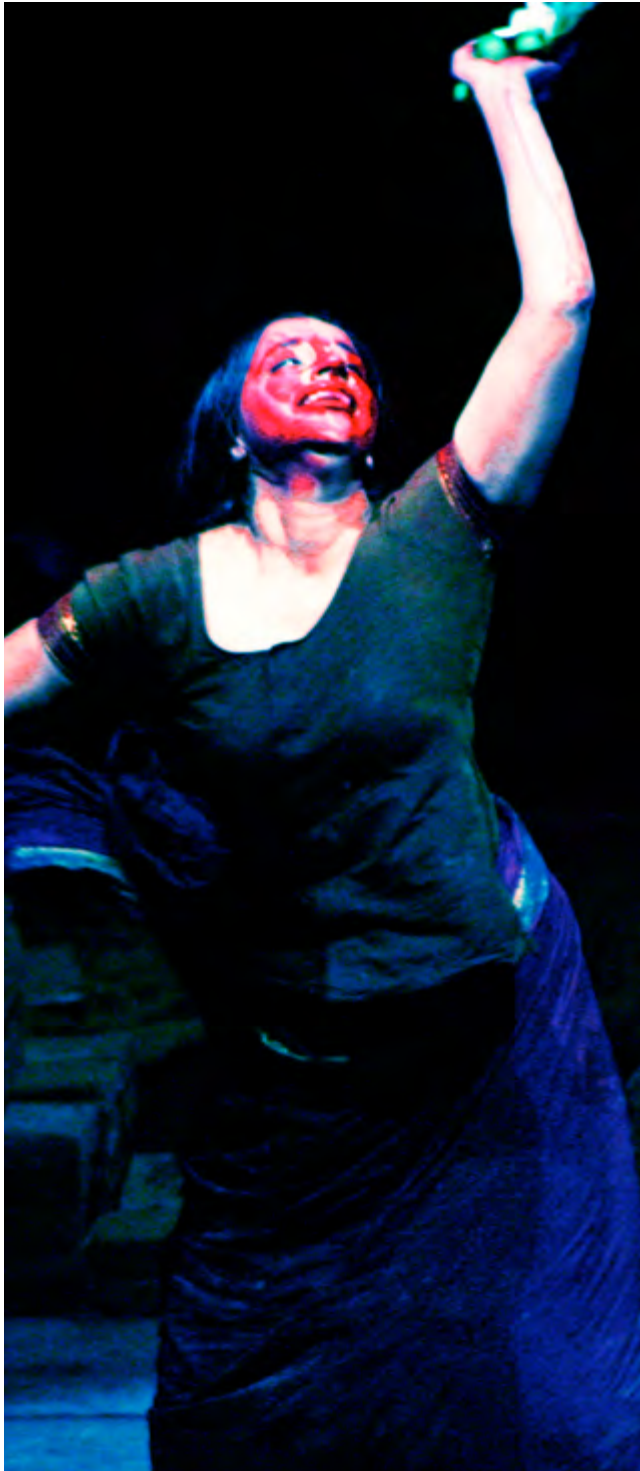
clothes. Mrinal and Bindu took opposite ends of a long red cloth. The cloth shook for a moment. Then Mrinal wrapped Bindu with the red cloth with care, as if to protect the orphaned girl. Mrinal lifted the steel plates and placed them individually on the stage, a foot's distance between each plate. Bindu carefully stepped on the plates one by one, her arms held up in the air. Mrinal and Bindu stepped on the last plate together, hugging each other. The two became silent as they faced each other.

Mrinal got up and washed her face. Making clucking noises, she threw wood shavings toward the cowshed. Bindu started making the bed, arranging the cloth around it. Then she started slapping herself. She fell to the floor but did not stop slapping herself. Mrinal handed her a steel plate and poured some jewelry onto it. Mrinal picked a bracelet from the plate and rolled it on the floor. Shouting out, she repeated the action a few times. Bindu pretended to plant something. Mrinal shook two cup-like containers. A cloud of dust trailed after her. Bindu continued to plant something with care. Mrinal wrapped herself in a red sari. She knelt down. While Bindu sang, tapping her hands on the floor, Mrinal wrapped herself in the sari and the cloth on the floor. Still wrapped in the sari and cloth, she got up and went to the left side of the stage with the containers in her hands. Bindu continued to sing. Mrinal unwrapped herself, folded the cloth, and placed it

on the steel plate.

Bindu started stacking bricks. Mrinal took the plate filled with wood shavings and rearranged the plates. She cried out, pretending to be bitten by the cow. Then she pretended to chase the cow as she laughed out loud. Bindu started placing pieces of dough on a box covered with red cloth. Mrinal suddenly let out a shout and lay on the stage, writhing as if in pain. She threw the plate. Bindu made a stirring motion in a bowl, which made clanging sounds that echoed. Mrinal got up with difficulty. She gathered all of the wood shavings in one plate. She covered the plate with a red cloth. Crying, she turned her face away and wiped her tears. She got up and stepped into the water. Holding the front of her dress, she splashed water between her legs. Still holding the front of her dress, she got out of the water. The echo created from Bindu's clanging continued. Mrinal approached Bindu and then sat down. Bindu, her back facing Mrinal, continued to stir. Mrinal drew out an egg and started rolling it from her right hand to her left. Then she broke it. She cupped her hands, trying not to let the egg run between her fingers, but it did anyway. She buried the broken egg in the dirt. Then she washed her hands.

Bindu started crying, sitting in front of the bed. The two conversed. Bindu, her hands held up in a praying position, cried out, then hugged Mrinal's ankles. Mrinal held Bindu's face in her hands.



Mrinal took up a pair of earrings and put the earrings on Bindu. She also put a gold piece on Bindu's forehead and wrapped the red sari around her. They put lipstick on each other. Bindu continued to snifle. Mrinal poured the wood shavings into the plate and placed it on top of Bindu's head. Holding a box in her hands, Bindu started to sing as she walked. Next to her was a bundle of sticks stuck in a crown and pointing out in different directions. She took out a matchbox and lighted the crown. Both Mrinal and Bindu cried out as if in despair. Mrinal threw the plates. Bindu placed the crown on her head. Red light shone directly upon Bindu, which made her look as if she was on fire. As Bindu walked, the incense that she held billowed a trail of smoke behind her. Bindu left the crown on the cowshed and slowly exited the stage, signifying her death.

Tears streaming down her face, Mrinal spoke. She placed the containers in the red cloth. Mrinal started dancing with the wind-bell in her right hand and the red cloth in her left. Red light shone over the water. Mrinal poured soap over the water. She mixed the water and the soap with her hands, then she made spooning motions with the rattle and shook it above her head, her right leg in mid-air. Hitting herself, she started to turn in circles. While the original text writes that Mrinal leaves home in search of freedom, I read this particular scene as an act of suicide—an act transcending her imprisonment. The theater went dark.

In *A Wife's Letter*, the address of the performance is giving voice to and creating space for women through degendering. Tagore's original short story rescues Mrinal's point of view by placing Mrinal at the center of the dramatic narrative and in the title of the play. Similar to Tagore's work, Chowdhry's production tells Mrinal's story—her detachment from her family, her memory of her encounter with Bindu, and her struggle to help Bindu—and eclipses her husband's. Chowdhry takes an additional step in articulating a feminist perspective by using a male actor.

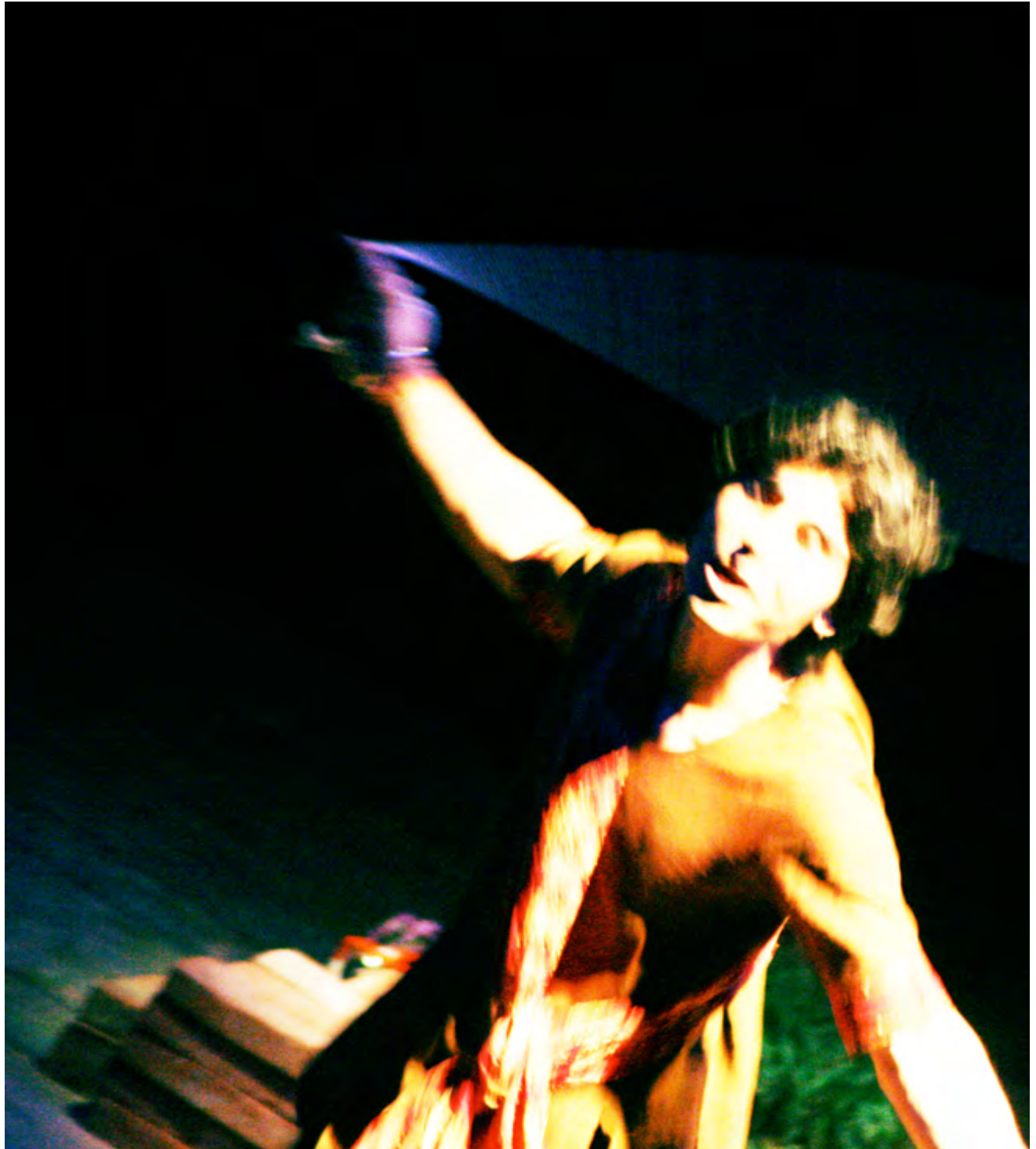
Culturally and socially relegated to the background of Indian patriarchal culture, Mrinal is a minoritarian subject who has only been given license to speak for herself in Tagore's text and Chowdhry's production. Mrinal is a figure that has been kept out of official histories. She is constantly defined by her husband; her position as his wife, the object of his affection, and her time spent with her in-laws were left untold until the appearance of Tagore's text and Chowdhry's production. Only when Mrinal is able to tell her own tale does she find an appropriate manifestation in the creation of space.

Running away from her insane husband, Bindu meets Mrinal, who takes her in and builds her a space where she gradually begins to perform attachment to Mrinal. On stage, Mrinal's domicile traces the coalescence of her encounter with Bindu. The home is a theatrical space where

Mrinal both psychically and psychologically encounters Bindu. What significantly links Mrinal's home to her actions in encountering Bindu are its physical qualities, or rather, its negative physical space. The dwelling is made up of a few simple props, concretizing the empty space it surrounds. It is Mrinal's status as a minority, or theoretically queer, subject and the visually lacking space that stand as a testament to her own figurative absence from both society and history. Mrinal's space performs her queer memory aptly and embodies in an active way her place both in society and in Chowdhry's production.

### *A Degendering Discourse*

The post-show discussion after the performance featured Bishnupriya Dutt, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, Gick Grewal, and Vansh Bhardwaj. Dutt noted that *A Wife's Letter* is a process-based performance rather than a text-based performance—it is a performance that experiments with physical theater and the performative body. Dutt also discussed contemporary Indian theater. Whereas colonial and postcolonial modernity dealt with issues of masculinity, today's popular theater deals with women's issues. Dutt views Chowdhry as a national figure in the era of globalization in which paradigms of nations are breaking away. While many adaptations of *A Wife's Letter*—both in cinematic



and theatrical productions—have highlighted the issue of nationalism, Chowdhry’s production de-masculinized the space and created a space for female bonding.

Next, Chowdhry spoke. She commented that the relationship between the text and the theater is not set in stone, and explained how she dealt with Tagore’s work. Although there is criticism that Tagore is speaking for and/or through Mrinal, Chowdhry stated that she sees an alternative view: Tagore’s text enables a woman to tell and write her story, “spilling the beans” about the culture of the times and unraveling a story of gender relationships.

“Is the text really about female bonding and sisterhood?” Chowdhry then asked, noting that this “sisterhood” was the only solution that was available to the female protagonists. It is an act of placing one’s expectations on another person in a relationship that is not socially qualified through marriage or other conventional kinship systems. Therefore, every gesture in this liminal, nonqualified space becomes meaningful for both Mrinal and Bindu. For Chowdhry, the space becomes a solution in a society that is “eating itself” through the colonial legacy and the patriarchal paradigm.

Vansh Bhardwaj discussed his acting and the training he received in *The Company*. His training there was notably different from that which he received as a theater student: in *The Company*, the director and the actors went through the script

only once, then they would focus on improvisation instead of going over the script again. For example, the director and the actors would improvise one scene in ten different ways. They would choose one to five improvisations and combine them into one scene. Bhardwaj stated that it is a process in which the actor gets the opportunity to tell more of his own self: the actor comes before the script. In addition to techniques of improvisation, Bhardwaj explained how he learned to use objects in acting. For Bhardwaj, the various ways that one uses objects can make a whole different story.

In the question-and-answer portion of the event, an audience member asked about the decision to use a male actor. Chowdhry posed a few questions: What does gender mean on the stage? Do we construct gender performatively? Is gender an aspect of the character? Is it biological? Chowdhry stated that the concept of tradition is going through many changes—it is a continuous process of dynamics and change. She answered that she responds to the ambiguity of gender diffusion and the idea of androgyny in which gender is not defined. She decided to cast Bhardwaj as Mrinal because she thought Bhardwaj was an actor who could become anything.

The second question was whether British colonialism had influenced the cross-dressing aspect of play. Chowdhry answered that there is a similar theatrical history in India. She also noted that the

issue of cross-dressing provided the play a reprieve from social codes, enabling the play to give voice to women. At this, Bhardwaj commented that every man has a woman in himself, and that every woman has a man in herself. Dutt also suggested that the aspect of cross-dressing showed the ultimate breakdown of the wife’s relationship with the family and that the only people whom the wife could bond with were the people who changed their gender.

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**Areum Jeong is a PhD student in Theater and Performance Studies. Her research interests include Asian performance art, feminist theory, theories of identification, and narratology.**

Note: All photos courtesy of *The Company*